

East Herts Council Report

Executive

Date of meeting: Tuesday 11 March 2025

Report by: Councillor Ben Crystall – Leader of the Council

Report title: English Devolution White Paper Interim Plan

Ward(s) affected: (All Wards);

Summary – The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government has requested that an interim plan be provided to Government on or before 21 March 2025, setting out the progress being made on developing proposals for local government reform in line with the criteria and guidance set by Government.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR Executive, that:

- a) the Government’s proposals for English Devolution and Local Government Reorganisation be noted, and
- b) the Executive delegates to the Leader of the Council, in consultation with the Deputy Leader, that the interim proposals for Local Government Reorganisation in Hertfordshire as set out in the report be submitted to the Government by the deadline of 21 March 2025.

1.0 Proposal(s)

- 1.1 As above.

2.0 Background

- 2.1 The [English Devolution White Paper](#) was published on 16 December 2024. This set out the government’s plans to devolve greater power and funding to local areas and to deliver local government reorganisation in two-tier areas by creating a new network of Strategic Authorities covering the whole of England.

- 2.2 These Strategic Authorities will have populations of at least 1.5 million people and responsibilities linked to
- transport and local infrastructure,
 - skills and employment,
 - housing and strategic planning (although not determining planning applications),
 - economic development and regeneration,
 - environment and climate change,
 - health and wellbeing, and
 - public safety.
- 2.3 A Strategic Authority will also cover a 'sensible' economic geography with a 'sense of identity' and needs to be contiguous for all of the constituent authorities. It is the government's desire for a Mayor to lead a Strategic Authority and want local areas to propose plans for devolution. Where an area does not present appropriate proposals, the Government will use Ministerial Directives to ensure this happens.
- 2.4 The Government specified that areas could put themselves forward to be designated as a Devolution Priority Place (DPP), meaning that having been so designated, they would need to commit to have a Mayoral Strategic Authority, along with a plan to have the elections for Mayor, by 2026.
- 2.5 Hertfordshire did not apply to become a DPP, and there is therefore more time to develop proposals for a strategic authority covering Hertfordshire. A further update will be provided once firmer proposals are available.
- 2.6 As part of its plans for devolution, the Government has announced a programme of local government reorganisation that will replace all two-tier county and district councils, along with small or failing unitaries, with new unitary councils that have populations of at least 500,000 people.

These much larger unitary structures would then group together to form Strategic Authorities.

- 2.7 Hertfordshire, with its ten districts and boroughs, including East Herts, and the County Council, is one such two-tier area.
- 2.8 The Government believes that local government reorganisation, together with devolution over a big strategic area, will improve public services and support economic growth.
- 2.9 In accordance with the Ministerial letter dated 5 February 2025, East Herts will need to submit proposals for the reorganisation of local government structures in Hertfordshire. In particular, an interim plan will need to be submitted by 21 March 2025 with a full proposal needing to be submitted by 28 November 2025.
- 2.10 Discussions have already started between all Hertfordshire district and borough councils, as well as Hertfordshire County Council, about how best to enable devolution here, and shape plans for local government reorganisation.
- 2.11 A White Paper Working Group consisting of officers from all district and borough councils, as well as the County Council, has been set up to establish an evidence base for both the devolution and local government reorganisation proposals, this group is also starting to formulate a response on the Interim Plan.
- 2.12 The White Paper Working Group reports to the Hertfordshire Chief Executive Coordination Group, who in turns reports to Hertfordshire Leaders Group.
- 2.13 It is the intention that a single response for the Interim Plan will be submitted for Hertfordshire by 21 March, which is likely to contain multiple options being explored. It should be noted that the March submission is primarily a checkpoint to

get assurance that councils are working together to develop proposals in line with the Government's criteria. Any response in March does not prevent further options being developed or explored at a later date.

2.14 As the Interim Plan will be finalised in the coming weeks, with the Leader taking part in discussions, this report is seeking delegated authority to agree a plan for submission on behalf of East Herts Council.

2.15 It should also be noted that for the Election for Hertfordshire County Council will go ahead as scheduled on 1 May 2025. The table below sets out the current timeline.

	Date	Event
Confirmed	5 Feb 2025	Statutory invitation received from the government to submit local government reorganisation proposals.
Confirmed	21 Mar 2025	Submit interim Local Government Reorganisation proposal.
Confirmed	1 May 2025	Hertfordshire County Council Elections.
Confirmed	28 Nov 2025	Submit full Local Government Reorganisation Proposal.
Proposed	May 2027	Elections (Shadow authorities)
Proposed	Apr 2028	Vesting day for new unitary councils.

3.0 Reasons

- 3.1 The Minister indicated in his letter that he expected '*local leaders to work collaboratively and proactively, including by sharing information, to develop robust and sustainable unitary proposals that are in the best interests of the whole area ... rather than developing competing proposals*'. It was expected that every effort should be made to jointly submit one proposal, but it was understood there may be some cases where this was not possible. In such cases, the Government would consider any suitable proposals submitted.
- 3.2 Once submitted, Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government officials will provide feedback to help support the development of final proposals which are to be submitted by 28 November 2025.

4.0 Options

- 4.1 To provide an Interim Plan – This is recommended as it brings East Herts in-line with neighbouring Hertfordshire authorities and complies with the request from Government.
- 4.2 To not provide an Interim Plan – This is not recommended as it goes against the Government's specific request that council's work together to set out a plan on how to take forward its devolution plan.

5.0 Risks

- 5.1 Should the Executive choose not to approve the recommendations as set out in this report, then there would be a risk that East Herts Council is excluded from the Hertfordshire Interim Plan and would not therefore be able to shape and influence the March 2025 submission.

6.0 Implications/Consultations

6.1 As is set out in paragraph 2.11 and 2.12 of this report, there are ongoing discussions taking place between various officer and Member groups set up specifically for this purpose.

Community Safety

No

Data Protection

No

Equalities

Yes – An Equalities Impact Assessment (EqIA) was not completed for the Interim Plan stage, however as plans progress an EqIA will be developed to inform final local government reorganisation proposals to be submitted to Government in November 2025.

Environmental Sustainability

No - None in the context of this report. This report seeks to delegate authority as set out in the recommendations, and does not relate to a purchase or contract that would require a Sustainability Impact Assessment.

Financial

No - The submission of the interim plan will be contained within existing budget.

Health and Safety

No

Human Resources

Yes – None directly relating to the preparation of the Interim Plan. However significant resources will need to be made available to prepare for the full proposal in November 2025.

Local government reorganisation will have a direct impact on the council's recruitment and retention and this will continue to be

monitored by the council's Leadership Team, along with support from Human Resources team.

Human Rights

No

Legal

Yes - By virtue of Part 1 of the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007, the Secretary of State has the statutory power to invite proposals for a single tier of local government from any principal authority (which is defined as a county council or district council in England). The Councils across Hertfordshire have received such an invitation.

When responding to a request, the council must have regards to any guidance from the Secretary of State as to what the proposal should seek to achieve and matters that should be taken into account in formulating the proposal. The details of which are set out in the letter received on 5 February 2025.

Specific Wards

No

7.0 Background papers, appendices and other relevant material

- 7.1 [English Devolution White Paper](#)
- 7.2 Hertfordshire's proposed response – To follow

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