

# Extraordinary Council

17 November 2025

## Public Questions (5 total)

### 1. Question from Rich Newman to the Leader, Councillor Rowena Hay

What evidence can Cheltenham Borough Council provide to prove that their plan of partitioning our county is the desirable option among the population?

#### Cabinet Member response:

I'd like to thank Mr Newman for the question. Firstly, it is important to clarify that any proposals relating to LGR are not solely Cheltenham Borough Council's. All councils have worked together to produce business cases for both a single county unitary and a two unitary option based on an East/West split. Gloucester City Council have developed their own business case for a 'Greater Gloucester' Council with another council covering the remainder of the county. Council will also be having a free vote on the LGR options to support Cabinet in making the final decision on which LGR option to support.

With specific regard to partitioning the county, it is important to remind Mr Newman that Gloucestershire is currently partitioned seven ways between six district councils and one county council. In addition, prior to the government white paper, there was a broad consensus among all political parties in Gloucestershire that the preference would be to remain as district and county authorities split seven ways.

I also note that you yourself have previously stood for election to Cheltenham Borough Council. Despite the fact that you have not yet succeeded in being elected, I take from your own commitment to seeking public office in this town that you believe in the importance of having committed local politicians who can passionately represent their local areas. For me this goes to the heart of Local Government Reorganisation, I fundamentally believe that whatever shape local government takes in Gloucestershire, it is vital that our residents and businesses do not feel distant from the decisions that are made. On this basis, having two councils for Gloucestershire could help make the people we represent feel more connected to the decisions that are made.

Furthermore, bearing in mind that local government reorganisation will likely have an impact for the next 50 years or more, at this moment we must make a decision on what is the *right* size council to serve our residents.

On this point the District Councils Network recently completed some independently verified analysis which explored looking at the size and performance of unitary councils.

The full report can be found via the District Council website but the key findings were as follows:

1. There is little or no evidence to support a preference for large unitary councils and no evidence to support the 500k population level set out in government criteria.
2. The bulk of the data analysed shows a non-existent or faint relationship between a council's population and its outcomes.
3. When there is an apparent correlation between population size and outcomes, it rarely favours larger councils.
4. The evidence gives no reason to assume that smaller unitary councils will be less efficient, sustainable or effective due to their size.

## **2. Question from Rich Newman to the Leader, Councillor Rowena Hay**

What assurances can this council provide that assets of community value that were issued under Cheltenham Borough Council will be respected and adhered to under any new unitary authority?

### **Cabinet Member response:**

Thank you for the question. On the current timetable, elections to the shadow council(s) will take place in May 2027. I suggest that this question is then best directed to the politicians of the future council that represent Cheltenham.

## **3. Question from Elliot Craddock to the Leader, Councillor Rowena Hay**

According to the BBC, the cost of establishing two councils will take nine years to pay off vs. three years to pay off the single council model. And that's not even considering the future long-term costs of employing twice the number of people to work for twice the number of councils. Can the council outline the benefits for the taxpayers of Gloucestershire, from a money spent and economic point of view, where they can expect a benefit from two councils vs. one?

### **Cabinet Member response:**

I'd like to thank Mr Craddock for his question. At present Gloucestershire is served by seven councils. In all business cases developed for LGR they all project a saving to the taxpayer regardless of whether one or two councils remain for Gloucestershire.

On headline business case figures, a single unitary delivers marginally higher savings, because it avoids disaggregation costs, particularly for children's and adult services. These transition costs are not a flaw in the two-unitary proposal, they are a feature of any reform creating more than one council.

The financial analysis by Price Waterhouse Coopers (PwC) for both the single unitary model and the east/west unitary model shows that the net recurrent savings from the 2 unitary model is 1.3% of total expenditure in 2028/29 compared to 2.5% for the 1 unitary model. This is a marginal difference given the opportunities for economic growth and the forthcoming Fair Funding Review changes.

Every local government reorganisation business case contains financial modelling that attempts to project accuracy but is ultimately a collection of assumptions and estimates. Even the most comprehensive financial model can never fully reflect the financial reality of an established council, nor capture the impact of the way members make decisions shaped by the needs and views of the residents they represent. In this context it is important to put forward the limitations of the financial modelling completed thus far:

- The model is heavily focused on financial efficiencies through economies of scale, particularly in back-office functions and service delivery
- This mechanistic, spreadsheet-driven logic overlooks the complex, relational nature of local government services, especially those involving social care, housing, and community engagement
- Activities like early intervention, prevention, and community support—often delivered more effectively by smaller authorities—are difficult to quantify and thus underrepresented in the model
- The model makes no allowance for a reduction in performance on in-year council tax collection rates, which can be anecdotally evidenced. Gloucestershire districts collectively have an in-year collection rate of council tax of 97.8% (based on 2024/25) which compares favourably to recently created unitaries like Somerset 96.67% and North Northamptonshire 94.92%. A 1% reduction would equate to £4.7m. It is highly likely that bringing six districts together to deliver transformation would create at least some drop in collection performance.
- The model is limited in that it is only able to profile the timing of savings at a high level on a year-by-year basis. The two-unitary solution will be quicker and simpler to bring together services from three district councils rather than six. The on-going savings will therefore be delivered quicker and will provide a platform for further transformation savings.
- The model does not include any additional costs for supporting neighbourhood working which would be required in a single larger unitary which is more remote from its population and would reduce annual savings.

Under the two unitary financial position:

- Net annual savings are estimated at £10.8m, compared with £21.1m for a single authority. The difference is marginal on an annual budget of over £850m, (1.3% v 2.5%) and reflects the estimated disaggregation costs rather than ongoing inefficiency; it does not account for the model limitations set out above.
- Transitional pressures are manageable, and both authorities would be financially sustainable.
- Cost is only one part of the equation; reform that sacrifices legitimacy, service resilience or staff morale for marginally higher savings is a false economy.

In short: the two unitary authority model, achieves comparable financial benefits with far stronger legitimacy, accountability and resilience.

Financial modelling focuses on structure, not strategy. It can calculate the cost of merging teams or closing offices, but it cannot quantify the value of agility, trust, or economic opportunity or the cost of getting reform wrong. Four areas are routinely underestimated:

1. Economic opportunity costs: A large, slow-moving authority, risks losing investment opportunities the foregone GVA would dwarf any structural savings.
2. The prevention dividend: Smaller, connected councils can intervene early and reduce long-term demand pressures, something large authorities can struggle to do.
3. Delivery risk: A council that saves slightly more on paper but faces, staff attrition, and integration problems will erode those gains quickly.
4. Democratic disengagement: When residents don't feel heard, opposition to plans and consultations increases cost and delay.

Taken together, these risks could easily outweigh the £10 million difference between the one and two unitary options, running far higher if reform falters or legitimacy is lost.

#### **4. Question from David Redgewell to the Leader, Councillor Rowena Hay**

In view of the plans for Greater Gloucester plans being published yesterday, which would take part of Tewkesbury Borough Council and Cotswold District Council into Greater Gloucester, what impact as the soon to be Abolished Cheltenham Borough Council had in to this proposal.

With Cheltenham Borough Council now too small to provide services into Cheltenham spa suburban area like Bishop Cleeve, Shurdington Staverton parts of Prestbury Swindon village new Development,

Why did Cheltenham spa Borough Council decide to merge with Cotswolds District Council, and Tewkesbury Borough Council.

Rather than support a unitary Gloucestershire Council.

Where large service like social services Education service, Highways and Transport libraries service can be maintained in a single unit

Like unitary Wiltshire, Somerset, and Dorset .

Such a split will lead to a lot of joint arrangements including the Fire and Rescue Service Highways Authority

**Cabinet Member response:**

I'd like to thank Mr Redgewell for the question. At present Gloucestershire is divided into seven councils with one county council and six districts.

All councils have worked on the development of a single unitary option for Gloucestershire and a two unitary model based on an East/West split. Both proposals set out the respective strengths of each option.

Gloucester City Council have separately developed their own proposal for a Greater Gloucester Council with the remainder of the county forming the other unitary authority. CBC had no input into the development of that proposal.

Cheltenham Borough Council has not decided to merge with any other authorities. The decision on the future shape of local government in Gloucestershire will be made by the Government. On current timescales, that decision is expected next summer in 2026.

**5. Question from David Redgewell to the Leader, Councillor Rowena Hay**

With Tewkesbury Borough Council, Cheltenham Borough Council and Gloucester city council, Being a principle urban area.

With a joint structure plan .

For Economic growth development,

Housing ,community development, schools college's shopping centres and university campuses, mass rapid transit route planned and bus links

Why was a unitary council for Tewkesbury Borough Council Cheltenham spa Borough Council and Gloucester city council not looked at like Bournemouth Christchurch and Poole as urban area and with a rural Gloucestershire based on Cirencester, Stroud and the Forest of Dean .

With unitary Gloucestershire Council it's easy for one council to join the west of England mayoral combined Authority,

For bus Franchising powers Railway services powers regional planning and Regeneration power NHS services, Police powers over a merged Avon and Somerset police and Gloucestershire Police with the metro mayor having the same powers as the metro mayor Andy Burnham of Greater Manchester in the Devolution Bill soon to be an act.

Gloucestershire East council is very small and in places Deep rural to run major services.

What other than 2 events has Cheltenham spa Borough Council held on these proposals with stakeholders residents and community's business and Trades Unions noting the Cheltenham Borough Council was the only note a public meeting with stakeholders and Trades unions the other Evening.

Bearing in mind Tewkesbury Borough Council do not support west Gloucestershire unitary Council but a unitary Gloucestershire Council.

**Cabinet Member response:**

A proposal for a unitary council covering Cheltenham, Gloucester and Tewkesbury is not one that has been developed by any of the local authorities within Gloucestershire, therefore, that option will not be submitted to the government. However, the government have the final decision on the future shape of local government. They do not have to select any of the options put forward by councils in Gloucestershire. This means that central government could impose and implement whatever shape of local government it considered was best for the county - this includes the model outlined in the question if the government wished.

With regard to devolution, while it is technically possible for a two-council model of local government to end up in different devolved mayoral areas this is very unlikely. This is because all councils currently have a consensus to keep Gloucestershire together in any future devolved arrangement. However, decisions on future devolution arrangements are at this stage premature as the government has not set any further timetable for implementation of further mayoral strategic authorities.

On public engagement, CBC joined with all other councils to work jointly to seek the views of residents and stakeholders. This was conducted through the summer and included both surveys and in public events and supported the joint development of the business cases.

Finally, on union engagement, officer representation from the LGR joint programme was in attendance at the recent union meeting. But more importantly, CBC has positive and constructive union relationships and has regular meetings to allow our union colleagues to raise and discuss current issues. CBC remains open to discussing LGR in those meetings as it progresses.