

Cheltenham Borough Council Council Minutes

Meeting date: 17 November 2025

Meeting time: 2.30 pm - 4.46 pm

In attendance:

Councillors:

Martin Horwood (Vice-Chair), Frank Allen, Glenn Andrews, Victoria Atherstone, Paul Baker, Adrian Bamford, Garth Barnes, Dilys Barrell, Angie Boyes, Jackie Chelin, Barbara Clark, Flo Clucas, Mike Collins, Ashleigh Davies, Chris Day, Iain Dobie, Jan Foster, Juan Carlos Garcia Clamp, Rowena Hay, Hannah Healy, Sandra Holliday, Peter Jeffries, Alisha Lewis, Dr Cathal Lynch, Tony Oliver, Ben Orme, Dr Helen Pemberton, Richard Pineger, Julie Sankey, Stan Smith, Dr Steve Steinhardt, Izaak Tailford, Simon Wheeler and Suzanne Williams

Also in attendance:

Claire Hughes (Director of Governance, Housing and Communities), Gareth Edmundson (Chief Executive), Sarah Farooqi (One Legal) and Louis Krog (Head of Public Protection and DEPLO)

1 A moment of reflection

Before moving to the formal business of the meeting, the Deputy Mayor paid tribute to the Deputy Chief Executive, Paul Jones, a much-loved and respected colleague, who unexpectedly passed away last week. He said Paul first worked for the council as an apprentice at the age of 16, and subsequently worked his way up to the role of Deputy Chief Executive, S151 Officer and Returning Officer. In many ways, as finance director, he was the architect of the council's financial stability, to the benefit of everyone in the town and the council, and there was no-one with as much good humour, warmth and humanity as him. His loss has caused much shock and sadness, and deep sympathy is extended to his family and immediate colleagues in the council team.

He confirmed that the Leader will add a special item to the next Council agenda to give everyone an opportunity to pay tribute to Paul. In the meantime, a Book of Condolence has been placed in the Cambray Room, and there will also be an online way to remember him.

He invited everyone present to stand for a Moment of Reflection.

2 Apologies

Apologies were received from Councillors Beale, Chandler, Harvey, Joy, Tooke and Willingham.

3 Declarations of interest

The Deputy Mayor confirmed that being a county councillor does not count as a registerable interest for Agenda Item 11, Local Government Reorganisation.

4 Minutes of the last meeting

The minutes of the meeting held on 13 October were approved unanimously as a true record and signed accordingly.

5 Communications by the Deputy Mayor

The Deputy Mayor said he had attended several events recently and highlighted just a few:

- the 170th anniversary of Cheltenham YMCA – an extraordinary and moving event, celebrating this fantastic local organisation and the striking scale and breadth of all it does;
- a great celebration of Diwali at Pate's, featuring dance and cultural diversity;
- last week, a climate conference in the Chamber, the first half of which emulated the COP event in Belem, focussing on how the nations of the world are reacting to the existential threat of the climate emergency. He said our generation has not succeeded very well but input from schools and young people suggests that the next generation will do much better. It was a moving and powerful event, and included some very tough questioning.

6 Communications by the Leader of the Council

The Leader had two main items to share.

She recently met with the trustees of the Lido, a voluntary organisation which is going from strength to strength, as demonstrated by:

- a record summer season, with almost 300k visitors and 3,261 season tickets;
- the very popular dog swim raised £23k;

- the new car park has 143 public spaces, 27 bike rack spaces and eight EV chargers;
- 110 seasonal workers are employed, including the winter season.

She was proud that the council supported the solar car park, now completed at a cost of £1.2m; the Lido is now 65% self-sufficient, and excess energy is exported at 15p per kilowatt.

She has also attended the annual parish council get-together, which focussed on local government reorganisation and highlighted the nervousness and uncertainty about the implication of this for parish councils. Liberal Democrats' strong commitment is to bottom-up democracy, so it is important to engage with them. The second stage of the community governance review was approved at the last Council meeting, and will need five full-on reviews before moving to Stage 2; public consultation will take place 05 January-27 March, the responses will be reviewed by the working group in April-May, and it is likely the final recommendations will be brought back to Council in June. Depending on the results, a reorganisation order will be made, and she stressed the importance of Members getting as many people as possible to feed into the consultation to make it of value.

The Deputy Mayor, who was also present at the parish council meeting, said there was very strong appreciation of CBC's consultative approach.

7 To receive petitions

There were no petitions.

8 Public Questions

Five questions had been asked by three members of the public, all of whom were present to ask supplementary questions.

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.

Supplementary Question

Thank you for this thorough response. We can agree none of the four points raised show it is the will of the people to remain as one county or to partition Gloucestershire in half. The will of the people of Cheltenham is a priority, and with this in mind, as well the clear disagreement among the councils themselves, does this council agree that more consultation with public is necessary before the council is partitioned?

Cabinet Member response

There will be consultation but the process is that expressions of interest have to be submitted to the government by 28 November, and the government will decide the next stage by 28 March. This will include consultation, but it is still not clear whether this will go beyond statutory partners such as the police and health service. The government has said that the public can feed back on the proposals but it is not going to come out on a roadshow to each town in county. It is down to us to ensure that those with an interest put their arguments forward, and we will encourage our residents to do so.

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.

Supplementary question

Thank you for your response. In eyes of the public, this council has overseen the selling of the airport and Municipal Offices, the closure of the household recycling centre, and the closure of many pubs and businesses. What would you like the legacy of this council to be?

Cabinet Member response

The council will carry on doing what it has always done – serve the people of Cheltenham – and aim to hand over authority to whatever council comes next for a sustainable future.

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.

Supplementary question

Thanks for the thorough response, and it's good to share the same goal of keeping costs down for the people of Gloucestershire, though odd that the reply criticises financial modelling as a "collection of assumptions and estimates" and later on quotes something that was "anecdotally evidenced". The main argument seems to be the idea that one council would be too slow-moving to deliver for the people of Gloucestershire, implying that one single authority, with all the expertise focussed in that one authority, will be less efficient than two authorities with identical authority. Is that the assumption?

Cabinet Member response

No. At the end of the day it is about what we believe is best for Cheltenham, and in a wider context, what we believe will work. There are no other unitary authorities with two significant urban areas – Cheltenham and Gloucester - which would be constantly competing when applying to government. Cheltenham councillors believe two authorities are needed, to maintain local democracy - some wards are currently served by five councillors between the district and county, and this could be reduced to two, each representing 4.5k people, which would make communicating efficiently with residents difficult. This is a 50-year opportunity to look at local government and how to deliver public services better to residents . Fundamentally, I don't believe that 'bigger is better' – councillors need to be as close as they can to the people they represent.

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 and a suburban area like Bishop Cleeve, Shurdington Staverton parts of Prestbury Swindon village new Development,

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

Rather than support a unitary Gloucestershire Council.

Where large services 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.

Supplementary question

The county of Gloucestershire has been around for 1000 years, losing Bristol and South Gloucestershire in 1974. Cheltenham is a small town, with a large number of public services. How will splitting the historic county in half provide a decent bus service across the county, as well as health, social, fire services, and highways services, all currently provided on a county-wide basis, not to mention southwest public services such as the ambulance service?

Cabinet Member response

Actually the county is already split in seven, with the county council carrying out statutory functions and the six districts delivering the rest of the services. South Gloucestershire Council used to be part of Gloucestershire County Council, so we know this kind of split can be successful. There is a lot of concern about social services and in particular the effectiveness of adult social care, but at the end of day, the cost of disaggregation has to be gone through.

This is about public sector reform, and we don't necessarily have to have two separate services. For example, the enormously successful Ubico serves the whole of Gloucestershire and beyond, and is paid into by all the councils.

The goal set by government is for single one unitary councils with the carrot of an elected Mayor, but as it doesn't have enough money to introduce this everywhere, it has paused the process - which begs question as to why we are even going through this reorganisation when there is nothing at end of the tunnel for our residents.

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.

Supplementary question

Gloucester City and Gloucestershire County Councils have both upheld expressions of interest about joining the West of England Combined Authority, as has Stroud

District Council. As Cheltenham is a west country town, which looks to the west rather than the midlands, have there been any conversations with the West of England Combined Authority or any case made for an elected mayor?

Cabinet Member response

Yes, this discussion has formed part of the consultation and is included in the documentation presented today. From an economic point of view, the west of England is where we want to go and a natural road for Cheltenham, but this is not our decision.

9 Member Questions

There were none.

10 Cheltenham Borough Council (Markets) Bill

The Cabinet Member for Economic Development, Culture, Wellbeing and Public Realm introduced the report, which needed Council approval before it could progress to government. He said markets are an important and beneficial part of Cheltenham, promoting economic and social wellbeing, but licensing of markets is problematic due to Section 83 of the Cheltenham Trading Act 1882, which makes it an offence to hold a market on any street in the borough and therefore requires the licensing of every individual trader in order to operate. This is not sustainable and generates a huge administrative burden and cost to traders and the council every year.

To resolve this, the Council approved a resolution to repeal S83 in July 2023, and following consultation, a bill has been approved which requires final approval from Members before being deposited with Parliament. Following its adoption, CBC will be granted the powers to set up and manage new markets, setting the days, hours and charges, and to regulate sales. This much-simplified process, fully supported by the majority of respondents, will leave more time to create a tailored approach to better fit the town going forward, supporting businesses better and creating more harmony in the town centre. The private bill must be deposited by November 2025 - otherwise it will have to wait until November 2026 – and he hoped Members would support the recommendations and allow the authority to move forward with these essential works.

There were no Member questions. In debate, the following points were made:

- markets and traders don't often appear at licensing committee but handling individual licenses clearly creates a lot of work for officers who are dealing with alcohol licences, SEVs, taxis and more. A licence for a whole market will make their lives a lot easier;
- it seems bizarre to be discussing an 1882 Act of Parliament, which has created such a huge amount of bureaucracy and now requires a bureaucratic process to withdraw it. Everyone agrees that markets are an enormous and positive bonus for the town, and the repeal of this act will mean the council has more control over where they go. This is a great opportunity to save on bureaucracy and manage markets going forward to the benefit of all;
- this is a great idea, giving the town an opportunity to hold markets in different areas – a great bonus for the town's economy;
- this is just one efficiency brought about by the new Licensing and Public Protection Manager who is doing a great job, and has made excellent progress so far with her successful and professional application of licensing law.

RESOLVED THAT:

- 1. it is expedient to promote a Bill for effecting all or some of the purposes mentioned below and that such a bill be promoted accordingly by the authority. The purposes are:**
 - a. Repealing section 83 of the Cheltenham Improvement Act 1852;**
 - b. Applying Part III of the Food Act 1984 to any market in the borough; and**
 - c. Introducing a power for an authorised person to issue a fixed penalty notice to any person who the authorised person has reason to believe has committed an offence contrary to byelaws made under section 60 of the Food Act 1984.**
 - d. Such other purposes as may be determined by the Council.**
- 2. authority is delegated to the Head of Public Protection, in consultation with the S.151 Officer, Director of One Legal and Cabinet Member for Economic Development, Wellbeing, Culture and Public Realm, to:**
 - a. address procedural matters which may arise in relation to the promotion of the Bill and to enter undertakings or commitments in relation to it;**
 - b. agree to the making of any necessary amendments to the Bill that may arise during the promotion of the Bill; and**
 - c. affix the Common Seal to the Petition for the Bill and to any other necessary documents.**

32 in support

1 abstention

11 2025 Independent Resident Survey Results

Introducing the report, the Leader said resident surveys have been undertaken in 2019, 2022, and 2025, with the results of this year's survey now collated and presented to Members for noting and information. She made the following points:

- the surveys help measure how residents feel about Cheltenham and CBC services, and this year's is particularly well timed, coinciding with local government reorganisation, to provide information about how people identify with the town and which services are most valued;
- there is continued dissatisfaction with roads and pavements, and the findings will be shared with the new administration at the county, which will hopefully make improvements to benefit Cheltenham residents;
- we have been through torrid times since the last survey, with covid, the cost of living crisis, inflation and massive increase in energy bills presenting a huge financial challenge and requiring the council to deliver millions of pounds' worth of savings to protect our services. The fact that overall satisfaction levels this year are consistent with those of 2019 is something of which we can be proud, although there is always room for improvement;
- many people responded to the survey on line, but to ensure qualitative data, a specific number of phone calls to residents were also made, to provide a proper cross section of all residents from the age of 16 to pensioners.

There may not be another survey before 2028 but we will look at what residents are telling us and fight to protect and enhance the local services they rely on.

In response to Members' questions, the Leader confirmed that:

- where north, south, east and west Cheltenham is referred to, she was unable to say specifically which wards fall in these areas. The survey was carried out by Enventure Research Ltd, and they can provide that information;
- relevant results of the survey will be shared with Gloucestershire County Council – in particular residents' concerns about roads and potholes, and the closure of the Swindon Road HRC – and she welcomed the opportunity to work together with the county to resolve the issues.

In debate, Members made the following points:

- it is interesting to note that over 80% of Cheltenham residents think it is important to be represented by a local council and councillors;
- another interesting point to note is that residents don't feel they have enough choice of retail options in the town centre – this view is particularly prevalent with young people – and highlights the need to focus on attracting more affordable retailers to the town;
- although we all know we are lucky to live in Cheltenham, and the survey reinforces this, there are still challenges and it is important not to be complacent. We must continue to engage with residents, knock on doors, distribute leaflets, and make sure people know who we are and how to get in touch;
- it is great to read in the survey that young people now think that Cheltenham is offering greater career opportunities, after so many years when a lot of young

people left the town to pursue careers elsewhere. Now Golden Valley, cyber security and more are generating and driving good, quality jobs for Cheltenham people and will do for years to come – this is a fantastic bonus;

- the concerns about the loss of Swindon Road HRC are understandable, but some very positive discussions have taken place with the new Liberal Democrat administration at Shire Hall, with Cabinet Members agreeing that Cheltenham needs its own household recycling centre – it is the only urban centre in the county without one – and resolved to fight tooth and nail for this;
- another interesting point is that with the sale of the Municipal Offices imminent, people still want a council presence in the town and it is important that this is maintained;
- there are allusions to the town going downhill in some areas, with particular reference to litter and graffiti. This is the bane of all our lives and has a depressing impact; Cheltenham BID has done a good job cleaning up graffiti in the town centre, but we need to do more to catch and prosecute the perpetrators. It is great that Cheltenham has 16 litter-picking groups, and the council will continue to work with them;
- career opportunities in Cheltenham have increased greatly in the last few years, encouraging people who live or come here to study to stay on;
- it is good to note that people are proud to say they are from Cheltenham.

The Leader thanked Members for their comments, and following on from the last point and in the context of the upcoming item on local government reorganisation, she said it is all about place, where the heart is. People identify with Cheltenham and value the places and spaces where they live. She said no-one knows Cheltenham as well as its residents and Members do.

RESOLVED THAT:

- 3. the 2025 Resident Survey results and the insights they provide for future service delivery are acknowledged;**
- 4. the results will be used to inform future delivery of council services;**
- 5. the results will be communicated to the council's partners with lead responsibilities for areas where further improvement has been identified;**
- 6. the survey will be repeated in three years' time.**

34 in support - unanimous

12 Local Government Reorganisation - Business Case Submission

The Leader introduced the report, which she said had been an absolute Herculean effort over the past few months, to provide the information and detail requested by the government. Although the borough does not welcome local government reorganisation, it is not in our control, and ironically the government will decide what shape local government in Gloucestershire will take, while badging the initiative as giving people greater powers. She has fought for what she believes is the best

option and in the best interests for Cheltenham's residents and businesses, and tried to ensure that Cheltenham's voice is heard.

Whatever the outcome, the council will continue to work in a collaborative way and in partnership to deliver the best for our town, but working in collaboration requires compromise, so rather than try to highlight the key points of many hundreds of pages of business cases today, she would explain from the heart why her core liberal values make her believe that two unitaries – East and West Gloucestershire - is the best option for Cheltenham and the county:

- business cases are not statements of fact – they are opinions, underpinned by financial assumptions, and the same data can be used as the basis of very different proposals;
- there is no doubt that one big council can try to ensure that local residents' forums and parish networks go some way towards mitigating the loss of local councils, but why take risk? A fundamental Liberal belief is to always aim for the most power at lowest level and on this measure, two unitaries are the only choice for Gloucestershire;
- the maths is simple – in a future East Gloucestershire Council, almost 50% of the councillors will represent Cheltenham; in a single unitary, it will be only 25% who are able to speak for our town. This will result in a dilution of our power and influence – over Cheltenham's culture, festivals, investment, sense of place – and cannot be supported;
- we currently have an urban-centred, rural-blind government, hostile to town and parish councils, which wants to reduce power to neighbourhood talking shops with no power to create change. This is a top-down, civil servant-led artificial construct, based on population size and service delivery assumptions, trying to boil down the creation of new councils to some sort of technical procurement exercise. We have played our part and worked hard to make our case, but no civil servant can override our knowledge of our wards over the decades;
- the current two-tier system has its faults, but recognises the diversity of place across the county, and can flex to the vast differences, delivering local politicians with the power to shape place. Whatever option is chosen, the result will be a council many times bigger than what we have now, and faced with that choice, we must choose the smallest viable option to ensure that decision-making and power remain as close to residents as it can.

She ended by saying this is a once-in-a-generation opportunity for residents to make changes which will last for 50 years. All the options presented for Gloucestershire are as imperfect as the business cases that describe them, which is why she remains of strongest belief that we must choose power and influence at the most local level and support an east and a west unitary for Gloucestershire.

The Deputy Mayor thanked the Leader and explained the process and how the vote would work, reminding Members that the chosen option would be submitted as an advisory to the government, who will make the ultimate decision on Gloucestershire's future.

There were no questions.

In debate, the overwhelming majority of those who spoke agreed with the Leader's comments and proposal for two unitaries, and praised the Leader, Cabinet and officers for the huge amount of work involved in bringing the report and the business cases to Council today. They made the following comments, points and observations in support of two unitaries:

- the one-size-fits-all approach doesn't work, especially in large rural areas with multiple urban centres and many local identities. Possible financial savings should not be the only driver to determine the most appropriate long-term system, and the Local Residents Survey proves that over 80% of Cheltenham residents feel it is important to be represented by a local council and councillors. In hard times, statutory services are always cut first – in a single unitary council, six areas will be prioritising their own needs, fighting for one pot of money to fund services to improve their own community's wellbeing, economy and environment. Reducing councillor representation per division from five to two raises huge concerns, not only because the significance of local knowledge and local accountability is enormous, but also because it will create a significant barrier to anyone of working age being able to commit the required hours to deliver on behalf of the communities they serve, and although inclusive representation will be harder in a two-unitary authority scenario, it will be impossible in a single unitary. The Greater Gloucestershire proposal recognises many benefits of smaller population sizes but doesn't equally address the huge population size on the outer edge of the donut, or acknowledge that Gloucester is not the only large urban area in the county;
- local government reorganisation will remove a layer of democracy and autonomy from our residents, and we must fight for the best solution for them. CBC officers and councillors care deeply and work hard to deliver an amazing number of statutory and discretionary services on a small budget, and it is a fallacy – not practical or logical – to suggest that an authority responsible for 650k people, spanning multiple urban areas as well as rural ones with distinct identities and economies, can do the same. The argument against splitting highways and other county-wide services is weak when the residents' survey suggests that those services aren't working for us now, but cross-boundary services like Ubico and the Local Visitor Economy Partnership prove that they can work successfully. South Gloucestershire Council, with 300k people, already exists on our doorstep, and three authorities of roughly equal numbers serving the county of Gloucestershire will result in better representation and equity. No solution is perfect, including the current set-up of councils, but two unitary councils will better protect our town, our residents' interests and futures, and provide something for them more than just cost savings.

One Member felt a single unitary authority to be the only option that sticks to government's request that the new council should represent over 500k residents, and said that the Greater Gloucestershire model would result in a very small unitary of 180k. The benefits of two unitaries should be more councillors per resident, but in fact both the two-unitary and one-unitary option will result in just 110 councillors across the county, many less than the current representation. The east-west split is an improvement in terms of percentage of Cheltenham's representation but doesn't change each councillor's workload or the ability of a resident to contact their local

representative. The east-west split model also talks extensively about the individual identities of different areas of Gloucestershire, but neither a single nor a split unitary can change that; our regional identities sit in our people and will be maintained. Also, there are already regional differences across Cheltenham, between the different wards and areas. Pooling together all our resources in a single unitary will allow us to deliver services centrally, with all our expertise in one place and networked across all the districts and boroughs.

Members in support of two unitaries continued to explain their reasons:

- local government reorganisation is a blatant power-grab by the Labour government, and a huge waste of officer time and tax payers' money. It wipes out the vital layer of democracy that is closest to the citizen, taking their elected representatives further away in a large unitary authority. Larger does not necessarily mean better or more efficient, and there are many examples across the country where smaller can be successful. Cheltenham has 150 years of strong local democracy, and the best option is the most local – the two-unitary option. This can deliver better services to the communities it serves, including licensing, planning, and tackling the climate emergency; district councils are already leading bold, community-driven innovation and this must not be lost. Two strong, focussed councils will champion local priorities, and also provide real opportunities for the important involvement of the youth voice and youth representation. Our hands are tied and the final decision will be made by the government minister, but whatever the outcome, Members will work hard to make it work for our residents; two distinct authorities will provide balance, scale and localism, with decisions made as close to citizens as possible;
- No Child Left Behind was sparked by a statistic showing that the youngest child to be excluded from school in Gloucestershire lived in Cheltenham – and from that initial spark, 113 organisations now work with NCLB and 7,000 children have been helped with school uniform, computers and much more. The county was too far removed from the local area and community to recognise these problems and act on them. A two-unitary authority gives local people a local voice, and local councillors the opportunity to work with them and drive forward the things that matter. CBC already works successfully with Tewkesbury, and together they can continue to do the best they can for their towns and residents;
- the representation constraint from five to two councillors is really concerning – the increased workload will mean the loss of some good councillors, with full-time jobs and/or caring responsibilities, who do not have capacity to carry out the role. The government should be condemned for putting us in this position;
- CBC has survived many years of austerity and Conservative funding cuts, only for the current Labour government to take our representation away as well. Liberal values are for maximum representation at the lowest level; dilution of democracy will mean a dilution of Cheltenham, but as reorganisation is inevitable, two unitaries is the least worst option. The Deputy Chief Executive always said that bigger isn't necessarily better, and the fact that the failing services – highways, transport, social services - are all at county level while the wonderful things that we all love about Cheltenham are at borough level is proof of that;

- there are many arguments pulling us both ways, but the issue of representation is a clincher, at two levels: firstly, 54% of councillors will represent Cheltenham in a two-unitary council as opposed to 25% in a single unitary, and secondly, at the other level, there will be two Gloucestershire councils bidding for funding, striving to get their voices heard in Parliament, working with partners locally and nationally. Both are very persuasive arguments;
- the most important issue is the local councillor's relationship with the people they represent – understanding their problems and feeling they can actually do something to help. That connection and identity is needed to feed into decisions and actions, and needs to be as close to home as possible. Gloucestershire is a huge county with very different needs – all important, but requiring different solutions. The two-centre model is the only one which will work in the long term;
- in response to the Member who spoke in support of a single unitary, the figures that suggest representation in both a single unitary and two unitary councils will be the same are temporary. A boundary review will bring the number of councillors in a single unitary down to 60-70 rather than 110 – so ultimately providing less representation than 52 councillors in each of the two unitary councils. Regarding the size of unitary councils, there is no proof that over 500k residents offers any particular value: the District Councils Association found a negative correlation with outcomes as authorities became larger, and 350k in each of two unitary councils feels like a good size. Regarding representation, this also applies to officers: pooling experts in one centre of excellence is put forward as a reason to support a single unitary, but two unitaries of 350k residents provides enough capacity to have experts in both, and a single expert in one large unitary would only be able to give half the time and attention to very serious cases before them;
- it is striking to note how few residents understand this most significant decision, and notable that central government wants to introduce sweeping reforms with little evidence that they are wanted or even understood by the electorate. Local people value local government because it is local with decisions and advice rooted in local knowledge from people who understand the neighbourhood and share a sense of place, familiarity and community. The government's focus is on efficiency savings but efficiency is not a mandate for better service, and not a reason to reduce democratic representation or weaken local connection. One unitary authority or a centralised model will not improve outcomes for Cheltenham people, and could be underpinning a broader, unspoken national agenda around automation and AI. Although this can offer many capabilities, streamline processes and improve efficiency, it cannot and must never be allowed to replace the value of people; people need purpose and connection, and no algorithm can replicate the reassurance of speaking with a human who belongs to the community. The two-unitary model is not perfect but is the closest option to preserving the high degree of local representation and knowledge that the current system has. We must choose not just a structure but a philosophy of local government, that values people over systems, community over consolidation, and representation over remote efficiency;
- a two-unitary model is the only way forward, to prevent Cheltenham councillors from becoming disconnected with the people they represent. We need to look after our residents' best interests, not other people's – this is all that matters;

- local government is the best form of government, providing deep human connections, the ability to step into people's lives and take the weight from their shoulders, have real conversations with residents – and for many councillors, trying to maintain this connection in a ward twice as big would be almost impossible, making the role of councillor the exclusive purview of the retired and the wealthy. People need a sense of connection, especially in times of crisis, and they cannot be reduced to a number on a list too long to get round to. The government is hacking away at connections that keep the county moving and drive local investment, such as Golden Valley and all the new jobs and opportunities it is providing - it will kill local growth, local connection, and local government in any sense of word. The whole LGR process is a pantomime, involving hours of everyone's time; it takes years to deliver real change for real people, and the government should be concentrating on more important issues;
- the report talks about the 'right size' of local government, and Price Waterhouse Cooper proposed as 650k as the best option for a single unitary, with two smaller unitaries of 350k given the amber light. When unitary authorities were originally introduced many years ago, 250k was considered an appropriate number, and in view of population growth, 350k seems a sensible figure for now; 650k is just too large. The Deputy Chief Executive made a strong financial case to prove that two unitary authorities will be stronger than one, and it is worth noting that when health authorities were similarly merged in the past, with one of the strong drivers being the efficiency and financial gains, the reality was the exact opposite, and economies of scale were not delivered;
- a single unitary authority model appears to be the most financially driven and focussed on efficiencies, but local representatives care more about their residents and giving them a voice. The best way to do this is two unitary authorities – those voices will make up a higher percentage of the authority and therefore be louder;
- a particular concern about a unitary authority centred on Gloucester is planning, which is such an essential part of what people feel about a town, how it grows and develops, and how that is supported by the local planning authority. One single planning authority for the whole of Gloucestershire would be detrimental, and we would lose commitment and connection; two unitary authorities will help retain control;
- with two unitary councils, not only will Cheltenham have a bigger representation and louder voice in a smaller authority but so will every community across Gloucestershire – this is one of the reasons why so many county councils who have been down this path before us have opted for more than one unitary authority in their area. In all cases, they have started with an unequal balance of need and finances, but very few are likely to have been as close as the projection of £20m surplus or deficit in east and west Gloucestershire that would represent only 2% of overall turnover of two unitary authorities, and is probably within the margin of error on the consultants' spreadsheets;
- finally, to quote from E F Schumacher's inspirational 1974 book *Small is Beautiful*, 'we are generally told that gigantic organisations are inescapably necessary but there is a tremendous longing and striving to profit if at all possible from the convenience, humanity and manageability of smallness. Bigger is not always better'.

Invited by the Deputy Mayor to sum up, the Leader thanked Members for their comments and support. She responded to some of the points made:

- the original threshold of 500k residents for a single unitary authority was set by the government in November 2024, but the goal posts have moved since and they have said they will look at proposals for 350k or less. On that basis, both the single unitary and two-unitary proposals meet the threshold;
- although 110 councillors would initially serve on a unitary authority, this would be reduced to 90 following a referendum, further reducing representation with that model as opposed to the two-unitary model;
- it is important to make clear to the government that we are not against change – CBC can see the advantages of a unitary council and some degree of reorganisation – but it is against the idea of such vast numbers and the notion of sacrificing long-term sustainability for short-term financial gain. We just want to be involved in the changes, and to ensure that decisions are based on people not numbers;
- with reference to the £20m margin mentioned by a Member, CBC's council tax collection rate is extremely high but there is massive potential for this to drop with a unitary council, as has happened elsewhere. This could result in millions of pounds' worth of loss, which closes the gap on that £20m.

She ended by thanking officers, starting with the Deputy Chief Executive, amazing S151 Officer and finance lead, who challenged the process and took on the might of Price Waterhouse Cooper, disagreeing with their figures – and reducing them by £16m. Officers and councillors have spent huge amount of time throughout this process while still delivering on their day jobs, and she thanked officers across the county, but in particular at CBC: Paul Jones, Gareth Edmundson, Claire Hughes and Ann Wolstencroft.

The Deputy Mayor reminded Members that the votes being taken were not decisions but advisory votes which will be taken into consideration by the Cabinet when they make the decision on CBC's submission at their meeting on Tuesday 18 November.

The voting was as follows:

RESOLVED THAT:

1. **The following completed final business cases and supporting documentation are noted:**
 - b. **a single unitary for Gloucestershire, appendix 3**
 - c. **a two unitary East and West Gloucestershire appendix 4**
 - d. **a two unitary Greater Gloucester/Gloucestershire appendix 5**
 - e. **stronger places, stronger Gloucestershire – the case for East and West Gloucestershire, appendix 6**

Three advisory votes were then taken as set out in Recommendation 2 of the report, one for each of the three options as follows :

VOTE 1 : A single unitary for Gloucestershire, as detailed in the business case in Appendix 3

3 for, 29 against, 2 abstentions

VOTE 2 : A two unitary, East and West Gloucestershire, as detailed in the business case in appendix 4

30 for, 2 against, 2 abstentions

VOTE 3 : A two unitary, Greater Gloucester and Gloucestershire, as detailed in the business case in appendix 5

31 against, 3 abstentions

RESOLVED THAT:

- 2. the preferred option is a two-unitary, East and West Gloucestershire, as detailed in appendix 4.**

RESOLVED THAT:

- 3. The advisory votes (as minuted above) on the business cases for LGR be taken to Cabinet for consideration as part of their decision making on which LGR option to support in the joint submission to the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government.**

The Deputy Leader said he had attended many debates in many different chambers, and commended Members for a remarkably well-informed and reasonable debate, expressing different opinions with passion and incisive knowledge

13 Any other item the Mayor determines as urgent and which requires a decision

The Deputy Mayor had two items of urgent business.

13a Delegation of Planning Enforcement to Tewkesbury Borough Council in respect of Golden Valley Development

The Cabinet Member for Planning and Building Control introduced this important late item, explaining the background and why a decision was urgently required, as set out in the report. He said the report is in line with Corporate Plan priorities, and drew Members' attention to Paragraph 3.1, which outlines the responsibilities that will remain with CBC. He hoped that they would be happy with this approach and the contents of the report.

In response to a Member question about a reciprocal arrangement with Tewkesbury Borough Council, the Cabinet Member for Planning and Building Control said that this arrangement relates specifically to the north and south parcels of land owned by CBC and the developers.

There were no other questions and no debate.

RESOLVED THAT:

1. the delegation of planning enforcement powers to Tewkesbury Borough Council under Section 101 of the Local Government Act 1972 and Section 9D of the Local Government Act 2000 is approved;
2. The Director of Planning & Building Control, in consultation with the Monitoring Officer, is authorised to finalise and enter into a formal delegation agreement with Tewkesbury Borough Council.
3. The arrangement will be reviewed annually by the Director of Planning & Building Control in consultation with the Monitoring Officer and Cabinet Member for Planning & Building Control to ensure effectiveness and continued alignment with strategic planning and land management objectives.

1.

Unanimous

13b Appointment of Electoral Registration Officer and Returning Officer

The Monitoring Officer said the meeting had begun with a moment's reflection on the very sad loss of our Deputy Chief Executive, Paul Jones and that one of his roles was that of Electoral Registration Officer and Returning Officer. All will agree that he did an amazing job running CBC's elections for many years, but now the council is due to publish the register of electors on 01 December and legally we must have an Electoral Registration Officer in place in order to be fully compliant with the Representation of the People Act. Having taken advice today from the Electoral Commission about whether we can defer making appointment, it was made very clear that we should proceed to an urgent decision to appoint an Electoral Registration Officer and Returning Officer to be in place if an election was called.

There has been no time to write a report, but the recommendation is that the Chief Executive, Gareth Edmundson, is appointed to those roles with immediate effect.

There were no questions or debate.

RESOLVED THAT:

- the Chief Executive, Gareth Edmundson, is appointed as Cheltenham Borough Council's Electoral Registration Officer and Returning Officer, with immediate effect.

Unanimous