

Leader of the Council

Cllr Richard Clewer

Officer Contact: David Bowater, Senior Corporate Manager,
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Reference: L-01-25

Submission to the Devolution Priority Programme

Purpose of Report

1. Wiltshire Council has been invited to make a submission for councils in the 'Heart of Wessex' to join the Devolution Priority Programme. A letter from leaders of the relevant councils to the Minister has been requested by 10 January 2025.

Consultation

2. An extraordinary meeting of Full Council will take place on 9 January 2025 seeking support for a submission.
3. If accepted onto the Devolution Priority Programme widespread public consultation would take place on the establishment of a Mayoral Strategic Authority ahead of formal consent for its establishment.

Options Considered

4. The options considered include:
 - 1) not making a submission, which would mean it would take longer for Wiltshire residents to benefit from the additional funding and powers promised by government through devolution and the council may be subject to ministerial direction to join a strategic authority in which it has had less influence in shaping; or
 - 2) making a submission so that residents can benefit from the additional funding and powers promised by government through devolution as rapidly as possible.

Reason for Decision

5. It is the view of the council leaders involved that, with a population of approximately 1.5 million, the Heart of Wessex presents a realistic and ambitious offer which can redefine local decision-making and partnership across the patch, offering the Government an opportunity to showcase what devolution can offer to the region and to the wider UK. The Heart of Wessex has real strengths in sectors such as defence, digital, life sciences and clean energy, and devolution will help ensure the success of these sectors in kickstarting economic growth, making Britain a clean energy superpower and breaking down barriers to opportunity.
6. The provision of additional powers and funding through participation in the Devolution Priority Programme and the rapid establishment of a Mayoral Strategic Authority offers

the opportunity to deliver our shared priorities and improve the lives of local residents. It is the intention for the Leader of the council to make a submission with fellow Leaders in the Heart of Wessex, to the Minister, seeking inclusion in the programme on that basis.

INTENTION TO MAKE DECISION

Following consultation with officers I give notice that I intend to make the decision set out in the attached report subject to support from Full Council. If you would like to make any representations to me on this issue please do so by 9 January 2025.

The following supporting documents are attached:

Devolution Priority Programme report

The following supporting documents are available from the officer named above:

[English Devolution White Paper](#)

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Cllr Richard Clewer
Leader of the Council

Date...31 December 2024...

Leader of the Council

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Officer Contact: Lucy Townsend, Chief Executive, Lucy.Townsend@wiltshire.gov.uk
David Bowater, Senior Corporate Manager, david.bowater@wiltshire.gov.uk

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Submission to the Devolution Priority Programme

Purpose of Report

1. Wiltshire Council has been invited to make a submission for the Heart of Wessex to join the Devolution Priority Programme. A letter from leaders of the relevant councils to the Minister has been requested by 10 January 2025.

Relevance to the Council's Business Plan

2. The Business Plan has as guiding themes 'understanding communities' (where we ensure our dialogue is in the right place and at the right time) and 'working together' (where we design and deliver our services in partnership with service users, local communities and other public sector partners where appropriate), both of which are relevant to achieving devolution of funding and functions from central government.

Background

3. The Deputy Prime Minister wrote to council leaders in July 2024, following the King's Speech (which included an English Devolution Bill), inviting councils to "partner with Government to deliver the most ambitious programme of devolution this country has ever seen". This stated an intention to devolve new powers over transport, skills, housing, planning and employment support. Expressions of Interest (Eols) for preferred geographies and preferred governance model for devolution were invited on this basis.
4. Discussions took place with leaders of neighbouring councils to establish the options that were open to us. The West of England (covering Bath and NE Somerset, Bristol and South Gloucestershire) already has a Mayoral Combined Authority; Hampshire are working on a footprint including the county council, Southampton and Portsmouth and the Isle of Wight); discussions in Gloucestershire were focused on improving working within the county. Swindon Borough Council have been exploring options with the six Berkshire unitary councils (which they do not directly border) and Oxfordshire. Neighbouring Somerset and Dorset Councils both sought partners for devolution.
5. The Leaders of Dorset, Somerset and Wiltshire agreed in their Eols that a 'Heart of Wessex' footprint would make good sense but that the door would be kept open to Swindon Borough and Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole councils to join. The three councils agreed in September that '*at this time the Leaders of the councils involved do not think a mayoral system would be right for our communities*'. A Combined Authority was suggested as the preferred form of governance. A Combined Authority is not a merger – individual councils would continue to exist with their own

separate budgets– and each council leader would have a vote on what would be a separate legal body. Whilst not a formal decision, Cabinet was provided with an update on the expression of interest at their meeting of 8 October.

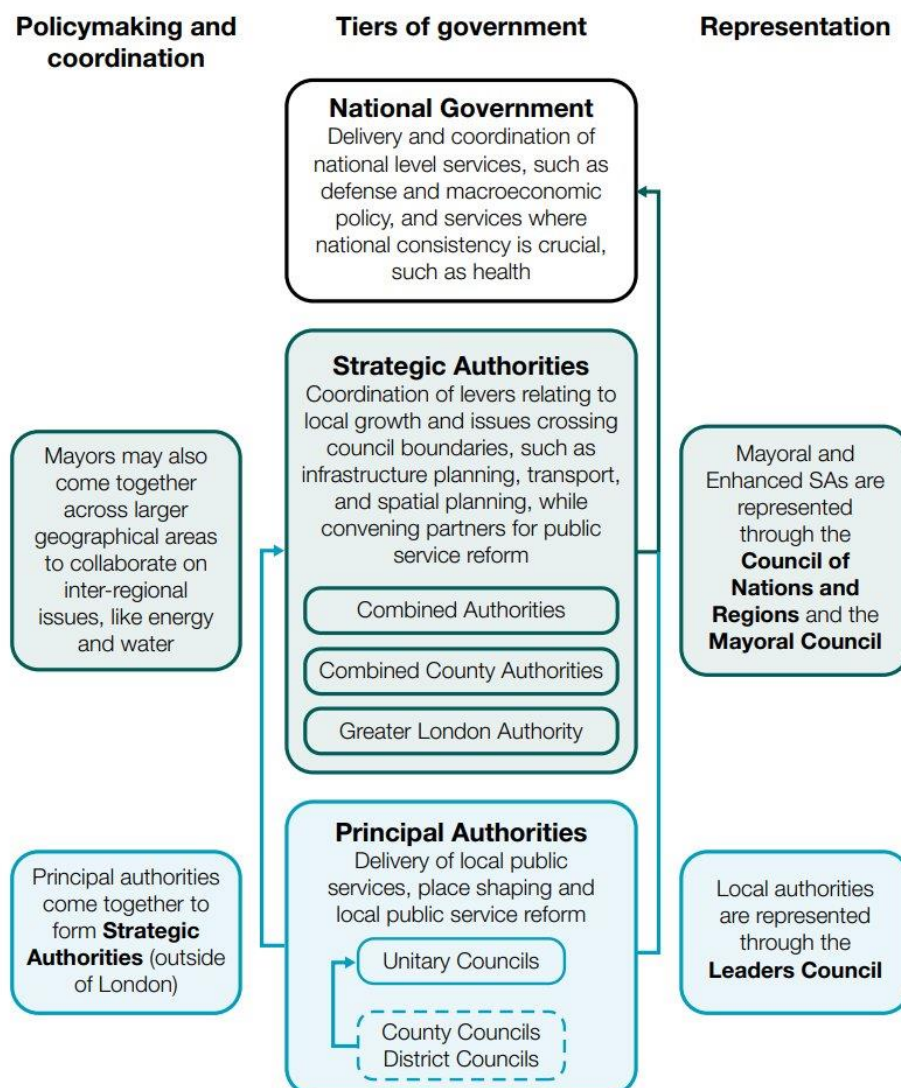
6. Since the general election and submission of the EoI, government continued to emphasise the importance of establishing Mayoral Combined Authorities (MCAs). This has included:
 - Reiterating that there will be a ‘mayoral premium’ – additional long-term funding for areas that agree to a directly elected mayor
 - Establishing a Mayoral Council for England and a Council of Nations and Regions to bring together the Prime Minister and devolved leaders on their work to drive growth
 - The Local Government Minister Jim McMahon MP stating that he wants all areas to have a mayor and that ultimately ‘*it is not acceptable to have parts of England not part of that*’
 - Agreeing new MCAs for Lincolnshire and Hull and East Yorkshire and exploring MCAs for Cumbria and Cheshire. A ‘foundational’ Combined Authority has also been agreed for Lancashire with the proviso that serious consideration is given to a mayor over the coming year. The entirety of the north of England may soon have complete coverage of MCAs.
 - Publishing a draft Industrial Strategy which emphasised the role of mayors in creating a pro-business environment and supporting key sectors
 - Announcing in the Get Britain Working White Paper that MCAs would trial and lead new approaches to tackling worklessness
 - Announcing in the Budget that core Local Enterprise Partnership funding would end and a consultation take place on ending funding for Pan Regional Partnerships, given the emphasis on MCAs
 - Announcing in the Budget ‘Integrated Settlements’ for Greater Manchester and West Midlands MCAs next year, with other MCAs following suit the year after. This would enable MCAs to vire funding between regeneration, housing, skills and other funding streams. It was also announced that MCAs will have borrowing powers in future.
 - Announcing in the Budget that government will be ‘*working with councils to move to simpler structures...with efficiency savings from council reorganisation*’.
7. Government recently ruled out mayoral deals for single councils or county councils so reorganisation will be aimed at two tier areas and enable MCAs to be established more easily.
8. Council leaders (and potentially other council representatives) retain a vote on MCAs alongside the mayor, who would chair the meetings of the body. As with a non-mayoral Combined Authority, individual council budgets would not be merged for councils sitting on an MCA. A public consultation on the governance of any MCA or CA is required in existing legislation ahead of its establishment.
9. As government had made it clear that it intends all devolution deals to ultimately culminate with Mayoral Combined Authorities, a revised expression of interest was submitted by the leaders of Dorset, Somerset and Wiltshire Councils on 25 November 2024, following further informal discussion between leaders. This was subject of a press release with a further update provided to Cabinet on 10 December.

10. The [English Devolution White Paper](#) was published on 16 December 2024. This stated that government will create in statute a new type of authority, a 'Strategic Authority'. There will be three tiers of Strategic Authority:

- i. Foundation Strategic Authorities (SAs) - those without a mayor
- ii. Mayoral Strategic Authorities (MSAs) - any strategic authority with a mayor
- iii. Established Mayoral Strategic Authorities

11. Government wants universal coverage of Strategic Authorities and where progress is slow will have the power to mandate these. Strategic Authorities will bring together leaders of the constituent councils. The deepest powers for strategic authorities will only be available to those where the Leaders of constituent councils are joined by a directly elected Mayor. Once a Mayoral Strategic Authority has been established for eighteen months or more (and provided there are no Best Value or other concerns) then that MSA will have access to an 'integrated settlement', enabling additional flexibility on how it uses its funding.

12. Alongside the establishment of Strategic Authorities government will be moving to fully unitary councils across the country. Reorganisation will commence in two tier areas (and could lead to delays in county council elections where mayoral elections are also planned) and may also address the issue of small, struggling unitary councils.



13. Areas of competence for Strategic Authorities will be set out in law (via the English Devolution Bill) – these will be conferred on existing Combined Authorities and Mayoral Combined Authorities as Foundational or Mayoral Strategic Authorities respectively. The title ‘Strategic Authority’ helps to clarify that the organisation is not a merger of the constituent councils or their functions and that Strategic Authorities will not be directly involved in many areas of delivery (although constituent councils can choose to cooperate on this if they wish). The move to establish a uniform set of competences will end the ‘deal-based’ approach to devolution and remove disparities in powers that are in place across the country.

14. The areas of competence proposed for Strategic Authorities are, broadly:

- **Transport:** bus franchising; rail network influence; station control; key road network
- **Skills:** Adult Education Budget; Get Britain Working; Local Skills Improvement Plans;
- **Housing and Planning:** Spatial Development Strategies and when in place call-in powers on strategic developments plus a mayoral Community Infrastructure Levy; Homes England programmes and Affordable Housing Programme funding
- **Environment:** retrofit funding; Local Power Plans; Local Nature Recovery Strategies
- **Business:** Growth Hub Funding; Office for Investment; UKRI regional innovation influence
- **Public Service Reform:** aligning geographies (police and fire); mayors on Integrated Care Partnerships; health improvement; right to request devolution

15. The White Paper sets out in detail how these proposed areas of competence apply to each level of strategic authority (in tables from p86 onwards), for example:

Detail	Foundation	Mayoral	Established
Funding and investment			
Access to a multi-departmental, long-term integrated funding settlement**			X
Long-term investment fund, with an agreed annual allocation		X	X
Removal of gateway review from investment fund, after Gateway One complete			X
Ability to introduce mayoral precepting on council tax^		X	X
Consolidation of local growth and place funding in a single pot**	X	X	X

16. These tables all emphasise a significant mayoral premium in funding and functions, alongside influence via the Council of Nations and Regions. The public service reform remit could see mayors take on Police and Crime Commissioner and fire authority functions where boundaries are coterminous, or reform to achieve alignment of boundaries over the medium term to deliver the same outcome.

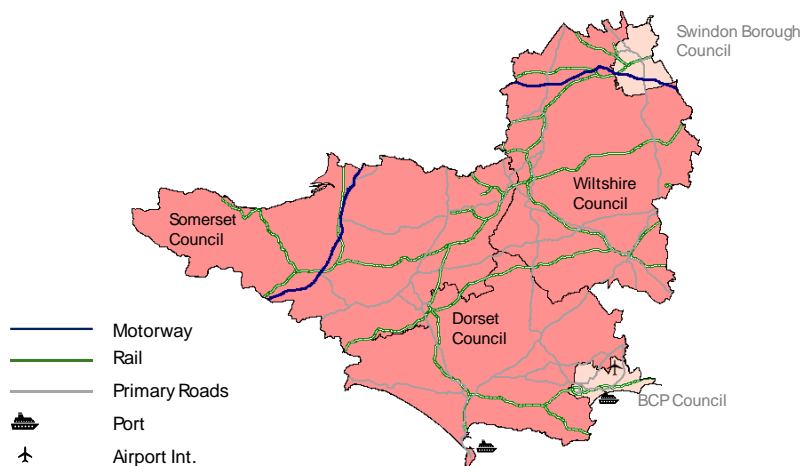
17. Alongside uniformity in powers, the White Paper proposes a standard approach to governance so that in almost all circumstances decisions will be taken by council leaders and 'majority voting, including the mayor'. The mayor will chair the Strategic Authority. Scrutiny arrangements will be in place alongside audit and local public accounts committees.

18. When agreeing geographies for strategic authorities, Government will be considering:

- **Scale:** The default assumption is for a combined population of 1.5 million or above, but government accepts that in some places, smaller authorities may be necessary.
- **Economies:** Strategic Authorities must cover sensible economic geographies with a particular focus on functional economic areas,
- **Contiguity:** Any proposed geography must be contiguous across its constituent councils (either now or with a clear plan to ensure contiguity in the future through agreed local government reorganisation)
- **No 'devolution islands':** Geographies must not create devolution 'islands' by leaving areas which are too small to go it alone or which do not have natural partners.
- **Delivery:** Geographies should ensure the effective delivery of key functions including Spatial Development Strategies, Local Transport Plans and Get Britain Working Plans.
- **Alignment:** The government will seek to promote alignment between devolution boundaries and other public sector boundaries.
- **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

Main Considerations for the Council

19. In considering the government's criteria on geographies, as set out above, it should be noted that Dorset, Somerset and Wiltshire: have a combined population of 1.5million people; share travel to work and housing market areas as well as other economic characteristics; and are contiguous. The proposal for the Heart of Wessex main tains an open door for BCP and Swindon councils to join so that no devolution islands are created and to ease delivery of functions and alignment of public sector boundaries. The historic identities of the ceremonial counties of Dorset, Somerset and Wiltshire have all been shaped as the heart of the historic Wessex region (for example, the College of Arms has used dragons, in token of ancient Wessex, in each of the arms awarded to Wiltshire, Dorset and Somerset).



20. Feedback from government on the proposal has been broadly positive to date. Leaders from the relevant councils have been invited to meet with the minister on 7 January 2025. Submissions to join a Devolution Priority Programme have been requested in the form of a letter from the Leaders of the constituent councils by 10 January.
21. If accepted onto the Devolution Priority Programme, the intention will be to establish a Mayoral Strategic Authority with elections taking place in May 2026. As part of this government is offering support to councils through the following indicative timescale:
- Jan-Mar 25: Running consultations on governance schemes for Mayoral Combined Authorities
 - Aug-September 25: Announcing Long-term Investment Fund amounts following the Spending Review
 - Aug-September 25: Seeking consent through council processes to new MSAs
 - September 25-Feb 26: taking Statutory Instruments through parliament
 - Feb-Mar 26: Institutions established
 - May 26: Mayoral elections
22. Public consultation will take place on the basis of existing legislation (the Local Democracy Act 2009 as amended by the Cities and Local Government Devolution Act 2016 and Levelling Up and Regeneration Act 2023). Where mayoral authorities have been established to date, constituent councils have negotiated with government, undertaken a governance review, consulted on this and then submitted a proposal to the Secretary of State for consideration and approval through the relevant processes. However, under s110, the legislation also provides for the Secretary of State to establish an MCA with the consent of the councils in the relevant area. In this scenario, public consultation is undertaken by the Secretary of State who must then be satisfied that the establishment of a combined authority is likely to “improve the exercise of statutory functions” in the area in question. Constituent councils can support with the publicity and events associated with the consultation.
23. As the government is moving towards standardising both governance and powers for Mayoral Strategic Authorities, the offer for government to run consultation has the benefit of easing the burden of undertaking this on the named councils.
24. After consideration of the results of the consultation approval for the new authority will be needed from the Secretary of State, the constituent councils and through orders in parliament. This will establish a Mayoral Combined Authority. Once the English Devolution Bill becomes law the competences of a Mayoral Strategic Authority would be conferred upon it. There will also be some capacity funding available in 2025/26 to aid constituent councils in establishing the MSA in time for elections in 2026.

Overview and Scrutiny Engagement

25. The decision to write to MHCLG so that Wiltshire and the Heart of Wessex can be considered in the Devolution Priority Programme is formally an executive one, not a council side one. Although the decision to write is short of a full legal commitment, given its significance and so that there is a formal decision trail, this Single Member decision has been prepared. Full Council are being invited to support this decision.

26. Further engagement will take place with the Overview and Scrutiny Management Committee in due course. This will include consideration of the options open to Wiltshire if not accepted onto the Devolution Priority Programme or consideration of the consultation if it is.
27. An MSA would be subject to its own scrutiny, audit and accountability arrangements as set out in the White Paper.

Safeguarding Implications

28. There are no direct safeguarding implications in a submission to the Devolution Priority Programme. The Devolution White Paper refers to a potential role for Strategic Authorities in taxi licensing to reduce the risk associated with out-of-area licensing - but this is to be the subject of a separate consultation.

Public Health Implications

29. There are no direct public health implications from a submission to the Devolution Priority Programme.

Procurement Implications

30. There are no direct procurement implications from a submission to the Devolution Priority Programme.

Equalities Impact of the Proposal

31. There are no direct equality impacts, although one of the aims of devolution would be to secure funding to improve social mobility and tackle inequalities.

Environmental and Climate Change Considerations

32. There are no direct environment and climate change impacts. An MSA would take on a role supporting the development of Local Nature Recovery Strategies.

Workforce Implications

33. Wiltshire Council leads on delivery of several economic or skills programmes across Swindon and Wiltshire under the governance of the Functional Economic Market Area in place following the transfer of the Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP) functions. This involved the transfer of staff into Wiltshire Council and we currently lead on the delivery of functions such as the Business and Growth Unit, Careers Hub and DfE Skills Bootcamp. A Local Skills Improvement Plan is also being developed on a Wiltshire and Swindon footprint and the recent 'Get Britain Working' white paper has confirmed that Wiltshire Council will lead on the delivery of a new Connect to Work programme for DWP across Wiltshire and Swindon over the next few years.
34. Shared policies are also being developed with Swindon in areas such as nature recovery, energy and transport. Shared delivery across the functional economic area will need to be a consideration and any material impact on staff will be considered as the route forward is confirmed by government.

35. Whilst it is not yet fully clear what the impact will be there may be opportunities for the secondment of staff or joint working in establishing an MSA. This will need to be considered as part of the development of detailed proposals.

Risks that may arise if the proposed decision and related work is not taken

36. If Wiltshire does not make a submission to the Devolution Priority Programme then the area could miss out on the significant 'mayoral premium' associated with devolution to an MSA. This also includes delaying access to an integrated settlement as an established MSA (which needs to be in place for eighteen months to qualify for this).

Risks that may arise if the proposed decision is taken and actions that will be taken to manage these risks

37. Proceeding without Swindon Borough Council as part of the proposed 'Heart of Wessex' area may complicate the alignment of public service geography with any MSA in the short term given Wiltshire and Swindon share the same police and fire service. Wiltshire Council also delivers the DfE skills bootcamp and the new multi-year DWP programme Connect to Work (as part of Get Britain working) to the Swindon area as well as the Growth Hub and Careers Hub. This would not be expected to change initially but new arrangements under the MSA may need to be put in place in a few years time. Commuter flows between Swindon and Wiltshire are more significant than between Swindon and other areas and it could be beneficial to the ongoing delivery of skills, employment and other programmes if Swindon concluded that this should be reflected in the partnership arrangements they wish to pursue. The government have said they do not want islands left behind but also that areas not willing to progress soon should not hold back those that do.

38. Ongoing engagement with Swindon Borough Council has been undertaken to address this risk and the door to the Heart of Wessex partnership remains open. If Swindon do not reach appropriate agreement with other neighbouring areas this risk could be mitigated through the use of a ministerial direction further down the line. As a smaller unitary council that has applied for Exceptional Financial Support, it is also expected to become clearer what options associated with local government reorganisation and devolution Swindon Borough Council may be exploring in the new year. Swindon will also be undertaking all-out elections for the first time in May 2026.

Financial Implications

39. In the recent Budget it should be noted that funding under the UK Shared Prosperity Fund was confirmed only for a further 'transitional' year at a 40% reduced rate for 2025/26, ahead of wider local growth funding reform taking place alongside further rollout of devolution. Wiltshire's allocation of transitional UK SPF was significantly reduced from that of previous years.

40. The detail of future funding through devolution to a Heart of Wessex MSA would be confirmed once the Spending Review is completed in summer next year. Mayoral areas are expected to attract a significant funding premium with a long-term investment fund (which so far have been between £377 and £815 per capita over 30 years and lately seem to have settled to around £650 per capita with a 60/40 revenue/capital split). If a similar amount was awarded this would equate roughly to £30-40m a year for a Heart of Wessex MSA with a population of 1.5m. Adding the population of

BCP (400k) and Swindon (220k) would take the population to 2.1m with a proportionate increase in funding allocation.

Table 1: Investment funds as agreed in initial devolution deals

Devolution deal	Year of deal	Total 30 year investment fund amount (£ in prices of the year the deals were proposed/ signed)	Total 30 year investment per person (~£ adjusted to ~2023 prices)
Greater Manchester	2014	£900,000,000	£434
West Yorkshire	2015	£1,140,000,000	£588
South Yorkshire	2015	£900,000,000	£769
Tees Valley	2015	£450,000,000	£886
Liverpool City Region	2016	£900,000,000	£764
West of England	2016	£900,000,000	£818
West Midlands	2016	£1,095,000,000	£377
Cambridgeshire and Peterborough	2016	£600,000,000	£698
York and North Yorkshire	2022	£540,000,000	£713
North East	2023	£1,400,000,000	£711
East Midlands	2024	£1,140,000,000	£518
Hull and East Yorkshire	Tbc	£400,000,000	£655
Lincolnshire	Tbc	£720,000,000	£654
Cornwall	Xx	£360,000,000	£631
Norfolk	Xx	£600,000,000	£655
Suffolk	Xx	£480,000,000	£630

41. Apart from its size, much of the value of a long-term Investment Fund would be the stability it would provide, allowing long term regeneration and infrastructure projects to be planned without the risk of sudden changes to government funding schemes and with the ability to lever in significant amounts of private sector investment.

42. Alongside the Long-Term Investment Fund there would be the prospect of additional or devolved funding for brownfield regeneration, the affordable homes programme, consolidated road funding, strategic planning, decarbonisation, bus services, business rates retention, adult skills, employment support ... and a single 'integrated settlement' and borrowing powers in due course. Details of amounts awarded to other areas under these headings are available on the gov.uk website.

Legal Implications

43. The decision to write to the Secretary of State for the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government about the Councils commitment to the Heart of Wessex devolution deal as set out in this report is an executive one and not council side. The Leader has sought to obtain the views and support of Council before making any decision. The timeline for the process, if it proceeds as suggested, includes public consultation which the Secretary of State is proposing to lead, with input on the nature of such consultation from the Council as appropriate. A final formal executive decision would then be needed to finally commit the Council and its administrative area and partner authorities to the creation of a Mayoral Strategic Authority for the Heart of

Wessex. It is understood that the Leader would seek the support of full council for this final decision.

Options Considered

44. The options considered include 1) not making a submission, which would mean it would take longer for Wiltshire residents to benefit from the additional funding and powers promised by government through devolution to the Heart of Wessex and the council may be subject to ministerial direction to join a strategic authority in which it has had less influence in shaping; or 2) making a submission so that residents can benefit from the additional funding and powers promised by government through devolution as rapidly as possible.

Conclusions/ Proposal

45. It is the view of the council leaders involved that, with a population of approximately 1.5 million, the Heart of Wessex presents a realistic and ambitious offer which can redefine local decision-making and partnership across the patch, offering the Government an opportunity to showcase what devolution can offer to the region and to the wider UK. The Heart of Wessex has real strengths in sectors such as defence, digital, life sciences and clean energy, and devolution will help ensure the success of these sectors in kickstarting economic growth, making Britain a clean energy superpower and breaking down barriers to opportunity.
46. The provision of additional powers and funding through participation in the Devolution Priority Programme and the rapid establishment of a Mayoral Strategic Authority offers the opportunity to deliver our shared priorities and improve the lives of local residents.
47. It is therefore the intention for the Leader of the Council, with the support of Full Council, to make a submission with fellow Leaders in the Heart of Wessex, to the Minister, seeking inclusion in the programme on that basis.

Lucy Townsend - Chief Executive

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Appendices

None

Background Papers

[English Devolution White Paper](#)

House of Commons Library Briefing Papers:

- [Combined authorities](#)
- [Devolution to Local Government in England](#)

Legislation: [Local Democracy, Economic Development and Construction Act 2009](#)

As amended by the Cities and Local Government Devolution Act 2016 and the Levelling Up and Regeneration Act 2023.