

Council

MINUTES OF THE EXTRAORDINARY COUNCIL MEETING HELD ON 9 JANUARY 2025 AT COUNCIL CHAMBER - COUNTY HALL, BYTHESEA ROAD, TROWBRIDGE, BA14 8JN.

Present:

Cllr Bridget Wayman (Chairman), Cllr Christopher Newbury (Vice-Chairman), Cllr Phil Alford, Cllr Liz Alstrom, Cllr Helen Belcher OBE, Cllr Chuck Berry, Cllr Ian Blair-Pilling, Cllr Nick Botterill, Cllr Richard Britton, Cllr Allison Bucknell, Cllr Steve Bucknell, Cllr Richard Budden, Cllr Trevor Carbin, Cllr Sam Charleston, Cllr Pauline Church, Cllr Ernie Clark, Cllr Richard Clewer, Cllr Jane Davies, Cllr Andrew Davis, Cllr Matthew Dean, Cllr Adrian Foster, Cllr Gavin Grant, Cllr Howard Greenman, Cllr Ross Henning, Cllr Sven Hocking, Cllr Nick Holder, Cllr Ruth Hopkinson, Cllr Jon Hubbard, Cllr Mel Jacob, Cllr Simon Jacobs, Cllr George Jeans, Cllr Johnny Kidney, Cllr Carole King, Cllr Gordon King, Cllr Edward Kirk, Cllr Jerry Kunkler, Cllr Dr Brian Mathew MP, Cllr Dr Mark McClelland, Cllr Charles McGrath, Cllr Ian McLennan, Cllr Dominic Muns, Cllr Nabil Najjar, Cllr Jack Oatley, Cllr Paul Oatway QPM, Cllr Andrew Oliver, Cllr Ashley O'Neill, Cllr Stewart Palmen, Cllr Bill Parks, Cllr Sam Pearce-Kearney, Cllr Antonio Piazza, Cllr Tony Pickernell, Cllr Horace Prickett, Cllr Nic Puntis, Cllr Tamara Reay, Cllr Pip Ridout, Cllr Ricky Rogers, Cllr Paul Sample JP, Cllr Mike Sankey, Cllr Jonathon Seed, Cllr James Sheppard, Cllr Martin Smith, Cllr Caroline Thomas, Cllr Ian Thorn, Cllr Elizabeth Threlfall, Cllr Jo Trigg, Cllr Tim Trimble, Cllr Mark Verbinnen, Cllr David Vigar, Cllr Iain Wallis, Cllr Stuart Wheeler, Cllr Suzanne Wickham, Cllr Christopher Williams and Cllr Graham Wright

1 **Apologies**

Apologies for absence were received from the following Members:

David Bowler, Clare Cape, Mary Champion, Zoë Clewer, Mark Connolly, Caroline Corbin, Brian Dalton, Dr Monica Devendran, Sarah Gibson MP, Peter Hutton, Tony Jackson, Jacqui Lay, Kathryn MacDermid, Laura Mayes, Dr Nick Murry, Kelvin Nash, Andrew Oliver, Derek Walters, and Philip Whitehead.

2 **Declarations of Interest**

There were no declarations of disclosable interests.

3 **Chairman's Announcements**

The Chairman provided details to Members of arrangements to be followed in the event the meeting extended beyond 9pm.

4 **Public Participation**

The details of public participation for the meeting were explained.

5 **Devolution Priority Programme**

Introduction

At the invitation of the Chairman the Leader of the Council, Cllr Richard Clewer, presented a report and update on the progression of the government's devolution proposals regarding local authorities. He set out his recommendation that the council seek inclusion within the devolution priority programme in order to expedite the establishment of a strategic mayoral authority of which Wiltshire Council would be a part. The proposal was seconded by Cllr Nick Botterill.

Cllr Clewer summarised the progression of the government's devolution plans, culminating in the publication of a White Paper in December 2024. He explained that he was not convinced that mayors were the most appropriate arrangement for large rural authorities, but that government had made it clear that its plans for strategic authorities intended all parts of England to be covered, and for this to include mayors. He welcomed some of the additional clarity provided by the White Paper, noting that many areas would see significant local government reorganisation alongside plans for the new strategic authorities, which were planned to include at least 1.5m residents. Mayors would work with local councils and act as a conduit for funding in specific delivery areas.

It was emphasised that councils had been invited to indicate the geographic extent of a strategic authority they considered appropriate, but that if progress was not made with local councils, ministers would have the authority to define the areas regardless. There was therefore an opportunity for Wiltshire Council to seek to positively input into the extent of the strategic authority to which Wiltshire would be assigned. As a result, extensive discussions had been held with Somerset and Dorset Councils on a Heart of Wessex proposal, with additional communication with Swindon Borough Council (SBC), North Somerset Council, and Bournemouth, Christchurch, and Poole Council (BCP) around their potential involvement if they considered it appropriate.

Cllr Clewer stated that support for the proposal was not a commitment to joining a new Heart of Wessex combined authority, but a statement that Wiltshire Council, alongside Somerset and Dorset Councils, was prepared to explore the option with government, which would be consulted upon early in 2025, with detailed recommendations to follow later in the year to be approved by the constituent councils at a future point.

In conclusion Cllr Clewer stated whilst he had some reluctance over the devolution programme there were some potential benefits to be gained, and there was a risk that if the council did not engage at this stage, it could face a less suitable proposal later. He therefore sought the support of Council for him to send a letter to the relevant Minister to seek inclusion within the devolution priority programme.

Public Participation

Questions submitted by Members of the Public were then received, as set out in the agenda supplement.

Andrew Nicolson was in attendance and asked supplementary questions following the written responses to his submitted questions. In relation to the Question P25-02 and the Western Gateway Sub-National Transport body, Mr Nicolson asked whether the Leader saw problems with a jigsaw of overlapping regional and pan-regional bodies, or if there were advantages to recognising some issues and transport in particular not being constrained by monolithic administrative boundaries.

Cllr Clewer responded that the government needed to undertake further work on what it wished to achieve with regional sub-transport, with some suggestion multiple mayors would need to work together on those issues, as it was the case the transport would span across any new mayoralty areas.

In relation to the Question P25-03 Mr Nicolson asked about whether a local nature partnership, including climate as well, would have the option of spanning Wiltshire and Swindon, or even the Heart of Wessex area.

Cllr Clewer responded that such an area might be too large for such a partnership, noting that the local councils would still exist for such purposes, though some coordination through a mayor might be a possibility.

Mr Nicolson also asked for clarity on perceived benefits to a Heart of Wessex proposal including Swindon and Bournemouth, Christchurch, and Poole.

Cllr Clewer responded that he considered existing county boundaries were a good starting basis for strategic authorities, enabling as much joining up of public service provision as possible which was important in areas with successful devolution arrangements, but that it was a decision for SBC and BCP to decide if they felt it was best for their residents.

Group Leaders

Other political group leaders were then invited to comment ahead of the debate on the proposal.

Cllr Ian Thorn, Leader of the Liberal Democrat Group, thanked officers for organising the extraordinary meeting at short notice over the holiday period to enable Members to have their say on the devolution process. He stated the devolution process had been discussed in good faith by the councils involved in the face of the intense speed government was moving with the programme and welcomed their collaborative approach. He also criticised the government's process for the programme to date, and stated he was not in favour of a further tier of government and bureaucracy, but did not think the council was in a position to simply oppose the government's intentions. Cllr Thorn commented that the door should be left open for Swindon Borough Council to be included if they considered it appropriate, given its economic status within Wiltshire. It was further stated that putting communities first was essential and that the council needed to do everything it could to ensure that was at the heart of any devolution process, and that the reality was whoever was running the council in the future would need to engage in the devolution process to get the best possible arrangement for Wiltshire residents.

Cllr Ernie Clark, Leader of the Independent Group, noted that many Members were not in favour of the devolution programme suggestions, but given the government's intentions the question was whether it was best for Wiltshire residents to engage in the process at the early stage or wait until the end. He stated he had received many comments opposed to the proposals, but his concern was that if the council did not engage with the process now a worse situation would be imposed at a later date. He therefore reluctantly supported the proposal of the Leader.

Cllr Ricky Rogers, Leader of the Labour Group, thanked the Leader for his update to Council. He noted that creating strategic authorities led by mayors was part of the government agenda, and that in order to get the best outcome for the people of Wiltshire it would be best to engage at the beginning of the process. Cllr Rogers stated he had some concerns around whether the proposals would truly devolve decision-making to local people, and how they would feel involved in the new authority, as well as ensuring all areas of the authority received a fair share of any funding, but that he supported the motion to begin the process. He concluded by noting the electoral campaigning challenge for any future mayoral candidate looking to represent such a large area.

Debate

The Chairman then opened the item and proposal for debate.

Comments in support of the proposal to seek inclusion in the devolution priority programme included that there was broad support for the council entering into the programme as requested, though many Members indicated they did so pragmatically or even reluctantly. The direction mandated by central government was noted, alongside the potential negatives to delaying engagement, as well as potential benefits from proactive engagement. It was argued that the council would benefit from adopting a coherent approach to enter into negotiations on the future arrangements at this early stage.

Other comments included welcoming the co-operative approach taken by the three councils in the core Heart of Wessex proposal, supporting the principle of devolving powers and improvement to regional collaboration and strategic planning in areas such as transport and development, or hopefully working in place of current bodies such as National Highways. Encouraging the inclusion of Swindon Borough Council was also raised.

Comments in opposition to the proposal included that the government proposals were an unwanted imposition of additional bureaucracy and complexity, for which there had been and would not be genuine consultation with the public. It was argued that although Somerset, Dorset, and Wiltshire were large rural authorities they still had distinct priorities, for example in respect of local rail services and planning, which would not be better served with a mayor.

There was scepticism that government would engage more meaningfully with new strategic mayors than with local councils, and comments that a lack of

engagement by Wiltshire Council at this early stage would likely not lead to negative consequences, and as such Members should express their opposition to the proposals by voting against the motion.

Other comments in opposition included that the 1.5m population target for new strategic authorities was arbitrary and unnecessary and would still result in major administrative areas and economies relevant to Wiltshire not being included, such as Bath and Bristol. It was also argued that government could empower local councils in a simple and easy way by abolishing council tax rate caps, returning all business rates to the local council which raised them, and abolishing the National Planning Policy Framework and mandated housing targets.

There were comments whether in support of or against the proposal for inclusion in the programme arguing that further layers of government were not needed. Concerns were raised that there was a risk that the strategic mayoral authorities would be taking powers from local councils rather than being devolved powers from central government as devolution should require, and that a strategic approach could miss important local context.

The need to have scrutiny of any mayoral decision-making and ways of holding them to account democratically was emphasised, to ensure a single individual did not hold too much authority over such a large area, as well as queries relating to the level of precept raising and borrowing powers for any mayoralty, and their general power of competence.

Cllr Clewer then had the opportunity to respond to comments made during the debate. He acknowledged the concerns raised by some Members, whilst stating that in the new mayoral model there needed to be a voice for rural England. Details were provided on mayors having precepting power and limited borrowing power, as well as general power of competence, for current mayor arrangements, with more information needed on how this would apply under newer arrangements. There would be some form of Scrutiny for any mayoral authority. He also noted that councils could work together well without a mayor, as had been demonstrated with co-operation and co-ordination with the Leaders of Dorset and Somerset despite political differences.

In conclusion, whilst there were reservations around the direction from central government and on some of the details which were still to be developed, Cllr Clewer argued that supporting the proposal was the best path forward for Wiltshire.

It was then,

Resolved:

That Full Council supports the intention of the Leader to write to the relevant Minister seeking inclusion in the Devolution Priority Programme on the basis of the single Member decision report included with the Summons.

In accordance with the Constitution there was a recorded vote.

Votes for the motion (65)

Votes against the motion (7)

Votes in abstention (1)

Details of the vote are attached as an appendix to the minutes.

(Duration of meeting: 6.00 - 7.30 pm)

The Officer who has produced these minutes is Kieran Elliott of Democratic Services,
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Recorded Vote – Extraordinary Meeting of Full Council – 9 January 2025

Item 5 – Devolution Priority Programme

Vote	Councillors	Count
For	Cllr Phil Alford, Cllr Liz Alstrom, Cllr Helen Belcher OBE, Cllr Chuck Berry, Cllr Ian Blair-Pilling, Cllr Nick Botterill, Cllr Allison Bucknell, Cllr Steve Bucknell, Cllr Richard Budden, Cllr Sam Charleston, Cllr Pauline Church, Cllr Ernie Clark, Cllr Richard Clewer, Cllr Jane Davies, Cllr Andrew Davis, Cllr Adrian Foster, Cllr Gavin Grant, Cllr Howard Greenman, Cllr Ross Henning, Cllr Sven Hocking, Cllr Nick Holder, Cllr Ruth Hopkinson, Cllr Jon Hubbard, Cllr Mel Jacob, Cllr Simon Jacobs, Cllr George Jeans, Cllr Johnny Kidney, Cllr Carole King, Cllr Gordon King, Cllr Jerry Kunkler, Cllr Dr Brian Mathew MP, Cllr Dr Mark McClelland, Cllr Charles McGrath, Cllr Ian McLennan, Cllr Dominic Muns, Cllr Nabil Najjar, Cllr Ashley O'Neill, Cllr Jack Oatley, Cllr Paul Oatway QPM, Cllr Andrew Oliver, Cllr Stewart Palmen, Cllr Bill Parks, Cllr Sam Pearce-Kearney, Cllr Tony Pickernell, Cllr Horace Prickett, Cllr Nic Puntis, Cllr Tamara Reay, Cllr Pip Ridout, Cllr Ricky Rogers, Cllr Paul Sample JP, Cllr Jonathon Seed, Cllr James Sheppard, Cllr Martin Smith, Cllr Caroline Thomas, Cllr Ian Thorn, Cllr Elizabeth Threlfall, Cllr Jo Trigg, Cllr Tim Trimble, Cllr Mark Verbinnen, Cllr David Vigar, Cllr Iain Wallis, Cllr Stuart Wheeler, Cllr Suzanne Wickham, Cllr Christopher Williams and Cllr Graham Wright	65
Against	Cllr Trevor Carbin, Cllr Matthew Dean, Cllr Edward Kirk, Cllr Christopher Newbury, Cllr Antonio Piazza, Cllr Mike Sankey and Cllr Bridget Wayman	7
Abstain	Cllr Richard Britton	1

Extraordinary Full Council Meeting – 9 January 2025 – Members’ Attendance

Councillor Name	Time in (Meeting start – 18.00)	Time Out (Meeting close – 19.30)
Phil Alford	18.00	Meeting Close
Liz Alstrom	18.00	Meeting Close
Helen Belcher OBE	18.00	Meeting Close
Chuck Berry	18.00	Meeting Close
Ian Blair-Pilling	18.00	Meeting Close
Nick Botterill	18.00	Meeting Close
David Bowler	Apologies	
Richard Britton	18.00	Meeting Close
Allison Bucknell	18.00	Meeting Close
Steve Bucknell	18.00	Meeting Close
Richard Budden	18.00	Meeting Close
Clare Cape	Apologies	
Trevor Carbin	18.00	Meeting Close
Daniel Cave	Absent	
Mary Champion	Apologies	
Sam Charleston	18.00	Meeting Close
Pauline Church	18.00	Meeting Close
Ernie Clark	18.00	Meeting Close
Richard Clewer	18.00	Meeting Close
Zoë Clewer	Apologies	
Mark Connolly	Apologies	
Caroline Corbin	Apologies	
Kevin Daley	Absent	
Brian Dalton	Apologies	
Jane Davies	18.00	Meeting Close
Andrew Davis	18.00	Meeting Close
Matthew Dean	18.05	Meeting Close
Dr Monica Devendran	Apologies	
Nick Dye	Absent	
Adrian Foster	18.00	Meeting Close
Sarah Gibson MP	Apologies	
Gavin Grant	18.00	Meeting Close
Howard Greenman	18.00	Meeting Close
Ross Henning	18.00	Meeting Close
Sven Hocking	18.00	Meeting Close
Nick Holder	18.00	Meeting Close
Ruth Hopkinson	18.00	Meeting Close
Jon Hubbard	18.00	Meeting Close
Peter Hutton	Apologies	
Tony Jackson	Apologies	

Mel Jacob	18.00	Meeting Close
Simon Jacobs	18.00	Meeting Close
George Jeans	18.00	Meeting Close
Johnny Kidney	18.05	Meeting Close
Carole King	18.00	Meeting Close
Gordon King	18.00	Meeting Close
Edward Kirk	18.00	Meeting Close
Jerry Kunkler	18.00	Meeting Close
Jacqui Lay	Apologies	
Kathryn MacDermid	Apologies	
Robert MacNaughton	Absent	
Dr Brian Mathew MP	18.00	Meeting Close
Laura Mayes	Apologies	
Dr Mark McClelland	18.00	Meeting Close
Charles McGrath	18.00	Meeting Close
Ian McLennan	18.00	Meeting Close
Dominic Muns	18.00	Meeting Close
Dr Nick Murry	Apologies	
Nabil Najjar	18.00	Meeting Close
Kelvin Nash	Apologies	
Christopher Newbury	18.00	Meeting Close
Ashley O'Neill	18.00	Meeting Close
Jack Oatley	18.00	Meeting Close
Paul Oatway QPM	18.00	Meeting Close
Andrew Oliver	Apologies	
Stewart Palmen	18.00	Meeting Close
Bill Parks	18.00	Meeting Close
Sam Pearce-Kearney	18.00	Meeting Close
Antonio Piazza	18.00	Meeting Close
Tony Pickernell	18.00	Meeting Close
Horace Prickett	18.00	Meeting Close
Nic Puntis	18.00	Meeting Close
Tamara Reay	18.00	Meeting Close
Pip Ridout	18.00	Meeting Close
Rich Rogers	Absent	
Ricky Rogers	18.00	Meeting Close
Tom Rounds	Absent	
Paul Sample JP	18.30	Meeting Close
Mike Sankey	18.00	Meeting Close
Jonathon Seed	18.00	Meeting Close
James Sheppard	18.00	Meeting Close
Martin Smith	18.00	Meeting Close
Caroline Thomas	18.00	Meeting Close
Ian Thorn	18.00	Meeting Close
Elizabeth Threlfall	18.00	Meeting Close
Jo Trigg	18.00	Meeting Close

Tim Trimble	18.00	Meeting Close
Mark Verbinnen	18.00	Meeting Close
David Vigar	18.00	Meeting Close
Iain Wallis	18.00	Meeting Close
Derek Walters	Apologies	
Bridget Wayman	18.00	Meeting Close
Stuart Wheeler	18.00	Meeting Close
Philip Whitehead	Apologies	
Suzanne Wickham	18.00	Meeting Close
Christopher Williams	18.00	Meeting Close
Graham Wright	18.00	Meeting Close
Robert Yuill	Apologies	