

OPEN

31 January 2025

**English Devolution White Paper: Impacts for
Cheshire and Warrington**

Report of: Growth Directors of Cheshire West and Chester Council, Warrington Borough Council and Cheshire East Council.

Report Reference No: CWJC/11/24-25

Significant/Key Decision?	Yes/No
Cheshire West and Chester	No
Warrington	No
Cheshire East	Yes

Purpose of Report

- 1 This report focuses on the high-level impacts that the new devolution framework, outlined in the English Devolution White Paper published on 16 December 2024, would have if Cheshire and Warrington councils formally decided to move forward with devolved powers and investment.
- 2 This new framework would form the basis of a future devolution agreement between the three Councils of Cheshire West and Chester, Cheshire East and Warrington with Government. It is therefore important to begin to understand the implications and seek the Joint Committee's views on priorities at the earliest opportunity.

Executive Summary

- 3 The [English Devolution White Paper](#) "Power and Partnership: Foundations for Growth" details how the Government intends to deliver its manifesto commitments for stronger and deeper devolution over the course of this Parliament. This report summarises the main elements of the White Paper as it relates to devolution. It does not cover aspects of the White Paper which focus on Local Government Reorganisation.
- 4 We recognise that there is further work needed to fully understand all aspects of the White Paper, including governance, finance and other process impacts. These aspects are explored in the 'Devolution Work Programme' Committee Report. There is equally, if not more importantly, a need to focus on the future thematic content of any future devolution agreement made between Government and the Councils of Cheshire and Warrington - and how this

could improve the quality of life of all our residents, support our businesses to thrive and grow and enhance the quality of our built and natural environment.

- 5 This report begins to highlight and review key areas of responsibility that may be devolved to Cheshire and Warrington. Whilst the powers available to Cheshire and Warrington are set out by Government and the quantum of any investment package won't be known until after the completion of the Spending Review in June 2025, the report underlines the need to explore and test all aspects of the opportunities of devolution to support our communities understanding as we consult and to support the councils' decision making process.
- 6 The report recommends a number of ways in which the Joint Committee, Members from all councils and all political groups, business, stakeholders and communities can engage in the emerging content of a potential future devolution agreement for Cheshire and Warrington.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Joint Committee is recommended to:

1. Note the content of this report.
2. Agree that the named members of the Joint Committee detailed in this report will oversee the work with officers to develop priority themes for Cheshire and Warrington, before bringing all detail back to the Committee for strategic leadership and oversight.
3. Engage with officers via these theme areas over the coming weeks to shape and develop thematic content outlined in this report, aligned to the Devolution White Paper and which are likely to form a future Devolution Agreement.
4. Involve and collaborate with those Members and officers identified in Table 1 (relevant Cabinet Members and Council Committee Members), Business Advisory Board members as well as the Leaders Board to co-produce the thematic content in the context of the Devolution White Paper and ensure alignment with local priorities.
5. Ensure Joint Committee Members to continue to work with their own council's cross party member working groups and reference groups to shape and develop the areas of thematic content in the context of the Devolution White Paper.
6. Further shape subregional priorities with a series of all-Member sessions across the three Councils in Spring/Summer 2025.
7. Engage directly with stakeholders and communities through consultation events held across programme delivery.

Report Detail

Overview

- 7 On 16 December 2024, the Government published the [English Devolution White Paper](#), setting out an ambitious vision for deepening and widening devolution across England. As well as detailing criteria for devolution, it also set out an approach to progressing local government reorganisation and a move to a system of local government that prioritises high quality, sustainable public services.
- 8 The White Paper establishes a new tier of local government: Strategic Authorities (SAs). There are three categories - Foundation Strategic Authority, Mayoral Strategic Authority and Established Strategic Authority. SAs should be developed collaboratively with places wherever possible, but the English Devolution Bill will legislate for a parliamentary directive to allow the creation of SAs. This will only be used where local leaders are unable to make progress after sufficient time has been allowed for local proposals to be developed.
- 9 Details are set out in the White Paper of the types of responsibilities and funding that will be available to SAs. The initial proposed list, known as competencies, includes:
 - (a) Transport and local infrastructure
 - (b) Skills and employment support
 - (c) Housing and strategic planning
 - (d) Economic development and regeneration
 - (e) Environment and climate change
 - (f) Health wellbeing and public service reform
 - (g) Public safety.
- 10 SAs will have funding devolved to them. Foundation SAs will receive a dedicated local growth allocation. Mayoral SAs will have a consolidated funding pot across local growth, place, housing and regeneration, non-apprenticeship adult skills and transport. Established SAs are eligible for an Integrated Settlement which will allow them to set their own funding priorities based on local need and context. It is likely that the level of funding available to Cheshire and Warrington through a Devolution Agreement will become known when the Government Spending Review process concludes in June 2025. This will be kept under constant review through regular dialogue with Government officials.
- 11 Government is prioritising the establishment of Mayoral SAs across England to create visible leadership and greater accountability. Areas with Mayors will have access to the most extensive and flexible devolution. Mayoral

Authorities will also be invited to participate in the Councils and Regions and Nations and the Mayoral Council, chaired by the Prime Minister and Deputy Prime Minister respectively as well as the Mayoral Data Council.

- 12 On 10 January 2025, Cheshire and Warrington Leaders expressed their commitment to work in partnership with the Government to progress a devolution agreement and establish a Mayoral Strategic Authority by May 2026. If agreed, this would unlock significant devolution powers and funding during 2026 - with the ability to move towards an Integrated Settlement (via an Established Mayoral SA) after 18 months (potentially from early 2028). These powers are summarised in Appendix A.
- 13 Subject to agreement of the Devolution Work Programme, work will be undertaken to fully explore how each of the proposed responsibilities and funding would be delivered by a future Cheshire and Warrington Mayoral Strategic Authority. This will also support the development of any final Devolution Agreement to be agreed between the Councils of Cheshire and Warrington and Government, which will be subject to full council approvals by each of the three Councils
- 14 At this stage, an initial review of these responsibilities has been undertaken. These are detailed in Annex A of this report.

Transport and Local Infrastructure

- 15 The Mayoral Strategic Authority would become the Local Transport Authority, with transport functions including the ability to introduce a local bus franchise or municipal bus company. A single transport settlement would enable greater flexibility to plan and focus resources on local priorities. This would all come under one area-wide transport plan.
- 16 This would enable a strategic approach to tackle some of the major transport issues in Cheshire and Warrington, particularly given its large, dispersed rural and urban geography, with multiple major employment sites and service centres. Additional and flexible investment could support improvements to access reliable, high quality and affordable public transport and encourage a shift from car to bus or train.

Skills and Employment Support

- 17 The Mayoral Strategic Authority would work across the subregion to jointly develop a local skills improvement plan with employers. It would also have responsibility for a local 'Get Britain Working' plan. These would be delivered via devolved funding of all non-apprenticeship adult skills programmes through a single, consolidate pot to allow for greater flexibility across local priorities, as well as devolved supported employment funding.
- 18 Cheshire and Warrington has a highly skilled labour market, but we know there is increasing demand and competition for NVQ Level 3 + skills which is heightened by many workers nearing retirement age. Longer term trends around the ageing population, changing employment roles and young people

leaving, means that 'business as usual' is not an option. Devolved powers and funding for employment and skills would help to unlock a talent and skills pipeline, and allow us to support all our residents, including those from disadvantaged backgrounds and areas who may need additional support to access jobs.

Housing and Strategic Planning

- 19 A Mayoral Strategic Authority would lead the sustainable development growth agenda for the subregion, working to an agreed Local Growth Plan. It would lead on strategic planning, working closely with the three constituent councils in Cheshire and Warrington, to support delivery of the 'right homes in the right places', including affordable (both rent and ownership) and social housing. Delivery would be underpinned with both devolved funding, additional development powers and a defined strategic role to work alongside Homes England.
- 20 The lack of affordable housing in certain areas of the subregion contributes to skills and labour shortages for our economy - and is a particular issue for key workers and young people. Working to align development alongside better connectivity is a real opportunity - as well as a focus on the regeneration of town centres, ensuring sustainable rural towns and villages, repurposing brownfield land sites for housing and employment and other key issues associated with viability, such as flooding and land remediation. We recognise the need for local leadership to shape local solutions - but being able to deliver those solutions with greater scale, local powers and investment flexibility would be advantageous.

Economic Development and Regeneration

- 21 The focus for a Mayoral Strategic Authority would be to lead a strong partnership working regionally and nationally to support productivity and growth for all residents and businesses. Supporting new and existing businesses to invest, thrive and grow. Working alongside key Government Departments to focus on the opportunities within Cheshire and Warrington, including research and development (R&D) via Innovate UK and bespoke support for export as well as inward investment. With a new UK Small Business Strategy expected in 2025, we expect that additional support for small business (via a fully devolved Growth Hub) will be forthcoming.
- 22 Whilst Cheshire and Warrington has a strong and productive economy, it faces challenges around resilience linked to a decline in trade/export, lack of private sector investment in R&D and slow business growth. Being able to shape and target support and investment will enable us to support key sectors such as manufacturing and innovation in the agricultural sector, especially linked to decarbonisation such as anaerobic digestion. It would also provide dedicated support to work alongside business to take up new opportunities in growth markets in the green economy and clean energy as well as the growing human and animal life sciences sector. Finally, local priority sectors and supporting businesses of all sizes could form part of the business support landscape - including the visitor economy, financial sector and investment in

arts and culture to develop the distinct characteristics and cultures of our rural and urban communities and place - enhancing their vibrancy and attracting further investment.

Environment and Climate Change

- 23 The Mayoral Strategic Authority would be a key partner in achieving the Government's clean power mission to transition to a low-cost, clean power energy system by 2030, and in implementing the Warms Home Plan via devolved programmes and funding. Working to deliver decarbonisation, including innovative approaches to heat and power under local arrangements (via Local Power Plan and heat network zones). Working collectively to provide environmental leadership and stewardship - particularly in biodiversity enhancement and nature recovery through the Local Nature Recovery Scheme.
- 24 With around half of the properties in Cheshire and Warrington having an energy rating of D or below and some of our communities in fuel poverty, this will be an important area of focus impacting on our communities quality of life and health. Likewise, both the extent and quality of our natural environment in the subregion underlines the need to maintain a strategic focus across all aspects of the work of a future Strategic Authority. Making sure that environment and climate change underpins all aspects of the Authority's work will be critical.

Health, Wellbeing and Public Service Reform.

- 25 As a Marmot Region, a future Mayoral Strategic Authority would use its strategic role (and notably a statutory duty) to ensure that health is fundamentally seen as a key driver for social and economic progress - and therefore as a cornerstone for the subregion's future development. The Strategic Authority would work alongside the Cheshire and Merseyside Integrated Care Board to prevent ill-health, tackle health inequalities and improve the lives of the poorest the fastest. Doing this by focusing on the prevention agenda, improving living and working conditions (aligned to other thematic areas such as fuel poverty) and promoting healthy behaviours, including active travel.
- 26 Healthy life expectancy varies by some 16 years between the best and worst performing areas in Cheshire and Warrington - and in some areas our residents live 21 years in poor health. With 47 of our neighbourhoods in the 10% most deprived for health deprivation (and with figures worsening in some areas), with an older population higher than the regional and national averages and approximately 30% of people who are economically inactive being due to ill health - prioritising health and wellbeing across the work of the Strategic Authority will be vital to improving income levels and quality of life.

Public Safety

- 27 The Strategic Authority would work closely with the Police and Crime Commissioner (PCC), to co-develop strategies that enhance public safety. It

is expected that the PCC would sit as a non-constituent member of the strategic authority. The Strategic Authority is also expected to have an enhanced role in the work of the Local Resilience Forum - as well as building in resilience across all policy areas.

Thematic leads

- 28 Following discussion with members of the Joint Committee, the following themes and leads are recommended.
- 29 These themes are not precisely the same as those outlined in the White Paper but rather reflect the wider issues and priorities for Cheshire and Warrington and are based on Whitehall Departments. For example, the opportunity of double devolution may be explored and we will want to ensure issues are considered from perspectives of both our rural and urban communities. Alignment between themes and the White Paper are highlighted below.

Table 1:

Themes	White Paper 'competencies'	JC Lead	Councils' lead	Business Advisory Board	Senior officer sponsor
Transport	Transport and local infrastructure	Cllr Mundry (WBC)	<p>Member leads from Cheshire West and Chester Council and Warrington Borough Council will be the relevant Cabinet Member for the portfolio, or an identified alternative if the Joint Committee lead also holds the portfolio.</p> <p>For Cheshire East, the Chair (or Deputy Chair if the Joint Committee Lead is also the Chair) of the following Committees:</p> <p>Highways and Transport Economy and Growth Adults and Health Environment and Communities.</p>	Business lead for 'Infrastructure group'	CEO - Warrington Borough Council
Place	Housing and strategic planning	Cllr Mannion (CEC)			Executive Director of Place - Cheshire East Council
Health, Employment, Skills & Inclusion	Skills and employment support Health and wellbeing	Cllr Shore (CWaC)		Business lead for 'Community and Employment group'	CEO – Cheshire West and Chester Council
Rural, Culture & Communities	Public service reform Public safety	Cllr Flaherty (WBC)		Business lead for 'Net Zero group'	Director of Growth – Warrington Borough Council
Natural Capital, Environment & Net Zero	Environment and climate change	Cllr Gittins (CWaC)		Business lead for 'Sectors and Investment group'	Executive Director of Place and Growth – Cheshire West and Chester Council
Business & Innovation	Economic development and regeneration	Cllr Gorman (CEC)			CEO – Cheshire East Council

Comments from the Business Advisory Board

- 30 The Cheshire and Warrington Business Advisory Board (BAB) supports an approach which ensures that the business community works alongside Members and other stakeholders to shape the best possible impacts and outcomes for the subregion. To maximise the opportunities of devolution to help new and existing businesses to invest, thrive and grow - and in turn offer exceptional and accessible local employment alongside the best learning and skills opportunities for all residents.

Reasons for Recommendations

- 31 To ensure a collective and collaborative approach in exploring the impacts of devolution for Cheshire and Warrington, the report outlines a number of ways in which the Joint Committee can lead a wider discussion on its potential impacts.

Other Consultation and Engagement

- 32 Subject to the recommendations being supported, the various aspects of involvement and collaboration across the thematic areas will be embedded into the emerging Cheshire and Warrington Communications and Engagement Plan.

Implications and Comments

Legal implications

- 33 The report sets out the role of the Joint Committee in starting conversations about and developing the devolution themes and shaping the framework for future Cheshire and Warrington Devolution.
- 34 The report goes on to set out a number of proposed avenues by which Officers and Members will collaborate across the three Councils to develop the themes. Table 1 of the report names Officer and Member roles who will lead both in relation to developing the themes in the wider engagement of Members across the three Councils.
- 35 The Joint Committee does not have formal decision powers and any framework developed as a result of this collaboration and engagement will require the approval of each of the three individual Councils via their individual internal processes.

Finance implications

- 36 There are no direct financial consequences arising from the strategic recommendations in this paper. Building a greater understanding of the scope, costs and funding for a new MSA and the impact across the thematic areas will be part of the planned activity to inform final decisions. The initial costs of developing the plans for devolution in the subregion are set out in the accompanying Devolution Work Programme paper.

Risk Management

- 37 Risks associated with this paper will form part of the overall risk register for the devolution work programme and will be updated and reported by escalation to the Joint Committee and Devolution Steering Group every month.

Equality, Diversity and Inclusion

- 38 There are no immediate ED&I impacts. It should be noted that ED&I would form a key element of any final devolution agreement, subject to councils' decision.

Policy

- 39 Any devolution agreement would support the Cheshire and Warrington vision to be the healthiest, most sustainable, inclusive and growing economy in the UK.

Access to Information	
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Appendices:	Appendix A: English Devolution White Paper: Detailed overview
Background Papers:	NA