

# WARWICK DISTRICT COUNCIL

Minutes of the meeting of Warwick District Council held at Shire Hall, Warwick, on Thursday 30 January 2025, at 6.03pm.

**PRESENT:** Councillor Margrave (Chairman); Councillors Adkins, Aizlewood, Armstrong, Barton, Boad, Browne, Chilvers, Cron, Davidson, Davison, Day, K Dickson, R Dickson, Dray, Falp, C Gifford, B Gifford, Gorman, Kenedy, King, Kohler, Matecki, Melrose, Milton, Payne, Phillips, Redford, Roberts, Rosu, Russell, Sinnott, Tangri, C Wightman, P Wightman, Williams and Yellapragda.

## 65. Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Billiald, Collins, Hales, Harrison, Luckhurst and Syson.

## 66. Declarations of Interest

Minute Number 69 - English Devolution White Paper and Minute Number – 71 Notices of Motion

Councillor Aizlewood declared an interest as a Burton Green Parish Councillor.

Councillors Barton and Margrave declared an interest as Whitnash Town Councillors.

Councillor Boad declared an interest as a Royal Leamington Spa Town Councillor.

Councillors Browne, Dray, Gorman, Sinnott, C Wightman, and P Wightman declared an interest as a Warwick Town Councillor.

Councillors Chilvers and Matecki declared an interest as Warwickshire County Councillors.

Councillors K Dickson, R Dickson, Kennedy, and Milton declared an interest as a Kenilworth Town Councillor.

Councillor Falp declared an interest as a Witnash Town Councillor and a Warwickshire County Councillor.

Councillor B Gifford declared an interest as a Royal Leamington Spa Town Councillor and as a Warwickshire County Councillor.

(The Audit and Standards Committee had previously considered a report approving dispensation in respect of Councillors who were elected to more than a single authority. In this instance, it was considered that the decisions being taken were not directly related or impacted on other Councils and therefore Councillors only needed to record their roles on other Councils for information.)

Councillor Melrose declared an interest as an employee of Reading Borough Council.

## 67. Minutes

It was confirmed that the minutes of the meeting of the Council held on 18 December 2024 would be presented to Members for approval during the 19 February 2025 Council Meeting.

## 68. Communications & Announcements

The Chairman informed Council that he had attended the funeral of Rose Winship, the former Head of Cultural Services who had passed away on 21 December 2025. Rose had worked for the Council for over 35 years, having originally started as a lifeguard. Rose was a highly valued member of staff, respected by both her work colleagues, Councillors and the many local sport and community organisations with whom she worked. She had left a great legacy for Warwick District Council and would be remembered fondly. The service was very well attended by friends, family, colleagues and former colleagues. As a mark of respect to Rose Winship the Chairman led Council in a minute's silence.

The Chairman stated that the 30 January 2025 Council meeting was the final meeting of Warwick District Council (WDC), be it Council, Cabinet or a Committee, that would take place at Shire Hall. As Councillor Seccombe, Leader of Warwickshire County Council, was present, thanks were formally placed on record to Warwickshire County Council (WCC) for hosting WDC while building works were taking place at the Town Hall, and also to all WCC and WDC employees who worked hard to enable the arrangements to run smoothly.

The Chairman thanked the Leader and Portfolio Holders for agreeing not to make any statements under agenda item 8 – Leader and Portfolio Holders' Statements and agreement through Group Leaders (on behalf of their Groups) that no questions would be asked under item 9 – Questions to the Leader of the Council and Portfolio Holders' Statements.

## 69. English Devolution White Paper

The Chairman reminded Council he had invited speakers to address the meeting to aid the Council understanding the potential impact of the English Devolution White Paper on Warwick District and help it form a view on the proposals.

The Invited Speakers were as follows:

- Jim McMahon OBE MP (Minister for Local Government and English Devolution);
- Councillor Izzi Seccombe (Leader of Warwickshire County Council);
- Councillor Susan Juned (Leader Stratford-on-Avon District Council);
- Councillor Michael Moran (Leader of Rugby Borough Council);
- Councillor Christopher Watkins (Leader of Nuneaton & Bedworth Borough Council);
- Councillor David Wright (Leader of North Warwickshire Borough Council);
- Sir Jeremy Wright (MP for Kenilworth & Southam);
- Matt Western (MP for Warwick and Leamington);
- Representatives of the 24 Town and Parish Councils and the Parish meeting in Warwick District;
- Representative from Warwickshire and West Midlands Association of Local Councils; and
- Up to 10 Members of the Public.

The Chairman invited those speakers in attendance to offer their statements.

Councillor Seccombe, Leader of Warwickshire County Council, provided a verbal statement. Councillor Seccombe expressed an intention to continue pushing for an individual devolution package for Warwickshire as opposed to linking with a bigger strategic authority. It was preferable to create a single unitary authority that was non-mayoral and would allow Warwickshire to remain a non-constituent member of the West Midlands Combined Authority (WMCA).

Councillor Seccombe explained that Central Government had a strong preference for creating one local authority over a large geography. It was expected that by 3 February 2025, WCC would receive communication from Central Government regarding whether a new unitary Council would be fast-tracked for Warwickshire.

Councillor Seccombe justified the rationale for putting Warwickshire forwards when Central Government sought expressions of interest for those desiring devolution on the quickest time scale. This was to allow Warwickshire the greatest chance of shaping a suitable authority. It was not a question of if there were to be a reorganisation of Local Government, it was a question of when this were to happen. Thus, it was more appropriate to "go early". Councillor Seccombe also defended her decision to postpone the May 2025 County Council election because it was what was necessary.

Councillor Coles, on behalf of the Leader of Stratford-on-Avon District Council, provided a verbal statement. Councillor Coles supported the collaboration between Warwickshire's District Councils who had worked together to express concern over both the lack of consultation and the postponement of the May 2025 County Council elections. This was due to discontentment with the model proposed by WCC being based on an outdated report.

Councillor Coles expressed concern over the difficulty in ensuring that Local Government was based on sensible social and economic footprints since there were distinct areas of Warwickshire. The distinctions between the areas would create difficulties if there were to be one large Council covering Warwickshire.

Councillor Coles reiterated her disappointment regarding the postponement of the May 2025 elections. Elections were the price paid for democracy and not something that could be put aside for convenience.

Councillor Coles recognised the potential for opportunities resulting from devolution that should be explored. However, Warwickshire's District Councils should be involved in such conversations and should have been involved from an earlier point.

Councillor Watkins, Leader of Nuneaton & Bedworth Borough Council, provided a written statement read out by the Chairman. Councillor Watkins expressed that he was not opposed to the principle of devolution or Local Government reform. There were recognisable opportunities within this principle. However, Warwickshire were not ready to join the priority programme which would see the county on a fast-tracked plan for devolution. This was a rushed decision that risked omitting opportunities for Warwickshire to thrive as part of the most suitable model.

Councillor Watkins had made representations to Central Government alongside Leaders of Districts and Boroughs within Warwickshire to provide Warwickshire with time to undertake work related to reform.

Councillor Watkins placed the communities, cultures, and senses of place that formed Warwickshire at the heart of their statement. There was hope that for the

sake of all residents in Warwickshire, the various options for Local Government organisations would be duly explored to establish the right outcome.

Sir Jeremy Wright, MP for Kenilworth & Southam provided a written statement read out by the Chairman. Sir Jeremy Wright offered their apologies for their absence. Sir Jeremy Wright stated that a unitary status could be advantageous. The advantages were financial with regards to improved coordination between planning and economic development and in providing greater clarity and simplicity to residents regarding the responsibilities of Councils.

Sir Jeremy Wright stated that it was, however, not in the best interest of Kenilworth and Southam residents for Warwickshire to be members of the WMCA. Therefore, membership with the WMCA should not be a requirement of the new unitary authority.

Sir Jeremy Wright explained that it was undesirable for a unitary status to be imposed by Central Government in an unreasonably short time scale. This would inhibit both sufficient planning for change and obtaining support from residents for said change.

Matt Western, MP for Warwick & Leamington, provided a written statement read out by the Head of Governance and Monitoring Officer. Matt Western stated that the proposed transformative changes would see largest transfer of power out of Westminster to England's regions in a generation. This would rebuild local government, making it more effective. This would also save taxpayer money that could be invested into public services and improve accountability with fewer politicians. It was clear that Central Government were inclined to move quickly, Matt Western therefore sought assurances that WCC was also able to move quickly with its devolution efforts.

Matt Western explained that devolution was a key opportunity for Warwickshire and thus Warwickshire District and Boroughs should work collaboratively to determine the best approach to devolution.

Matt Western stated that the public should be presented with options and should hear the benefits of Central Government's devolution proposals. This was especially important as many residents relied on Council services daily. Their livelihoods were directly impacted by the effectiveness of these services.

Matt Western expressed that there were numerous options for how devolution could be structured in Warwickshire, and each should be considered. Whether Warwickshire was included in the first phase of devolution or not was in the hands of Central Government. However, this could be influenced by public feedback and the preparedness of Local Councils. It would have been preferable to have seen more time for consideration.

Ja'Neen Day, Chief Executive of Warwickshire & West Midlands Association of Local Council's (WALC) provided a written statement which was summarised by the Head of Governance and Monitoring Officer. The Chief Executive of WALC sought to offer reassurance that WALC was an independent and advisory body to Parish and Town Councils. WALC would therefore continue to work with and listen to their members and bring forward opportunities that they saw fit.

Councillor Wellsted, Member of Bishop's Tachbrook Parish Council, provided a verbal statement. Councillor Wellsted expressed concerns over the dangers of a unitary authority equating to a loss of connection between authorities and

residents. Although there were opportunities for saving money and becoming more strategic, Parish Councils would be adopting additional responsibilities that they had not requested. The risks associated with these additional responsibilities being thrust on Parish Councils could not be overlooked.

Councillor Wellsted also raised concerns over the origins of money to solve local issues. WDC were holding on to money that was owed to Bishop's Tachbrook. The concern was where such money would derive from if the Council were to become unitary.

Councillor Marsh, Member of Kenilworth Town Council and Town and Parish representative for WDC's Audit and Standards Committee, provided a verbal statement. Councillor Marsh explained that he had witnessed how active Town and Parish Councils could contribute positively to local communities.

Councillor Marsh recognised that residents were confused by the existing structure of Town and County Councils which created fragmentation and left Local Government uncoordinated. Therefore, plans to streamline Local Government could offer beneficial opportunities. Nevertheless, the changes should not be driven at the expense of meaningful engagement and democratic accountability that the delay of the May 2025 County Council elections would create.

Councillor Marsh expressed that Town and Parish Councils should form part of the proposed changes to ensure decision making was kept close to local communities. Kenilworth Town Council, for example, had acted as a catalyst for opportunities and safety. Therefore, Local Councils having greater responsibility could encourage residents to take pride in and get involved with their local community. Nevertheless, devolution could bring challenges to Town and Parish Councils, more training and resources would be required.

Councillor Marsh stated that cancelling the May 2025 County Council elections would evade accountability. This would also penalise Town and Parish Councils who would become liable for the costs.

Councillor McAllister, Member of Royal Leamington Spa Town Council, provided a verbal statement. Councillor McAllister explained that holding regular elections was an essential part of the democratic process. There were concerns over the large cost to Town Councils if Central Government were to agree with the fast tracking of unitary as requested by WCC. However, devolution presented opportunities for Town Councils to adopt non-statutory services and Leamington Town Council was ambitious in what it would like to deliver. Decisions that affected residents were best made as close as possible to the communities impacted. Therefore, there was hope for future constructive discussions involving Town Councils.

Councillor Jacques, a member of the Public, provided a verbal statement. Councillor Jacques stated that models for devolution which minimised the risks to the public should be favoured given the tight timescales. Warwickshire's diversity was supported by the existing two-tier system, this should not be lost in the new model. The new model should avoid assuming a "one size fits all" approach. This would create issues because of the clear distinctions between North and South Warwickshire. Non-statutory services were essential to meeting the needs of residents and should not be impacted negatively by the new model. A unitarised model would provide benefits such as economies of scale. This model should realise the benefits through exploiting the well-established working relationships.

Councillor Jacques explained that residents were generally happy with unitary but were discontent with the delay of elections.

Councillor Holland, a member of the Public, provided a verbal statement. Councillor Holland supported the proposal for unitary of Warwickshire Councils. A unitary Council would see the replacement of WCC as well as District and Borough Councils. This would create an increase in Councillors. Within unitary, Parish and Town Councils would have an increasingly important role, they should be preparing for this eventuality. The new unitary council should note that Warwick was not the centre of decision making, this should instead be the residents. A unitary Council would avoid residents falling down gap between different councils which must be resolved.

Sam Jones, a member of the Public, provided a verbal statement. Sam Jones questioned the judgement of the Leader of Warwickshire County Council and suggested that the request to delay of the 2025 County Council elections was out of a fear of facing the electorate. The rights of residents would be suppressed if the elections were to be delayed as they would be unable to decide who governed them.

The Chairman thanked the speakers and opened the item up to questions from Members.

In response to questions from Members, the Leader of Warwickshire County Council, explained that:

- it was preferable to create a new Local Government authority. This would be a single county statutory authority that was non-mayoral and would allow a non-constituent membership of the WMCA to continue. This would see the creation of a new statutory authority that was also a unitary authority;
- the statements used to justify the decision to apply to postpone the May 2025 County Council Elections were somewhat outdated as the case had updated slightly;
- it was clear that Central Government wanted to use functioning economic geographies as a guiding light when considering options. Health geography was also a contending factor mentioned by Central Government. The footprint of Warwickshire's health geography saw Coventry and Warwickshire bound together. This was despite the demise of LEPs (local enterprise partnerships) as a value of what had been created between Coventry and Warwickshire was recognised and would continue to grow, allowing support to be delivered to businesses;
- Central Government had not indicated any blueprint on what the bigger strategic authorities should look like. This justified the rationale for being proactive to secure a model for Warwickshire that would be most suitable;
- Parish and Town Councils were a vital element of the work that Local Government provided. It was thus important to consult with Town and Parish Councils to ensure that the impact of any decisions made would be suitable for them. However, any consultation would be carried out by the Minister for Local Government and English Devolution, as outlined in the English Devolution White Paper. An invitation for a consultation would not be refused by WCC if it were to be offered;
- there were risks associated with the potential changes to Local Government and the potential transformation would be challenging. However, as well as being aware of the risks, it was crucial to be aware of the potential rewards;

- the cost of local government reorganisation was projected to be £500 Million across the country. However, the opportunities were estimated to equate to savings of over £2 billion;
- if Local Government was to be designed from scratch, the model that was currently in use would not be used as it created confusion;
- there were great opportunities for synergetic advantages from services sitting alongside one another in a new strategic authority that did not currently sit closely because of the existing Local Government structure;
- the priority was to create a larger Council that maintained local delivery;
- services would continue to be delivered on a locality basis;
- it was important to be open minded to allow the potential for Local Government restructuring to become an opportunity to create a future for Warwickshire that was desirable;
- there had been no discussion of becoming a full member of the WMCA;
- the current model being considered was one of a strategic, unitary, non-mayoral authority;
- the existing relationship between WCC and the WMCA was fundamentally beneficial to the six Councils involved, this relationship should thus continue;
- there was a functioning economic and health geography established between Coventry and Warwickshire;
- WDC were bound into the WMCA through certain areas such as the gigafactory;
- a proposed alternative model for Local Government restructure should consider the impact it may have on the WMCA relationships;
- the potential for Warwickshire to remain a non-constituent member of the WMCA in the proceeding stages of devolution was not impossible but it could compromise the position of the Council;
- the County Council believed the model of business they had was working well;
- of the six Councils engaged with the WMCA, WDC had financial interest in remaining in the WMCA, this would also be applicable to other Councils and was thus worth considering;
- there was no absolute model that could be taken forwards, this was more likely to be defined at the next stage;
- there would be an increased number of Councillors in a new Council for a single unitary;
- it was unclear what proposals were to be taken forward;
- consideration of previously used models was the only way to identify potential models;
- everything WCC did was in collaboration with others, collaboration was valued above all else;
- the new Council would be one designed to allow everyone to have a voice;
- more responsibilities were being bounced on to Town and Parish Councils, some of whom were prepared to embrace such responsibilities;
- there would be a quicker response time when operating as one Council;
- the future of Local Government should be about the residents;
- there was not an immediate answer for who would be responsible for the cost of delaying the May 2025 County Council election which was projected to cost between £750,000 and £1 million;
- the County Council were awaiting a letter from Central Government which would provide further information regarding the potential delay of the May 2025 County Council elections; and
- once WCC had received communication from Central Government, they could provide information to interested parties.

(Councillors Aizlewood and Cron left the meeting at the end of this item)

(At 7.39pm, the Chairman adjourned the meeting for a comfort break)

## 70. **Petitions**

The Chairman stated that there would be no business to consider under agenda Item 6 – Petitions.

## 71. **Notices of Motion**

The Council considered a Notice of Motion brought forward for debate by Councillors Boad, Davison, Day, Falp, and Melrose.

It was proposed by the Chairman and duly seconded by Councillor Boad that Council Procedure Rule 13(5) be suspended for this item, to enable Councillors to speak on a single Motion, or amendment, under this item more than once.

Following further discussion between Group Leaders the Motion as set out on the agenda had been revised and was proposed by Councillor Davison and seconded by Councillor Boad as follows:

“This Council notes the Decision of the Leader of Warwickshire County Council (WCC) to request the WCC elections are delayed for a year and endorses the joint letter from the Leaders of this Council, North Warwickshire Borough Council, Nuneaton & Bedworth Borough Council, and Stratford-on-Avon District Council in response.

That Council endorses working with Councils (County District/Boroughs, Towns and Parishes) across Warwickshire to look at the options for appropriate service delivery models for unitary status, taking into account the views of residents, this must consider:

1. Protecting the level of services currently delivered to the community of Warwick District by this Council;
2. The geography, population and economic and community footprint of Warwickshire;
3. Warwickshire’s relationships with its neighbours; and
4. Views on which strategic authority the Council would be best to look at aligning with”.

This Council notes the proposed allocation of £25k with the budget papers being considered by Cabinet next week to support this work.

This Council asks the Chief Executive and Leader, in conjunction with Stratford-on-Avon District Council, to explore the following potential options:

1. Join the existing West Midlands Combined Authority as a full (constituent) member.
2. Join a new Coventry/Solihull/Warwickshire strategic authority.
3. Join a new Warwickshire/Oxfordshire/Buckinghamshire/West Berks/Reading/Wokingham/Bracknell/Slough/Windsor and Maidenhead strategic authority (M40/Chiltern Line corridor).
4. Join a new Warwickshire/Worcestershire/Gloucestershire/Herefordshire strategic authority that might include Shropshire.



This Council notes that whatever we do to progress these proposals, all of them have serious challenges, other Councils will have different views, and the final decision rests with Government”.

Councillor Matecki proposed that the motion should be amended to read “this Council noted the Decision of the Leader of Warwickshire County Council (WCC) to request the WCC elections were delayed for a year and ~~endorsed~~ **noted** the joint letter from the Leaders of this Council, North Warwickshire Borough Council, Nuneaton & Bedworth Borough Council, and Stratford-on-Avon District Council in response.” This was duly seconded by Councillor Phillips and on being put to the vote was lost.

Councillors Davison, Falp, Adkins, Boad, Sinnott, Milton, Kohler, Day, Armstrong, Phillips, Redford, R Dickson, Kennedy, Chilvers, Melrose, Matecki, Payne and King addressed the Council on this item.

**Resolved** that

- (1) the Decision of the Leader of Warwickshire County Council (WCC) to request the WCC elections be delayed for a year and endorsed the joint letter from the Leaders of this Council, North Warwickshire Borough Council, Nuneaton & Bedworth Borough Council, and Stratford-on-Avon District Council in response, be noted;
- (2) the work with Councils (County District/Boroughs, Towns and Parishes) across Warwickshire to look at the options for appropriate service delivery models for unitary status, taking into account the views of residents, including consideration of the following, be endorsed:
  - i. protecting the level of services currently delivered to the community of Warwick District by this Council;
  - ii. the geography, population and economic and community footprint of Warwickshire;
  - iii. Warwickshire’s relationships with its neighbours; and
  - iv. views on which strategic authority the Council would be best to look at aligning with;
- (3) the proposed allocation of £25k within the budget papers being considered by Cabinet on 6 February 2025 to support this work, be noted;
- (4) the Chief Executive and Leader, in conjunction with Stratford-on-Avon District Council, to explore the following potential options:
  - i. join the existing West Midlands Combined Authority as a full (constituent) member;
  - ii. join a new Coventry/Solihull/Warwickshire strategic authority;

- iii. Join a new Warwickshire/Oxfordshire/Buckinghamshire/West Berks/Reading/Wokingham/Bracknell/Slough/Windsor and Maidenhead strategic authority (M40/Chiltern Line corridor);
  - v. join a new Warwickshire/Worcestershire/Gloucestershire/Herefordshire strategic authority that might include Shropshire; and
  - vi. join any other feasible option that was identified; and
- (5) whatever was done to progress these proposals, all of them had serious challenges, other Councils would have different views, and the final decision rested with Government, be noted.

## 72. **Common Seal**

The Common seal was not required for the decision taken by Council that evening and therefore its affixation was not proposed by the Chairman.

(The meeting ended at 9.23pm)

CHAIRMAN  
19 February 2025