

OPEN

CORPORATE POLICY COMMITTEE

6 February 2025



**Supporting Effective Engagement:
Cheshire and Warrington Devolution**

Report of: Philip Cresswell, Executive Director of Place

Report Reference No: CPC/55/24-25

Ward(s) Affected: All

For Decision or Scrutiny: Decision

Purpose of Report

- 1 To ensure that Cheshire East Council can effectively provide appropriate advice and guidance to officers and maximise its' position within the subregion in the development of a potential devolution agreement for Cheshire and Warrington.
- 2 This report covers two key issues:
 - The report proposes that the membership of the Cheshire East Member Reference Group for devolution is expanded to broaden the advice and guidance given to officers.
 - The report also notes the request from the Cheshire and Warrington Joint Committee that the arrangements for the Chair continue for a further year and that Cheshire East maintains its position as Vice Chair for a further year to ensure continuity of capacity whilst the work to develop a potential devolution agreement is developed and a request is therefore made for the terms of reference of the Joint Committee to be amended accordingly.

Executive Summary

- 3 In December 2024, the Government published its Devolution White Paper, and it is expected that the English Devolution Bill will pass through Parliament in 2025/26. The Government is expected to announce details of a Devolution Priority Programme for those areas wishing to proceed as soon as possible, and Council Leaders and Deputy Leaders from Cheshire and Warrington have expressed an interest in being included in the Programme. If confirmed, this will require a broad and significant programme - which we will need to ensure has effective engagement and involvement from Members.
- 4 It is important that all relevant Groups and Committees form part of the advice and guidance officers receive as the work around devolution is developed. It should be noted that, as well as the Member Reference Group, a Member engagement programme has been developed and will be implemented over the coming weeks.
- 5 Given the anticipated pace and complexity of the programme to May 2026 it would be helpful to maintain consistency in a number of areas, including extending the rotation of the current subregional lead local authority and Chair of the Joint Committee (Cheshire West and Chester Council) - with Cheshire East Council as Vice Chair - for a further 12 months to May 2026, before rotating the Chair to Cheshire East Council (and Warrington Borough Council as Vice Chair) and to recommence rotations on a two year basis. The terms of reference of the Joint Committee are attached at Appendix 1 and the proposed amendments are set out in red.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Corporate Policy Committee agrees to recommended to Full Council that:

1. The Council approves the expansion of the membership of Member Reference Group (MRG) to include the Deputy Leader of the Conservative Group. This will increase its membership to seven.
2. To approve the Deputy Leader of the Liberal Democrat Group to attend as a substitute to the MRG, in the event that the Leader of the Group cannot.
3. That the MRG continues to provide guidance and advice towards identifying a devolution proposal for Cheshire and Warrington, enabling officers to further progress opportunities and discussions with government officials.

4. Authority be delegated to the MRG, to make any further amendments to its membership, such amendments to be approved by a majority of the members of the MRG.
5. The Terms of Reference for the Cheshire and Warrington Joint Committee be amended to extend the rotation of the current Chair (Cheshire West and Chester Council) for a further 12 months to May 2026 and amend accordingly the dates for the following rotations by the same period, including the Vice Chair, as set out in the attached Appendix 1.

Background

Member Reference Group

6. On 21st August 2024, the Corporate Policy Committee considered an update report on devolution and noted that the government was seeking to move the devolution principle at a pace. Therefore, to ensure members were able to provide appropriate advice and guidance to officers, to assist their efforts in establishing the basis of a detailed proposal for discussion and debate with government, Committee authorised the formation of a Member Reference Group (MRG)
7. The MRG was formed of six members. The Membership approved was:
 - Leader of the Council
 - Deputy Leader of the Council
 - Leader of the opposition – Conservative Group
 - Leader of Liberal Democrats
 - Vice Chair of Economy and Growth Committee.
 - Chair of Highways and Transport Committee.
8. The MRG has an advisory role, with no decision-making powers. The Group meets monthly, and so far has met on 5 occasions – August 2024, September 2024, November 2024, December 2024, and most recently on 23rd January 2025. Terms of reference were considered and approved by the Group in August 2024.
9. Further to the publication by Government of the English Devolution White Paper in late December 2024, the MRG has recognised the need for continued pace and priority in discussions with Government, and as a consequence consider it would be beneficial to expand the membership to broaden the advice and guidance to officers.
10. Accordingly, officers consider that the expansion of the MRG by one representative to seven members would be appropriate, with a structure as follows:

- Leader of the Council
- Deputy Leader of the Council
- Vice Chair of Economy and Growth Committee.
- Chair of Highways and Transport Committee
- Leader of the opposition – Leader of the Conservative Group
- Deputy Leader of the Conservative Group
- Leader or Deputy Leader of Liberal Democrats

Cheshire and Warrington Joint Committee

- 11 Further to this Council's agreement on 11th December 2024 to enable the Cheshire and Warrington Joint Committee to provide effective strategic leadership in the development of any devolution proposition for Cheshire and Warrington, the details of the Government Devolution White Paper have been published.
- 12 The Devolution Priority Programme was confirmed within the White Paper, with Council Leaders and Deputy Leaders from Cheshire and Warrington expressing an interest in being included in the Programme.
- 13 Given the anticipated pace and complexity of the programme to May 2026 it would be helpful to maintain consistency in a number of areas, including extending the rotation of the current subregional lead local authority and Chair /Vice Chair of the Joint Committee.
- 14 It should be noted that the Chair function also includes that Council supporting the running of subregional arrangements. It is therefore felt that maintaining consistency for a further 12 months whilst work progresses to explore devolution is the preferred approach.
- 15 The proposal therefore is to amend the current terms of reference by extending the rotation of the current Chair (Cheshire West and Chester Council) for a further 12 months to May 2026, together with Cheshire East Council as Vice Chair - for a further 12 months to May 2026, before rotating the Chair to Cheshire East Council (and Warrington Borough Council as Vice Chair) and to recommence rotations on a two year basis.
- 16 The terms of reference of the Joint Committee are attached at Appendix 1 and the proposed amendments are set out in red.

Consultation and Engagement

- 17 Cheshire East Council has reported updates to its Corporate Policy Committee on 13th June 2024 and 21st August 2024, and on 30th August 2024, set up a small cross party Member Reference Group which has subsequently met on five occasions to discuss key issues and progress.

- 18 All Member Briefings relating to sub regional working and the wider Devolution debate have been held on 5th December 2024 and the 7th January 2025.
- 19 Engagement is continuing with the Cheshire and Warrington Leaders Board (including representatives from the voluntary and community sector, health, fire and police) as well as the Cheshire and Warrington Business Advisory Board (representing the private sector and business representative organisations such as the Chambers of Commerce).
- 20 Engagement has also been held with all local MPs.
- 21 A comprehensive communications and engagement plan will be developed to ensure that stakeholders, business and residents are fully engaged in exploring the impacts of devolution.
- 22 A statutory consultation with residents and businesses across Cheshire and Warrington will form part of any decision-making process, separate reports will come forward once available.

Reasons for Recommendations

- 23 The Member Reference Group has recognised the need for continued pace and priority in discussions with Government, and as a consequence consider it would be beneficial to expand the membership to broaden the advice and guidance to officers.
- 24 Maintaining consistency across subregional arrangements for a further year whilst the three Councils of Cheshire East, Cheshire West and Chester and Warrington work together to understand and assess the implications of devolution for Cheshire and Warrington will support effective decision-making by the three Councils, as well as mitigating a number of risks through effective resourcing.

Other Options Considered

- 25 No further options were considered and reasons for recommendations are clarified above.

Implications and Comments

Monitoring Officer/Legal

- 26 The Terms of Reference for the Joint Committee and the relevant delegations within them have previously been formally approved by each respective Council. It is appropriate therefore that the same request is made of each and each approves them. All three Council's will need to approve the amendments requested for them to take effect.

- 27 Any steps to create a strategic/combined authority will be subject to separate legal obligations and such a step would need to be authorised by Full Council approval for each authority in due course, if such proposals are brought forward.

Section 151 Officer/Finance

- 28 There are no financial implications as a consequence of this report, as relating to the Terms of Reference of the Joint Committee. Any financial implications relating to potential devolution will be reported and considered at a later time, to respective councils and the Joint Committee.

Policy

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| An open and enabling organisation <i>Ensure there is transparency in our decision making</i> | A thriving and sustainable place <i>A great place for people to live, work and visit</i> <i>Thriving urban and rural economies</i> |
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Equality, Diversity and Inclusion

- 29 There are no direct equality implications as a result of this report.

Human Resources

- 30 There are no direct HR implications as a result of this report.

Risk Management

- 31 A full risk register will be established if the decision is taken to move towards devolution.

Rural Communities

- 32 There are no direct implications for rural communities.

Children and Young People including Cared for Children, care leavers and Children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND)

- 33 There are no direct implications for children and young people as a result of this report.

Public Health

- 34 There are no direct public health implications.

Climate Change

35 There are no direct climate change implications as a result of this report.

| Access to Information | |
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| Appendices: | Appendix 1 – Report to the Joint Committee |
| Background Papers: | Reports to Corporate Policy Committee; <ul style="list-style-type: none">• 13 February 2024• 3 June 2024• 21 August 2024 Report to Full Council : <ul style="list-style-type: none">• 11 December 2024 |