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| Report To: | Full Council | Date: | 27 January 2025 |
| Contact Officer: | Paula Harrison | | |
| Subject: | English Devolution White Paper Briefing | | |

1. Background

1.1 On 16 December 2024 the Government published the 'English Devolution White Paper - Power and partnerships: Foundations for growth'. This is primarily aimed at local authorities for driving strategic decision making for economic growth. There is no immediate impact on Parish or Town Councils.

2. English Devolution White Paper Summary

2.1 The English Devolution White Paper sets out an ambitious agenda to reshape local government in England through:

- Broadening devolution so that all areas of England have a devolution settlement
- Deepening devolution, through development of a stronger set of powers and resources available to local areas through the new Devolution Framework published in the White Paper
- Progressing local government reorganisation in two-tier areas to support a move to simpler structures, unlock further devolution and deliver sustainable public services.

2.2 The White Paper sets out the intention of the Government to create a new tier of local government in the form of Strategic Authorities (SAs). Initially, there will be three categories:

- **Foundation Strategic Authorities (FSA)**, which are those strategic authorities *without* a Directly Elected Mayor and comprised only of constituent local authorities.
- **Mayoral Strategic Authorities (MSA)** those comprised of a Directly Elected Mayor and constituent local authorities.
- **Established Strategic Authorities (EMSA)** which is the same as an MSA but has been established for a minimum period of 18 months and meets a number of qualifying criteria to be considered as 'established'.

It should be noted that the expectation set out in the White Paper is that local areas will come together to agree the geography and boundaries of any proposed SA, but that where local agreement cannot be reached, additional powers will be granted to Ministers through the forthcoming English Devolution Bill to mandate the geography of SAs if necessary.

2.3 Over time all SAs will move to becoming Established Mayoral Strategic

Authorities. The revised Devolution Framework set out in the White Paper lists the devolved powers and functions available to each type of SA covering areas such as transport, infrastructure, skills and employment support, housing, strategic planning, economic development, environment, health and public safety.

2.4 The intention of the Government is to prioritise the establishment of MSAs and the Devolution Framework and the devolved funding arrangements are intended to reserve the most significant powers to Established MSAs. Whilst all SAs will have some funding devolved to them, this will be limited to a dedicated local growth allocation for FSA, whereas MSAs will have a consolidated funding pot for local growth, place, housing, adult skills and transport. Only EMSAs will be able to reach an Integrated Settlement on funding with the Government, which will remove any remaining ring fencing of devolved monies and allow local flexibility on funding of priorities. Similarly, only Mayoral Strategic Authorities will become members of the Council of Nations and Regions, allowing local areas to shape future national policy and priorities, and seek specific additional devolved powers by making requests for additional areas to be included in the Devolution Framework.

2.5 The White Paper sets out the criteria for the geography for the creation of SAs, which are:

- **Scale:** Combined population of 1.5 million or above
- **Economies:** Cover sensible economic geographies with a particular focus on functional economic areas and multiple travel to work areas
- **Contiguity:** Geography must be contiguous across its constituent councils
- **No 'devolution islands':** Geographies must not create devolution 'islands' by leaving areas which are too small to go it alone
- **Delivery:** Effective delivery of key functions including Spatial Development Strategies, Local Transport Plans and Get Britain Working Plans
- **Identity:** A vital element of successful devolution is the ability for local residents to engage with and hold their devolved institutions to account – and local identity plays a key role in this.

Local Government Reorganisation

2.6 The White Paper also sets out the Government's intention for all remaining two-tier local government areas, reorganising existing County and District and Borough Councils into new unitary councils.

2.7 New unitary councils should have a population of 500,000 or more. No upper population limit has been put on the new unitary councils although Ministers have made clear that numbers well in excess of 500,000 will be considered too large to be local enough to residents and communities. Proposals with population limits below 500,000 may be considered only on a case-by-case basis where necessary to enable a wider sensible/rational local government geography.

2.8 It should be noted that there is a separate statutory process for the creation of new unitary councils that is different for the creation of SAs, including different consultation and engagement processes and formal decision-making involving all tiers of local councils. As such, the Government make clear that they want all councils in an area to collaborate on developing reorganisation proposals for their

area and do not wish to see competing proposals, so as to allow for reorganisation proposals to be agreed and delivered as quickly as possible.

2.9 It is expected that in late January 2025 the Government will contact authorities setting out further details and a timetable for areas to respond with reorganisation proposals, which will differ depending on whether or not areas are included in the Devolution Priority Programme.

3. Devolution Priority Programme

3.1 In recognition that there are areas that will want to achieve the benefits of devolution as quickly as possible, the Government is creating a Devolution Priority Programme for a limited number of areas which will see them prioritised in terms of Ministerial decision-making, departmental support and the necessary legislative process.

4. Responding to the White Paper

4.1 Swindon Borough Council will be considering its next steps. Early indications are that it is likely to want to draw on links with Oxfordshire and Berkshire. Those that are on the Priority Programme will combine with Mayoral elections in 2026.

5. Recommendations:

5.1 That Council notes the information.

Background Documents

English Devolution White Paper, Power and partnerships: Foundations for growth, Ministry of Housing Communities and Local Government, 16 December 2024 available at [English Devolution White Paper: Power and partnership: Foundations for growth - GOV.UK](#)