

HUNTINGDONSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

MINUTES of the meeting of the COUNCIL held in the CIVIC SUITE (LANCASTER / STIRLING ROOMS), PATHFINDER HOUSE, ST MARY'S STREET, HUNTINGDON PE29 3TN on Wednesday, 19 March 2025

PRESENT: Councillor S R McAdam – Chair.

Councillors T Alban, M L Beuttell, R J Brereton, M J Burke, E R Butler, S Bywater, Catmur, S Cawley, B S Chapman, S J Conboy, S J Corney, A E Costello, S J Criswell, L Davenport-Ray, D B Dew, S W Ferguson, I D Gardener, C M Gleadow, J A Gray, J E Harvey, M A Hassall, P J Hodgson-Jones, S A Howell, P A Jordan, M Kadewere, D N Keane, J E Kerr, C Lowe, R Martin, B A Mickelburgh, D L Mickelburgh, J Neish, Dr M Pickering, T D Sanderson, D J Shaw, R A Slade, S L Taylor, I P Taylor, S Wakeford and N Wells.

APOLOGIES: Apologies for absence from the meeting were submitted on behalf of Councillors B S Banks, A Blackwell, K P Gulson, N J Hunt, A R Jennings, P Kadewere, B M Pitt, D Terry and C H Tevlin.

74 MEMBERS' INTERESTS

No declarations were received.

75 LOCAL GOVERNMENT REORGANISATION IN CAMBRIDGESHIRE AND PETERBOROUGH

With the aid of a report by the Chief Executive Officer (a copy of which is appended in the Minute Book) the Council considered a report relating to the Cabinet's proposed submission to the Government in relation to Local Government Reorganisation.

In introducing the item, the Chair of the Council proposed that Council Procedure Rule 13, Rules of Debate, be suspended for the duration of discussion of the item and common law rules of debate be put in place to ensure full debate on the matter.

In introducing the report, the Executive Leader Councillor S Conboy, advised that the report presented to Council contained a draft letter to submit to the Minister on behalf of the Council. It was noted that this was the start of the process and that the Council would like to be involved in, and take ownership of the process as it moves forward. It was also noted that there was agreement across the authorities of Cambridgeshire and Peterborough to work together towards a shared future goal by November 2025, being the next set deadline, where the Council could express their views on which options it would favour for unitarisation. The Council were advised that data work across the area had been

commissioned and that this work would help to inform and establish both viable and preferred options. It was noted that this work was yet to be completed, therefore not at the stage to present options.

The Minister had set the expectation that the Council engage with the general public but had not set out how this should be undertaken, this was something which the Council were keen to comply with. It was noted that following the meeting of the Council, the Cabinet would convene to decide on whether or not to submit the proposed letter, contained within the report. The letter was specifically worded to not be specific thus allowing the Council room to develop and form informed options rather than be rushed into a decision. It was stated that the letter met most of the aspirations of the Ministers request. The Leader continued that the District Council, along with partner Councils wished to use the letter to convey to the Government that they were all likeminded and working towards a common outcome. It was noted that Fenland District Council had gone further than this by adding additional comment as there is one potential option which it strongly does not want to consider. It was observed that given the impending County Council elections scheduled for May 2025, the partner Councils did not wish to be too specific in a way forward and that the majority of partners were comfortable with this approach.

Councillor B Chapman recollected Local Government Reorganisation in the 1970s and hoped that lessons had been learnt from the experience. He heeded caution when partnering with neighbouring Councils and noted how the final partnership would fit together like a jigsaw. He expressed concern, which he stated was shared by other St Neots Councillors, about housing growth both within St Neots itself and the surrounding area falling into Bedfordshire. He further stated that upon completion of this building work, the area would be substantial and affect the balance of the newly created Council.

The Chief Executive gave assurance to the Council that the partner Councils were taking work streams into consideration and were ensuring due diligence. Work was ongoing to identify such projects across the partner Councils to ensure a smooth transition following the reorganisation. It was advised that Officer cohorts would be created initially and developed into shadow boards as the reorganisation progressed with the alignment of procurement and IT being specifically highlighted. A proactive approach was being taken to ensure delivery of efficient and effective services and it was noted that preplanning would help to deliver this. It was clarified that the reorganisation would create a legal and safe authority from day one. It was also noted that these principles aligned with the Corporate Plan priorities and that it was hoped that the process would be much more robust than previously.

Concern was expressed by Councillor S Bywater about the speed at which the Government was expecting local authorities to comply with their vision. He further stated that it felt rushed with critical questions left unanswered. It was noted that the County Council's Chief Executive had highlighted that the transition was expected to cost £80m. Councillor Bywater further questioned where this money would be coming from, whether it would be centrally funded or sourced from the Councils involved. It was also noted that many local Councils were facing financial challenges and was concerned that those who did have reserves, such as the District Council, would be contributing more to the process than their partners which would be unfair on residents. It was also noted that

there would be a human impact to the reorganisation with anticipated job losses and specifically noted members of staff who had relocated to Huntingdonshire for the sole purpose of employment with the Council. It was asked what safeguards were in place for staff and to protect frontline services. Councillor Bywater stated that he supported the letter but acknowledged that the process was in its infancy with navigation of many complexities expected in the future. In this context, it also observed that the County Council had been in the process of selling their previous office accommodation for five years.

The Leader of the Opposition, Councillor R Martin stated that he would not be supporting the letter as he felt it left the Council open to a huge amount of risk. Councillor Martin specified that he felt to move forward as a District, there needed to be some kind of change but that the current structure was not completely broken. It was observed that a one size fits all approach did not embrace the unique strengths of each partner. Councillor Martin stated that he had heard many different opinions about the way forward but felt that what was suggested by the Government did not fit the region. Whilst Councillor Martin felt that the White Paper itself was clear, subsequent rumours and lack of clarity had confused the issue. It was his opinion that the Government were determined to push through the reorganisation by the deadline no matter the cost. It was also noted that there was a contradiction in what was being asked with the LGR and what could be allowed by current law.

Councillor Martin expressed further concern that Cambridgeshire and East Midlands were the only two regions with a two-tier area with a devolution deal. It was noted that he felt the Government had applied a comply or be forced into compliance approach to this process. Councillor Martin further observed that Huntingdonshire were one of two regions who had not provided the Government with a full response as requested. It was his concern that the Government would focus on the regions who had not put an interim plan in place and stated that if the aim of the letter was to avoid being dictated to, he felt the exact opposite would be true. It was questioned why 19 of the 21 responses by area had managed to answer every question set by the Government with an interim plan, which it has been acknowledged can be amended, yet this region had not. Councillor Martin felt if an interim plan could be submitted and amended prior to it being finalised then this is the approach that Huntingdonshire should have taken. Concern was expressed by Councillor Martin, that this plan was being developed but not shared with the Government and was concerned that this would affect the Councils autonomy on the LGR process.

Councillor Martin was pleased to hear that the Executive Leader intended to apply a data driven approach but questioned what data would be used, how it would be applied and what value would be given to different factors. He felt that these questions should have been addressed in the response to the Government and further questioned what viability would mean in this context, would that be financially, social or politically viable and how would that be decided. Councillor Martin indicated his concern that should the emphasis be on financial viability, local government finances would need to change to make any authority viable. It was observed that PricewaterhouseCoopers had predicted savings of £2.6bn in the creation of a whole unitary authority but Councillor Martin also noted that the deficit in adult social care was £8bn which put the proposed savings into perspective. Councillor Martin expressed his fears about Single Unitary Authorities which he felt moved decisions further away from local residents.

It was observed that issues still needed to be fixed to ensure success, and that a real change in local government finance was required for viability to be a reality. It was also noted that the anticipated savings identified would vary depending on the size of the end authority and that there was still potential to make a loss. It was stated that he felt the District Council needed to be clear on the process they intended to employ to set out a data driven approach and to consider whether the cost savings would outweigh the social and political considerations. It was further stated that this needed to be addressed in a structured and strategic manner or the Council would run the risk of having its fate decided for it. Councillor Martin also stated that he felt that these were the issues he expected to be able to discuss at the meeting. In noting that LGR was a fact and that by refusing to engage in the invitation, the Council were passing on their opportunity to shape the future shape of local government. He felt that the Council should have taken a proactive approach and controlled the narrative like the majority of regions nationally. Councillor Martin again reiterated his opinion that the Council were allowing themselves to be dictated to and were at the mercy of Central Government.

Councillor J Gray noted that the letter was important and would affect the future of residents and the Council. He regretted the approach of the Government to LGR and the timetable for this but admitted that to be pragmatic, the reality of the situation was that the timeframe was set and must be adhered to. Councillor Gray concurred with the comments made by Councillor Martin. It was observed that the signatories to the letter were notable persons however the content of the letter was in his opinion a holding pattern and had been written by a committee. In his opinion the letter only stated that the Council were passionate about co-operating with LGR, he felt that the letter needed to be more substantive. The issue was of concern to Councillor Gray, who argued that the letter showed that the Council were not owning the process and were allowing the Government free reign. It was also of concern that the majority of other areas had sent a robust and substantive approach.

Councillor Gray agreed with Councillor Chapman that the last reorganisation in the 1970s was not perfect and saw a situation where Districts and Counties were put together, it was noted that a single unitary authority to cover Cambridgeshire and Peterborough would be giant and would not have a lot in common. It was observed that Cambridge and Peterborough were very different cities. There is also the knowledge that significant population growth is expected within the region over the coming years which will further affect the region and the structure of the area was what gave Councillor Gray most concern. Specifically that this could delay the District Council's democratic arrangements for 2026 and that residents should still be able to express their say in how the District Council is run. Councillor Gray pointed out that no one had voted for a joint administration who have used the opportunity to implement things which as individuals they did not necessarily campaign on. Councillor Gray expressed a desire for democracy to continue and was wary about being part of the minority that is doing nothing.

It was stated by Councillor S Cawley that he shared the concerns already expressed by his colleagues and was disappointed to see that the meeting had been convened to discuss a holding letter. Councillor Cawley questioned whether by not submitting a full response by the deadline the Council were opening themselves up to be told what to do by the Government rather than

choosing what suited them best. He questioned the Leader whether that had been considered and also asked why Fenland District Council were not with the rest of the partners on the letter.

The Chair invited the Leader, to respond. Councillor Conboy advised that the letter had involved cross party conversations, and this proved a challenge on the practicalities on what could be agreed by the Leader or what would require further consultation with District Council colleagues. The Leader reassured that the Group of Council Leaders did not believe that they were disadvantaging their Councils with the type of letter they had put together and that other responses were not available until recently. It was further acknowledged that had the Leaders had sight of the other letters they may have reconsidered the type of response but were still firm in their belief that the proposed letter tells the Government of the District Council's commitment to LGR. It was also noted that the region gave a particular challenge due to the Governments focus on Cambridge and that the Leaders of the region were mindful that this was in play as well.

The Leader reiterated that she did not believe that the Council were at a disadvantage with the proposed letter however she also didn't want to present a letter which stated that the seven partner Leaders were in agreement about a way forward without consulting their Councils or residents and stated that this would have caused further concern about the pace of the project. The Leader agreed with the other partner Leaders that this was a pragmatic response with an agreement in principle to reorganise but without commitment to the detail. It was acknowledged that it would be interesting to see why those who had submitted more detailed letters had felt the need to do so and noted that some of these regions did not have the number of partners or political differences of Cambridgeshire and Peterborough. It was also acknowledged the concerns of the Council and would take that back to the other partners.

It was acknowledged by Councillor T Alban, that local government changes and accepted that. He also appreciated and acknowledged Councillor Conboy's reassurances and acknowledge the pressures that the partner Councils were under. Councillor Alban reported that Parish Councils were concerned that the resulting authority would mean that local government would be even less local and that small villages would be even more remote. It was further noted that some parishes had stated that they would welcome taking on additional responsibilities such as works to trees and was encouraged that engagement with parishes was mentioned in the report.

Councillor Alban expressed concern that a larger authority may also involve a move to daytime meetings which would disenfranchise potential councillors from becoming involved with local government due to the required time commitments and would result in a Council constructed of a disproportionate representation of residents being those without time or financial constraints.

A risk based approach to the letter was advocated by Councillor M Hassall, who expressed hope that Cabinet had had time to review his comments on the matter which he had circulated to the Council prior to the meeting. Councillor Hassall acknowledged that there was an opportunity here but that there were also political risks. He was concerned about the compliance of the CPCA where there was a lot of acknowledged differing political opinions and that boundaries of the

proposed Council would need to be agreed with resident involvement with clarity needed to illustrate how decisions had been made. It was felt that the Minister had requested the information on how the partner Councils would reach a decision and that the proposed letters weakness was that it did not address this.

Councillor Hassall concurred with Councillor Conboy that the Government were interested in Cambridge but was concerned that by not proposing a way forward the Council was playing into the Government taking control of the situation. It was believed by Councillor Hassall that the letter should ask the Government to clarify what information they would be using to make their final decisions on the proposed new authorities. It was stated that there was difficulty in suggesting any amendments or adjustments to the letter given that Cabinet would be meeting following the rising of the Council meeting and assumed that they would be approving the submission of the letter regardless.

Councillor C Gleadow agreed with Councillors Martin and Hassall about the whole evaluation of what is important and questioned how a decision could be made when the criteria to evaluate the decision was not yet ascertained and thought that this was something which needed to be addressed.

Councillor P Hodgson-Jones agreed with Councillor Hassall that a risk-based approach to the letter would be the solution to some of the key issues identified. Councillor Hodgson-Jones questioned the Leader whether the decision had already been made by Cabinet to authorise the letter regardless of the debate heard at Council. It was stated by Councillor Hodgson-Jones, that with the Cabinet meeting following the Council meeting and the fact that the letter was to be sent by the end of the week as well as the fact that the partner Councils would need to agree any amendments, he felt that the purpose of the meeting was to inform rather than debate due to the content of the letter being unchangeable.

Councillor Hodgson-Jones also felt that the Council were being railroaded into the response before them which was symptomatic of the timescales set by the Government on the matter. It was of further concern to Councillor Hodgson-Jones that the content of the letter was weak and felt that given the number of partners involved a more robust response should have been sought. Given that the Government had asked for a suitable structure to be presented for the region along with anticipated issues, the partners should have informed the Government that the area was too large for a single authority and proposed a split of the region. It was further noted that the Government had advised a target population for each final authority, this would allow for a split into two authorities for the region and it was questioned by Councillor Hodgson-Jones why the letter did not address this.

The role of the Combined Authority in LGR was questioned as it was established the Mayor was not a signatory to the letter and further questioned what role the CPCA would have following LGR. It was also questioned whether there had been any outreach to neighbouring authorities to see what adjustments and involvement could be made. The St Neots and neighbouring area was particularly mentioned given the anticipated amount of development in this location over the coming years it may be logical for Huntingdonshire to partner with Bedfordshire to form a strategic basis. Councillor Hodgson-Jones drew attention to the Government's request that in order to ensure the robustness of the proposed new authorities, boundary changes for existing Districts may be

explored. He further indicated that this was another point which illustrated that the partner authorities had not given due consideration to the Ministers requests.

The Executive Leader responded that the letter did not talk about boundaries due to the devolution discussion being separate from Local Government Review. The Leader felt that the briefings given to Councillors to date had been clear that conversations with neighbours were ongoing and that this included Bedfordshire. However, it was noted that some authorities had already reorganised and that the Government was clear they would not be repeating this. It was observed that boundary reviews were complex and that this piece of work was ongoing. The Council were advised that the CPCA were not part of LGR and the assumption was that they will be continuing in their current guise, this was the reason why they were not a signatory to the letter.

Whilst the Leader took on board the comments that the letter was weak but confirmed again that it is was all seven leaders could agree to. It was again advised that Fenland District Council wanted to add a point about the notion of a full unitary for the region. It was further noted that the forthcoming County Council elections may result in a new administration, resulting in new opinions and that their opinions on the way forward may change following the election. The view had been taken by the partner organisations to not stipulate preferred partnerships as this had not yet been established. The Leader reassured Members that there was a desire across the region to comply and that data work had been commissioned to establish the best way forward but that this was not a swift process.

It was confirmed by the Leader, that the Cabinet would meet following the Council meeting and that there had been logistical challenges as all authorities had wanted to involve their Members and follow due process. The Council were reassured that Cabinet would consider the discussion from the meeting but were also conscious that there was a deadline and the other partners were also in the same situation. The Leader reassured Members that further letters and clarifications could be submitted to supplement the original response. It was further noted that there was an expectation to engage with the public as well. Following a question from the Chair, the Council were assured that should further detail be submitted, that could be reflected on as a group.

The concerns surrounding Fenland District Council were addressed by the Executive Councillor for Economy, Regeneration and Housing, Councillor S Wakeford, who advised the Council that it was understood that Fenland District Council had added a note that they felt a single Unitary Authority for the region would not be a viable option. Councillor Wakeford acknowledged the challenges that the Governments timescales posed. It was further noted that whilst it was thought that a significant number of regions had submitted more detailed responses it was yet to be established whether these were compatible with their partners. It was felt by Councillor Wakeford, that the proposed letter demonstrated to the Government that the partners of the region were in agreement to move forward together and demonstrated that they could engage together constructively. Councillor Wakeford also addressed the notion that Cabinet were predetermined to approve the letter and noted that a realistic alternative proposal had not been suggested for consideration.

The Executive Councillor for Climate, Transformation and Workforce, Councillor L Davenport-Ray confirmed that many of the comments heard during the meeting aligned with her own concerns and that it was helpful to hear the opinions of colleagues. Councillor Davenport-Ray expressed concern about the timescales of the project which she felt hindered full public consultation as well as a lack of evidence why the LGR was required. It was felt by Councillor Davenport-Ray, that there was no data to show that a Unitary Authority was more efficient than the current arrangements but felt that taking time with partners to consider the options, the Council would be able to alleviate some of the anticipated issues. Councillor Davenport-Ray highlighted a section within the report which identified anticipated risks.

The comments of Councillor Hodgson-Jones relating to Government expectations were acknowledged by Councillor Davenport-Ray who felt that he had applied more logic to this than actually existed. The letter addressed that the Council and its partners are able to work together to establish a way forward and disagreed that the letter was weak. It was further stated that Councillor Davenport-Ray felt that time was needed to gather facts and allow evidence driven choices about the geographical shape of the new authority. It was felt that this approach would allow the Council to stand up for residents and make a good decision for their future rather than a quick decision. Councillor Davenport-Ray supported the letter and stated that the Council should continue to work with partners to achieve a more detailed proposal which the Chamber would see before submission in November 2025.

Councillor Hodgson-Jones wished to respond to the Leaders response, and stated that if there was no plan to change the role of the CPCA, then there could be no change to the boundaries of Cambridgeshire and Peterborough and therefore their Districts.

Councillor Conboy clarified to the Council that the meeting was to discuss LGR and that devolution was a different matter. The Leader advised that it was anticipated for the Combined Authority to change to a Strategic Authority in time and that the boundary of the Combined Authority was a separate conversation. It was confirmed by the Leader, that the letter had provided to the Government the intended direction of travel for the partners and that they were open to considering data and options to ensure the best interests of residents were met. The Leader observed that it was prudent to make informed measured decisions rather than quick decisions which may be regretted. It was further acknowledged that an area of compromise may be required once the data was appraised but that the partners were unified in getting this right.

Councillor Martin reiterated that he had been hoping to see a response to the Government which outlined all the points they had asked not a bland weak letter. Councillor Martin questioned whether the Executive had requested further clarity from the Minister as others had which, it was felt, would have highlighted options to be taken forward.

Councillor Hassall responded to Councillor Davenport-Ray that he acknowledged that risks were identified in the report. Councillor Hassall observed that there were many political challenges and yet political risks were omitted from the report, he also drew attention to a note which he had circulated to the Council which was close to an alternative suggestion. It was acknowledged that it would

be difficult to come to an agreement without data and with some clear economic measures an agreed way forward with partners could be agreed.

Councillor Chapman stated that the interests of Huntingdonshire residents need to be considered when forging a way forward and there was a need to protect what the District Council had achieved for their residents by ensuring that any future deal considers this and protects their assets.

Councillor Wakeford acknowledged the note circulated by Councillor Hassall and stated that he had interpreted this as to elaborate on what had already been proposed. Councillor Wakeford also responded to Councillor Martin that he felt the letter addressed the issue in which the Government were assured that the Council were collaborative and willing to work with partners. It was observed by Councillor Wakeford that some of the more detailed responses submitted highlighted conflicts of opinion between partners and that the less is more approach may prove prudent.

It was questioned by Councillor C Lowe whether a separate response could be submitted for the District Council to highlight preferred partners.

In response to Councillor Lowe's question, the Leader stated that it was not practical to add this at this point but could be reflected upon and submitted with supplementary information going forward.

Councillor J Gray conveyed his agreement with Councillor Chapman's comments about protecting the achievements of each Council in their residents' interests. Councillor Gray assured the Leader that he understood the challenges faced with the letter and agreed that it was in the Councils best interests to be involved in the discussion. Councillor Gray concluded that the letter was too general and that there would have been better ways to express the sentiment conveyed and agreed that Huntingdonshire was a proud District but that there were missed opportunities as a County and specifically noted the resources of Cambridge and their internationally renowned educational facilities.

Accordingly, the Council

RESOLVED

that the report to be submitted to the Cabinet on Local Government Reorganisation in Cambridgeshire and Peterborough be noted.

The meeting ended at 8.43pm.

Chair

