

Area Board Briefing Note

Devolution to Wessex

Devolution is the handing down of powers and decision making from central government to councils. Government published a [White Paper](#) on how they wish to achieve Devolution in England on 16 December 2024.

The White Paper says that government will create in statute a new type of authority, a 'Strategic Authority'. 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 and funding for Strategic Authorities will only be available to those where the Leaders of constituent councils are joined by a directly elected Mayor.

Funding will include long term investment, regeneration, transport and housing funds. Powers for strategic authorities will include:

- **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

Alongside the establishment of Strategic Authorities government will be moving to fully unitary councils across the country. Reorganisation will commence in remaining two tier areas (parts of the country which still have district councils).

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.
- **Economies:** sensible economic geographies
- **Contiguity:** Any proposed 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 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

Applications to a Devolution Priority Programme were sought by government by 10 January. Wiltshire Council is seeking inclusion in this programme along with other councils in the Wessex area – BCP (Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole), Dorset and Somerset – representing a combined population of 1.9 million. An extraordinary [full council](#) was held on 9 January where Wiltshire councillors voted 65-7 to join the programme, whilst noting some reservations alongside the clear direction of travel from government. The paper sets out the background to the debate.

If Wessex is accepted onto the Devolution Priority Programme there will be a period of public consultation led by the government, following which constituent councils will be asked to give their formal assent to the proposals. Mayoral elections would then take place in 2026. If not accepted onto the programme the constituent councils will consider their next steps together.

The proposal to create a Mayoral Strategic Authority with Dorset, BCP and Somerset councils is not a merger of the councils. Each council will remain independent, continuing to serve its local communities as individual authorities.

FAQs

Why are the councils supporting an elected mayor for Wessex?

The government has made it clear that it is committed to devolution that includes mayors and that there will be a significant premium in terms of funding and representation associated with this. This model aims to ensure clear, accountable leadership to drive economic growth, improve public services, and invest in vital infrastructure, working closely with the leaders of the constituent councils.

Mayoral devolution offers the opportunity to develop a long-term investment plan for the critical infrastructure our counties need with the ability to bring in additional private sector investment. Should mayoral devolution be agreed, residents would have the opportunity to vote for a mayor.

What about Swindon?

Discussions to date have also included Swindon Borough Council but they are currently exploring a range of options. Wiltshire, Somerset, BCP and Dorset councils remain open to the possibility of working with Swindon as part of Wessex.

When will we hear back from the government regarding the proposal?

We expect to hear back by early February.

What will the process of consultation look like?

We expect the process of any consultation by government to be set out soon.

How would the Wessex proposal work in practice? What type of authority would actually be created if devolution is agreed for Wiltshire?

We expect the governance framework for mayoral strategic authorities to be based on the mayoral combined authority structures provided for in existing legislation. In almost all circumstances decisions will be taken by council leaders and 'majority voting, including the mayor'. The mayor will chair meetings of the Strategic Authority. Scrutiny arrangements will be in place alongside audit and local public accounts committees.

Will Wiltshire Council be merging with BCP, Dorset and Somerset if the Wessex devolution proposal is agreed?

No. There are no plans to share additional services between the three councils. The aim of devolution is to unlock additional funding streams from central government and that we would work collaboratively with BCP, Somerset and Dorset on new initiatives.

If the devolution proposal is approved by government, local councils in Wiltshire, BCP, Dorset and Somerset will continue to exist and have the same responsibilities as they do now. Current legal, tax-raising and public service responsibilities of individual councils will remain with those councils. Any formal proposals will be subject to consultation.