

Cheltenham Borough Council

Cabinet

Minutes

Meeting date: 17 March 2025

Meeting time: 12.30 pm – 12.55pm

In attendance:

Councillors:

Victoria Atherstone, Flo Clucas, Mike Collins, Iain Dobie, Rowena Hay, Martin Horwood, Peter Jeffries, Alisha Lewis and Izaak Tailford

Also in attendance:

Claire Hughes (Director of Governance, Housing and Communities) and Gareth Edmundson (Chief Executive)

1 Apologies

There were none.

2 Declarations of interest

There were none.

3 Minutes of the last meeting

The minutes of the last meeting will be considered at the next meeting (08 April).

4 Public and Member Questions and Petitions

There were no public questions, Member questions or petitions.

5 Devolution and Reorganisation

The Leader began her introduction by saying that the council faces a dilemma in many respects – to either step aside and allow local government reorganisation to be imposed on Cheltenham while we continue to focus on the day job, or to follow a

proactive path and make a clear statement about what we believe is best for Cheltenham, our neighbourhoods and our families. She said local government reorganisation is a once-in-a-lifetime, 50-year event, and of such importance to the future of the borough that it is the duty of elected Members to choose the latter.

She said three proposals are being outlined at this interim stage, as set out in the report:

- a single county-wide unitary authority;
- two unitary authorities, one in the east and one in the west;
- a Greater Gloucester model.

A joint covering letter signed by all the districts and the county council will be submitted to the government this week, with the supporting proposals submitted separately.

She said CBC's proposal for two unitary authorities – one made up of Gloucester City, Stroud and the Forest of Dean, the other combining Cheltenham, Tewkesbury and the Cotswolds - is pioneering and ambitious for Gloucestershire. The two proposed councils will be the right shape and size to meet government assessment tests and the right scale to still be connected to residents and communities. She thanked our five MPs, including Max Wilkinson, for sharing this preference for two councils to serve the county.

Moving forward, she said there is still a huge amount of work to be done, not least major consultation with residents and communities. Not all councils are unified around CBC's proposals, but she is convinced that these are right for Cheltenham and its residents, and that working collaboratively is the only thing to do.

She ended by saying that whatever the government decides, we will all work to do what is right for Cheltenham and for Gloucestershire as a wider entity.

Members thanked the Leader and officers for their hard work, and supported the proposals as set out, with the following contributions:

- the importance placed on having a local voice is welcome, and it is essential that a readable, accessible version of the documents is shared, so that everyone can understand what is being proposed;
- two unitaries is a genuinely positive way forward; areas need to be the right size to achieve efficiency - particularly in licensing and planning - to meet local needs, and be informed by local views. A single unitary cannot achieve this but two smaller unitaries can;
- we already work across districts, for example with Ubico, demonstrating that we don't have to form one single unitary in order to do that. Putting the whole of Gloucestershire together in one unitary would not necessarily make savings or efficiencies, whereas two unitaries can achieve what each area wants while working towards bigger goals, growth and change in a positive way;
- there are two main reasons to support the two unitary proposal:
 - i. localism: Gloucestershire is a huge county and a local centre for delivery is needed to provide services more efficiently ; and

- ii. identity – areas must not lose their identities, and Cheltenham and Gloucester are very different, both important but not suitable to be lumped together. Two unitaries will create different identities and makes good common sense;
- the report and document are inspiring, and it is worth remembering that this comes out of ten years of austerity from the previous government and the current government now facing huge challenges around services and funding. Cheltenham doesn't like being imposed upon, preferring to find its own solutions, and this is the right and obvious one. It is about identity and place and keeping local connections, which one huge authority would not provide. The proposal for two unitaries is well-articulated, not just about saving money but also about making positive changes to people's lives and services;
- this impressive report has been produced in a very short space of time, and thanks must go to the Leader and officers for that. In response to arguments that the current county-wide model for social services, adult care and education should not be split, population analysis shows that even if Gloucestershire is divided into two unitary authorities, these will still be larger than Bath and North-East Somerset and South Gloucestershire and North Somerset councils. The notion that things are done better if done bigger doesn't follow;
- attention to community and parish council level is welcome and matters greatly. The report emphasises the opportunity to have better focus on parish, town and community councils in urban areas, to rationalise, make them more consistent, and to bring government down to a really local level;
- there are parts of the borough boundary where the Cotswolds, Tewkesbury and Cheltenham all meet, and the two-authority model is an opportunity to get the best for Cheltenham by working even more closely and intensely with those areas, for example in planning for housing and transport. Cheltenham and Gloucester are two major urban centres, equally important and both with great histories and cultures, but Cheltenham has always looked more towards Tewkesbury and the Cotswolds than to Gloucester, and will welcome the positive opportunity to finesse some of the awkwardness of being separate boroughs and work together as the larger area of East Gloucestershire;
- an enormous amount of work has gone into delivering this proposal to the very tight government deadline. In view of government aspirations for growth, there is a worry that combining and rationalising councils could lead to the loss of some of the most important and exciting drivers of that growth in some areas. CBC's approach to finance and investment is innovative, and too much standardisation over vast areas could mean lost opportunities for experimentation. The two-unitary model, focussing on two centres of gravity, will give more opportunity, time and resource for them to innovate well and drive real localised growth.

Picking up on one of the comments, the Leader confirmed that a governance review has already started, and the journey will begin with a joint meeting with all five of Cheltenham's parish councils scheduled for later in the week. There is a question over what will happen to all the unparished areas, so it is important to commence this work and run it in parallel to everything else.

She thanked Members for their comments, and also officers and partners for the massive team effort in getting CBC's proposal to this point. She said that the two-unitary model will support economic growth and our communities

RESOLVED THAT:

- 1. the joint letter to be submitted to the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government found at Appendix 4 is approved;**
- 2. a preference is expressed for two unitary councils to be created in Gloucestershire and the interim submission included at Appendix 5 is approved, setting out an outline case to be appended separately to the joint letter alongside other interim proposals submitted by respective Gloucestershire councils;**
- 3. authority is delegated to the Chief Executive in consultation with the Leader to work with the other six Gloucestershire councils to submit the joint letter and any associated separate appendices submitted by councils individually;**
- 4. that there is not alignment on the shape of local government in Gloucestershire is recognised by Cabinet, but a commitment to ongoing collaboration with other Gloucestershire Councils, stakeholders and MHCLG as the devolution and reorganisation process progresses is agreed, to ensure that we deliver the best outcomes for residents and businesses.**

6 Briefing from Cabinet Members

There were no briefings on this occasion.