

HUNTINGDONSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

MINUTES of the meeting of the CABINET held in CIVIC SUITE (LANCASTER/STIRLING ROOMS), PATHFINDER HOUSE, ST MARY'S STREET, HUNTINGDON, PE29 3TN on Monday, 24 November 2025.

PRESENT: Councillor S J Conboy – Chair.

Councillors L Davenport-Ray, S W Ferguson,
J E Harvey, S A Howell, J E Kerr,
B A Mickelburgh, T D Sanderson and
S Wakeford.

54. MEMBERS' INTERESTS

At the invitation of the Chair, the Monitoring Officer made short statement. The Monitoring Officer advised that all Councillors had received guidance on Section 25 of the Localism Act and the principle of open-mindedness. The Monitoring Officer advised the Committee that they were meeting in their capacity as Councillors for Huntingdonshire District Council.

The Monitoring Officer noted the importance of Members approaching the debate with an open mind, considering the evidence and professional advice presented tonight, irrespective of any prior meetings or decisions on the matter in which you they have been involved.

The Monitoring Officer invited Cabinet to reflect on whether they are able to participate in the decision-making with an open mind, and to make necessary declarations accordingly.

Members made the following comments:

Councillor Sanderson declared that he had voted on this matter at Cambridgeshire County Council and Huntingdon Town Council previously but was still open minded.

Councillor Kerr declared that she had voted on this matter at Cambridgeshire County Council and St Ives Town Council but remained open minded.

Councillor Harvey declared that she was a Member of Huntingdon Town Council but was not at the time they discussed this, so she came in to this meeting fresh and open minded.

Councillor Mickelburgh declared that he was not a Member of any Parish or Town Council and abstained purposefully at the Full Council meeting to bring an open mind to this meeting.

Councillor Howell declared that she was a Member of Woodwalton Parish Council but they had not had a vote on this matter, she abstained at the Full Council meeting abstained last week and approached this meeting with an open mind.

Councillor Davenport-Ray had not voted on this subject at any other Council, abstained at the Full Council meeting and approached this meeting with an open mind.

Councillor Ferguson declared that he was not a Member of any other Council, did vote on this topic at the Full Council meeting but was always open minded and open to being convinced by colleagues.

Councillor Wakeford declared that he did not sit on any other Parish or Town Council, had not been involved in voting on this matter at the Full Council meeting, deliberately abstaining, and came to this discussion fresh and open minded.

Councillor Conboy declared that she was a Member of Godmanchester Town Council, was present when they discussed this matter but did not take part in voting, and she abstained at the Full Council meeting so she could retain an open mind then and for this meeting.

55. LOCAL GOVERNMENT REORGANISATION

A report by the Chief Executive was submitted (a copy of which is appended in the Minute Book) which provided an overview of proposals for Local Government Reorganisation (LGR) in Cambridgeshire & Peterborough and sought to enable Members to make an informed decision over what, if any, response the Council wished to make within the timescales and processes established by Government.

The Executive Leader – Councillor Conboy set out the report and urged the Cabinet to consider the views of the Joint Overview and Scrutiny Panel and the comments made at the Full Council meeting on 19 November. She commented that nobody had been whipped, it was entirely the Cabinet's decision as it was too important, and it mattered that they weighed all the options and considered the views of others as the discussion elapsed.

The Executive Councillor for Resident Services and Corporate Performance, Councillor Ferguson commented that he acknowledged the complex task this matter was. There had been optimism in the early days of finding a single solution across all the Council's, however this may have seemed naïve as different areas had different requirements/biases, so was a complex task and hard to predict. He was proud of the whole Council, particularly noting Conservative colleagues who had spoken with a single voice in opposition to Option D, but also their wish for Huntingdonshire to remain as its own entity. He thanked Councillor Conboy for listening as promised to everybody's voices. That promise had been held and both the Joint Overview & Scrutiny Panel and the Full Council meeting were excellent opportunities to listen to the voices of colleagues and who they represented. He had voted for Option E at the Full Council meeting as he found the arguments compelling, not because it was the strongest option on paper, but they were looking for a Unitary that would last, possibly 50 years into the future. As a result of the inevitable growth of Huntingdonshire, he supported any solution that had the whole of St Neots and the Tempsford corridor under a single Council. Option E provided the chance to be part of the Cambridge

economy but be a different part with its own identity. He was minded to support Option E as it presented a more future proof scenario, robust for tomorrow not just for today. Furthermore, he was of the opinion that Option E reflected the views of the vast majority of Huntingdonshire residents, and it was the choice for the long-term future of the community. At the Full Council meeting, the Council made its preference clear and his heart was with that preference as it envisioned Huntingdonshire standing on its own and thriving.

The Executive Councillor for Parks and Countryside, Waste and Street Scene – Councillor Kerr stated her dismay at comments made by the Member of Parliament for Huntingdon in a recent speech in Parliament regarding LGR. Over recent weeks she had worked closely, cross-party with colleagues from the County Council on the A141 St Ives improvement scheme, working collaboratively which had gained a lot of public support. In those discussions there had been reference to LGR, and it appeared a shared, cross-party understanding that presenting a united position would give a strong, clear message to government about where Huntingdonshire stood. She had felt encouraged by that, however that positivity had been lost when she heard the Member of Parliament for Huntingdon's comments. Political game-playing on an issue of such significance was unhelpful and offensive, and she could only assume it was an attempt to discredit the Joint Administration with an eye on the next election. The decision to explore the business case for Option E was a local decision by the Joint Administration, rooted firmly in local priorities and she was shocked that the Member of Parliament for Huntingdon had accused Members of basing their choice on AI. She had listened carefully to arguments for Option C, which were well thought out, well presented and made in good conscience. Council Leader's were expected to make difficult decisions after serious consideration, and to dismiss their judgement as the work of an algorithm was insulting and deeply unfair. By releasing his Parliament speech on social media on the day of the Full Council vote he created a storm that made residents believe that if Councillors did not vote for option E they were somehow betraying the electorate. As a result, some colleagues who voted for Option C had since received awful comments online which was unacceptable. She sincerely hoped they would receive an apology from the Member of Parliament for Huntingdon. She thanked Councillor Conboy for allowing all Members of the Cabinet full freedom to vote as they believed right. She did understand the merits of Option C and appreciated the thoughtful arguments made by those who supported it. However, she was leaning towards option E as it offered a stronger business case, certainly more than Option D, with a future proof way forward for Huntingdonshire and the County as a whole.

The Executive Councillor for Communities, Health and Leisure – Councillor Howell, stated that she abstained at Full Council as she wanted to hear the views from all Councillors present, fully digest what was said and reflect upon those words before making her decision at this meeting. She lived very close to the Peterborough border, as did the majority of her residents and overwhelmingly the voices she had heard from those residents had been that they did not want to join Peterborough. Town and Parish Councils, Full Council and the majority of her residents were saying the same thing, they preferred option E. She commented that she would listen carefully to

the debate and listen to the views of Cabinet before making her decision, but those views were going to need to be a lot louder than the views of her residents.

The Executive Councillor for Finance & Resources, Councillor Mickelburgh Was of the opinion that there was no immediate right or wrong answer to this problem posed by Government and that leadership was not about perfection but accountability. Therefore, it was worrying to see some of the online reaction to the Options presented; somehow not voting for what someone else thought was the correct choice resulted in being called a traitor and somehow disloyal to Huntingdonshire. If at any point someone had a view that one option was better than another, they should be able to debate and persuade, not resort to threats. He was delighted that the debate at Full Council was constructive and had heard from a number of people whose final decision was heavily influenced by the points put forward. In response to why there were abstentions at the Full Council vote he explained that abstention was not avoidance, it was Cabinet Members' respect for the democratic debate and the commitment to listening before deciding. The closer to the point of implementation, the more information was available and the fewer assumptions would be made, the better opportunity for external factors to have been identified and to work through the alternatives. This evening was the very last responsible moment so was the right time to vote. He felt that this had been a poor Westminster process that felt, at best, rushed. It was a once in a generation decision which was very open to political gerrymandering at every level. The flexibility of criteria remained unclear with contradictory messaging and the final decision falling to one Minister who had changed once during this process already and it meant it was too opaque. Our system of representative democracy meant district Councillors were elected to Wards whose residents they expected to make decisions for based on the views and interests of their residents; in this process, he asked whether those views or best interests agreed with, competed with, or collided with those views from somewhere else. He also questioned how a good holistic decision could be made with such competing viewpoints. He was proud of how the Council had conducted this process, where every Councillor had been given the opportunity to vote for every option. He was interested in the debate at Full Council and pleased opposition colleagues repeatedly made reference to how the Council had grown stronger over the last few years and thrived in comparison to other areas and how this had made Option E a realistic concept.

The Executive Councillor for Governance and Democratic Services, Councillor Harvey Took the opportunity to thank all of the officers involved in getting to this point and recognised that it had been a mammoth task. She had looked at the facts and figures in lots of detail, which had led her head to Option C but her heart did not agree. She had given thought to what Government had said about Project Fairfax, and the importance of RAF Wyton and Tempsford, both of which she felt could be delivered under Option E. She was concerned about the diversity of Councillors in the new Unitaries and asked if a statement to that effect could be included in the first letter to Government. It was her firm belief that Option E went a long way to addressing those concerns, keeping democracy close to home and residents with contactable Councillors. On balance, these were the factors outweighing the figures and therefore she was minded to

support Option E.

The Executive Councillor for Planning – Councillor Sanderson praised the excellent contributions from all sides during the Full Council debate. Although Members had strong views on their preferred options, they were presented in a respectful way. He referred to comments from the Minister for Local Government in February who had suggested proposals needed to align to six main criteria, and made reference to the criteria which stated that new Unitary Council's should enable stronger community engagement and deliver genuine opportunity for neighbourhood empowerment, which was important and was exactly what the Council wanted to do - deliver things for the community and empower neighbourhoods. He was inclined to look at Option E as most favourable - a single standalone Unitary Authority in its own right. Reading the business case, this was the best opportunity for effective governance and efficient and coherent service delivery, reflecting the needs and aspirations of stakeholders and partners, and it would be the best for the local economy and create economies of scale. Furthermore, he felt that it would protect local identity and maintain existing boundaries. He accepted that Option E would also be difficult in some ways to deliver and make the population numbers work, and he had had some comments of concern from colleagues in Bedfordshire around boundaries. However, it allowed the ability to concentrate on some specific economic areas and the consideration of Tempsford's growth as a new Town added to his reasoning behind Option E. He had some sympathy with Option C which he felt would provide place-based solutions and economies of scale and that the electoral reform arrangements perhaps were stronger. However, throughout the process, two of the biggest concerns were social care costs - it was important to maintain the safe and legal delivery of this crucial service - but most importantly LGR would lead to significant changes to the Council's greatest asset which was staff. It could lead to a drop in morale with a lot of unknowns around and it was important to manage change effectively and have strong engagement maintained to ensure all of the workforce were on board throughout this process.

The Executive Councillor for Climate, Transformation and Workforce, Councillor Davenport-Ray commented that it was helpful to have input from all political groups at the Full Council meeting, and there had been convincing evidence-based arguments from both sides of the chamber against Options A, B and D. When Option E was suggested, she was dubious about the financial case, but there was now evidence that demonstrated it was a possibility. Options C and E also included compelling evidence of travel to work patterns and community social links, and from the debate and vote at Full Council, those two options were the most favoured by Councillors. She referenced the result of the public consultation in the focus groups which had been compelling, including 3000 responses from people across the region. These responses showed that the public supported changes to Councils, especially where it led to better Council services. Reorganisation was something the Council needed to do, keeping local people at the heart of decision making. Furthermore, the public wanted local Councillors that understood their local area and their number one priority in a Councillor was having genuine local knowledge, regular community contacts and practical accessibility to local people. The responses also showed that successful Councils

from the public's perspective respected the practical geography of their daily life, and the public thought that good Councils did not impose boundaries based on administrative convenience or theoretical efficiency models. The feedback also showed that people living in rural areas had higher concerns about being overlooked if they were in a large unitary authority. On balance, the survey responses from people in Huntingdonshire seemed to support Option E. She referenced recent decisions by the Government on some of the Council areas that were going down the fast-track route of LGR, particularly noting that some of those Councils had proposed boundary changes, therefore the Council should not shy away from proposing boundary changes if it believed that would result in the best outcome for local residents. St Neots was being squeezed on all sides from development, with much of it out of its control, and the current boundaries did not serve the economic and social needs of the people that lived there. By suggesting that current boundaries should be maintained, the government had missed the opportunity to take a nuanced and long-term approach to the St Neots area. The crossroads of St. Neots needed room to grow with one Council where local people could control their own destiny and moderate the pressures on their own schools, roads and GP surgeries, and on this basis she believed the proposed boundary review mentioned in Option E was what residents of St Neots would want to put forward to government. She commented that multiple voices on the board of a combined authority was essential, especially in the cases in our region where they were very different contrasts in urban areas and rural populations - pursuing Option E would ensure an extra voice at that combined authority board table. Overall, she was proud that the Council had taken what time there was available to gather facts and make the best evidence-driven choices about the geographic shape of the future Council. Officers had done the Council proud and the tone of the political debate had been professional and respectful. She was of the opinion that sadly if the government was serious about streamlining local government, this conversation would be about major investment in social care funding; the wrong part of local government was being reformed, while Councils struggled to support looking after children and vulnerable adults and this tactic was both unhelpful and uncaring. She was minded to support Option E based on the balance of evidence and the positive future it would open up for Huntingdonshire residents and businesses. She hoped the Council could use this opportunity to express disappointment in the flawed and short-sighted process it was being asked to follow; reorganisation could have been a once in a generation opportunity to make local government truly work for local people with sufficient funding to support social care. True localism was powerful and bigger was not necessarily better and those opportunities had been missed.

The Executive Councillor for Economy, Regeneration and Housing, Councillor Wakeford stated that his intention was to listen at the Full Council meeting and the Joint Overview & Scrutiny Panel, and to reflect prior to making his decision. He made reference to the heartfelt tone at the Full Council meeting, where there were positive comments about the concept of LGR from across the Chamber, though clearly not without caveats. He was of the opinion that a non-trivial amount of time was spent navigating relationships between tiers of authorities. In his Portfolio, if the Council held County levers as well as District levers, life would be simpler, quicker and residents would notice the

difference – to give two examples, more affordable houses being built sooner and more vibrant public spaces used better. This was the whole point of being a unitary authority, to have control of a broader span of local governance. At the Full Council meeting, he had heard complaints about the speed of the process as well as how it was being done and a number of other challenges. Work was underway in parallel to tackle social care which presented an enormous challenge, and he was of the opinion that in terms of speed, even with having double the length of time or even unlimited time, he was not convinced there would have been agreement across Cambridgeshire and Peterborough on a single way forward. He felt that there was at least something to be said about the government pushing to move at pace and faster than might have been chosen, but that was not to knock the many valid questions and concerns about details that that created. Reflecting on all of the Options, he came to the conclusion that there was validity in Option C, working economically, socially and practically; there had already been major infrastructure closely linking parts of Huntingdonshire into Cambridge including the guided Busway, new A14, repurposed old A14, the prospect of East West Rail travelling through Huntingdonshire, the nearby Universal Studios. The centre of economic gravity was looking west from Cambridge, certainly in terms of future opportunities. Option C was a real contender, a stronger contender than the vote at the Full Council meeting might have been taken to suggest and one he had been weighing significantly in his mind. He had every confidence that whichever was the government's preferred option, could be made to work. He had heard concerns that houses would be built in Huntingdonshire by a merged Council, referencing the strong language used by the Member of Parliament for Huntingdon of “dumping houses” in Huntingdonshire. However, he reflected on comments from the opposition pressing the Council to go faster in meeting housing deadlines including on affordable housing which they were correct to raise, and he stated that in its term the administration had seen record affordable housing building in Huntingdonshire. He commented that those waiting on the housing register would not mind too much what the borders of the authority were that chose to build the house. He did find Option E compelling as it did allow Huntingdonshire to unleash its potential in a variety of ways, but was not persuaded by all of the arguments advanced in favour of it. Some of the protests he had heard of the possibility of people from places outside Huntingdonshire and their representatives participating in the democratic process, overlooked the fact that there were more tiers of local governance than could be counted and Members at the County Council and the Combined Authority from beyond Huntingdonshire already made decisions that affected the Huntingdonshire area so the principle already existed. He shared Councillor Kerr’s discomfort around some of the language used by the Member of Parliament for Huntingdon around treachery. He was minded to support Option C from what he had heard.

The Executive Leader, Councillor Conboy took the opportunity to put on record her thanks to fellow Council Leaders, noting that it was not easy sitting together at the beginning of this journey and they had pulled together across the whole of Cambridgeshire and Peterborough, united in understanding the importance of trying to get this right for residents. Early on, it became apparent that geography alone made it difficult to come up with a single solution. The Councils’

Chief Executives had also been pivotal, as well as their staff teams in working collaboratively and it had been challenging for all authorities as they cared passionately about their places.

The Executive Lead praised Officer teams for working across different political frameworks across different organisations to try and provide the best opportunity to come up with business cases that could be genuinely looked at and tested. She took the opportunity to explain what had changed in order to allow Option E to be put on the table, citing Project Fairfax, the new Local Growth Plan that included the North Hunts Cluster, the Local Plan, Universal Studios across the border in Bedfordshire, East West Rail which would intersect directly with the North South Line, and bringing Alconbury Rail Station on stream allowing growth in a way that was not necessarily anticipated previously and opening up new commuting routes that benefited Huntingdonshire. She expressed the view that Tempsford was a pivotal location and raised concerns regarding the delivery of a new town of such scale and significance, with its potential impact across three authorities. She noted that, given the proximity of the nearest major settlement - being the authority's largest settlement - it would make little sense to proceed without a coordinated approach, potentially including consideration of boundary changes. If that meant Tempsford went outside of Huntingdonshire then so be it, but it was too important to not to get right. The impact on existing residents as well as those villages that Tempsford would include would be significant. The Council was continuing to do work with Homes England in looking at other sites and was operating in a changing landscape. The Council also had a really strong track record of growth and that meant better financial stability, making option E a more viable option then when this matter first began, and there was now a business case that demonstrated that Option E was deliverable. She praised the work of the Joint Overview and Scrutiny Panel who had been fantastic not to come to any conclusion as they equally wanted to have an open mind, ask questions and ensure all the decision making that Full Council needed to make was founded on having really good advice from offices and consultants, which was pivotal to underpinning the debate. At the Full Council meeting, Members did the Council proud and she listened intensely and did not know where the debate was going before it commenced and had not made any decision herself as she genuinely wanted to listen. She was concerned about Option D, because she wanted to see Peterborough reach the status it deserved which was to be the principal city outside of Cambridge and she was not sure Option D delivered that. Having listened to the Joint Overview and Scrutiny Panel and Full Council meeting and weighing the evidence, she was clear that Options C and E were deliverable and had different strengths. She had looked at Option E in terms of potential - it was less conventional but it was deliverable. Reference was made to the views of Parish and Town Councils, though not all of whom had met and voted yet, and at the time of the meeting there had been 29 responses favouring Option E, 13 favouring Option C, 1 favouring Option A, 1 favouring Option B and none favouring Option D. Therefore, this feedback suggested that Parish and Town Councils predominantly favoured Option E, though clearly struggled with the same debates the Council had during the Full Council meeting. There were many moving parts of the system at this point; LGR, changes to the integrated care system, changes around social care, special

educational needs and the upcoming Budget which may make changes the Council needed to accommodate. However, she was convinced that whichever option the Secretary of State chose, whilst she may be minded to have her own preference of Option E, the Council could make it work on behalf of residents and the workforce.

The Executive Councillor for Resident Services and Corporate Performance, Councillor Ferguson expressed his disappointment at Cambridgeshire County Council who had voted for Option A but had not disclosed the full business case for that Option, which he felt was disrespectful.

Following the discussion, the Chair moved that the Committee should vote on supporting Option E as per the report. This was duly seconded by Councillor Sanderson.

The Chair moved to the vote. Votes were recorded as follows:

For: 8

Against: 1

Abstentions: 0

The Monitoring Officer confirmed that the Committee's preference for Option E was carried and would therefore form part of the substantive motion.

The Chair gave Councillor Mickelburgh the opportunity to declare which option he might have chosen, and he confirmed that he took into account the vote at Full Council, as well as two of the Council's that sat within his Ward who had preferred Option C, and in the interests of representing their views and the residents they represented, he would have brought Option C to the table.

The Chair moved to the vote on the substantive motion.

Whereupon, it was

RESOLVED

that the Cabinet

- (a) noted the various options that have been presented relating to Local Government Reorganisation for Cambridgeshire & Peterborough;
- (b) noted the criteria and process established by Government and that the Secretary of State will be the end decision-maker;
- (c) considered and commented on the various options against the criteria identified, noting that the various options will be incorporated into a single submission made on behalf of all Councils in Cambridgeshire & Peterborough;
- (d) considered the comments provided by the Overview and Scrutiny Joint Group and Full Council in respect of the proposals and the vote by Council to support any or none of the options presented.

- (e) determined that the Council wishes to support Option E (noting that the Council can only support one option);
- (f) delegated authority to the Chief Executive, in consultation with the Executive Leader of the Council, to write to the Secretary of State and other Leaders & Chief Executives within Cambridgeshire & Peterborough to communicate the Council's decision (rec E);
- (g) delegated authority to the Chief Executive, in consultation with the Leader of the Council, to complete and finalise a Foreword for the final business case in support of Option E. (rec E);
- (h) based upon the final decision (rec E), delegated authority to the Chief Executive, in consultation with the Executive Leader of the Council, to liaise with other Leaders and Chief Executives to make any final amendments to the single submission for Cambridgeshire & Peterborough in advance of submission to the Government; and
- (i) delegated to the Chief Executive, in consultation with all Group Leaders and non-group aligned Members, to formulate and submit a response to any formal consultation on proposals for Local Government Reorganisation in Cambridgeshire & Peterborough.

Chair