

Cheshire and Warrington Joint Committee

25 July 2025

Devolution Programme: Update Report

Report of: Cheshire and Warrington Devolution Programme Steering Group

Report Reference No: JC/09/25-26

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

Purpose of Report

- 1 This report is for information for the Joint Committee in its role as the overarching Devolution Programme Board, to update on progress against the agreed Devolution Programme and budget. It also outlines the latest anticipated timeline for local decision making.

Executive Summary

- 2 This report details progress to date against the agreed programme. Whilst key aspects of the programme have been delivered as planned, it should be noted that the overall programme has been impacted by a longer than expected response from Government following the statutory consultation. This has resulted in an increased overall risk rating due to constrained timescales over summer 2025. This has been reflected in the overall programme plan and a revised decision-making timeline. Now that the Ministerial Statement (made on 17th July 2025) has confirmed that Cheshire and Warrington have met the relevant statutory tests and,

subject to the consents of the Councils, are able to establish a Mayoral Combined Authority in early 2026 and defer a Mayoral Election by 12 months to May 2027, we are able to move forwards with a greater degree of clarity to prepare for the Councils decisions in September.

- 3 We continue to prioritise delivery of the devolution communication and engagement programme to ensure our residents, business community, stakeholders and Members have as much opportunity to understand devolution and share their views. This report details engagement to date, outlining in detail community and stakeholder feedback.
- 4 We remain well within the agreed budget for the devolution programme, and we continue to minimise spend in advance of any council decisions.
- 5 The report outlines anticipated next steps to ensure we continue to deliver to programme – including local key milestones and, subject to council decisions, formal Government milestones.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Joint Committee is recommended to:

1. Note the latest overall anticipated timeline, including local decision making, of the Devolution Priority Programme in Cheshire and Warrington.
2. Note progress against programme delivery – including latest budget position and risk register.
3. Consider the Ministerial statement relating to the Devolution Priority Programme that was made on 17th July 2025 (the date of publication of this report).

Report Detail

- 6 Programme workstreams continue to meet as required. Given the longer than expected period in receiving information from Government, some elements of the programme have not progressed as far as anticipated at this stage.
- 7 Nonetheless, we have continued to make good progress as far as possible. For example, we have now started a regular Workforce Engagement Board with key human resources leads and Union representatives. This Board is chaired by Cllr Mundry. A verbal update can be provided of the most recent meeting which took place earlier this month. We have also focused on preparatory work in both the finance and governance workstreams, so that we will be able to move as rapidly as possible once further details are received. We understand that much of the work around governance will be based on a template approach –

aligning with the content of the English Devolution Bill (as outlined in a separate report at this meeting).

- 8 The work around thematic content has now completed the initial focus on gathering evidence, initial prioritisation and developing a clear narrative. This is closely aligned to the development of the Sustainable and Inclusive Economy Strategy, including the significant consultation process. We will be using the outcome of this stakeholder engagement to further shape priorities as we move forward and the functions and timeline associated with the potential creation of the Mayoral Combined Authority in 2026 become clearer. The introduction of the English Devolution Bill to Parliament last week was an important milestone in moving to more detailed discussions.
- 9 The Cheshire and Warrington devolution communications and engagement strategy continues to be developed and delivered at pace. Key to this strategy are the aims of increasing awareness of what devolution would mean for the area, what the benefits are likely to be, and helping people to understand the general process and timescales around decision making.
- 10 A comprehensive engagement approach continues, with more than 500 dedicated in-person conversations with key partners and residents so far, alongside a wider media/public awareness campaign that has supported more than 1 million reads of Cheshire and Warrington devolution news coverage, with almost 900k impressions across the Cheshire and Warrington devolution social media channels. This work sits alongside a comprehensive and dedicated elected member engagement programme across the three councils.
- 11 A detailed report of communications and engagement activity to date (following the government's consultation) and information regarding the next steps for activity planned up to potential formal council decisions in September, is included as Appendix A to this report.

Budget position

- 12 On 30 May 2025, the Joint Committee approved an overall budget of £1.275m to deliver the Devolution implementation plan. This budget was fully funded by MHCLG Capacity Grant of £1m, further grant funding from the Local Government Association (£25k) and a pre-existing approval to utilise £250k from Enterprise Cheshire and Warrington (ECW) Enterprise Zone balances for sub-regional activity. This approved funding package was put in place to ensure there would be no direct call on Council budgets, with approvals and budgets phased to ensure that costs would only be incurred when absolutely necessary.

- 13 As at the end of June 2025 total expenditure of £180k had been incurred against expected spend at this stage of £364k. This underspend of £184k has arisen due to several factors including:
- (a) Delays in the MHCLG timeline with approval to proceed following the statutory consultation still outstanding.
 - (b) The resulting rescheduling of the councils' decision-making timetable and the replacement of a two-stage decision making process ('in principle' and 'final'), with a single decision for each council in mid-September.
 - (c) The parliamentary by-election in early May and the associated restrictions on Council activity during the pre-election period.
- 14 Workstream leads have confirmed that expenditure on implementation activities has been postponed reflecting the unavoidable delays in the implementation timetable. Therefore, all unspent budget in the period January to June 2025 will be carried forward to the next quarter with spending plans realigned accordingly. An in-depth review of the budget and the assumed phasing of costs and funding will be undertaken over the next quarter, with the results reported to the Joint Committee at the end of the second quarter, in October 2025. At this stage, it is expected that all necessary costs incurred throughout the implementation period will be contained within the existing approved budget.

Table 1: Budget v Actual Spend as of 30th June 2025

Workstream	Total Budget £	Budget to 30.6.25	Actual Spend		Total Spend £	Budget C/Fwd £
			1.1.25 to 31.3.25	1.4.25 to 30.6.25		
Comms & Engagement	257,899	118,599	24,326	36,336	60,662	197,237
Finance	102,518	14,800	-	6,300	6,300	96,218
Governance	151,068	45,017	3,000	24,308	27,308	123,760
Growth	258,896	70,974	-	7,693	7,693	251,203
Programme Management	246,183	92,611	34,889	43,176	78,065	168,118
Workforce	90,000	22,500	-	-	-	90,000
Contingency	168,435	-	-	-	-	168,435
TOTAL	1,274,999	364,501	62,215	117,813	180,028	1,094,971

Anticipated next steps in the programme.

- 15 High level information sessions have commenced between all the areas in the Devolution Priority Programme and the lead Whitehall Department (MHCLG). These have been generic in nature to date. We expect more detailed engagement on implementation impacts for devolution in Cheshire and Warrington to commence now that we have received confirmation of the Secretary of State decision on the Statutory Consultation.

- 16 There are 6 areas within the Devolution Priority Programme. These are Cheshire and Warrington, Cumbria, Norfolk and Suffolk, Greater Essex, Sussex and Brighton, and Hampshire and the Solent. Aside from Cheshire and Warrington and Cumbria (who have also been given approval to hold Mayoral Elections in 2027), all the other areas are considering concurrent local government reorganisation. We are engaging with these areas, as well as those areas who have recently been through the process of creating a Combined Authority and hosting mayoral elections, to share learning and best practice. We will also be working closely with the Local Government Association to ensure that we provide the support and space for Members to fully explore the implications of devolution.
- 17 Following the 17th July Ministerial Statement, this will now trigger more detailed discussions on a Cheshire and Warrington Devolution Agreement. This will be based on the English Devolution Bill recently introduced to Parliament and outlined in a separate report to this Committee. We expect the agreement to include detail across:
- (a) Powers and functions for a Cheshire and Warrington Combined Authority
 - (b) Confirmation of the date that key programmes and powers would be transferred.
 - (c) Governance arrangements
 - (d) The funding offer for Cheshire and Warrington
- 18 We anticipate we will now be in a position to report in detail to the Joint Committee at its August 2025 meeting.
- 19 In parallel with the development of a Cheshire and Warrington Devolution Agreement will be the development of the Statutory Instrument – the legislation that will allow for the creation of a Cheshire and Warrington Mayoral Combined Authority. Whilst this will be primarily a technical document, it will set out the initial core governance and set up arrangements of the new Authority. This will establish how the Mayoral Combined Authority will work – including how it will make decisions across the constituent councils, the role of the Mayor, how it will maintain effective engagement with stakeholders and communities, deliver any statutory duties and ensure transparent and accountable delivery of its powers and funding. Subject to Council decisions, we expect to complete the detail of the Statutory Instrument by the early autumn ahead of the legislation then going through Parliament. This Parliamentary process is expected to run through the autumn into early 2026. A Cheshire and

Warrington Mayoral Combined Authority could be created in the first few months of 2026.

- 20 This Statutory Instrument will be focused on the legislation needed to create a Cheshire and Warrington Mayoral Combined Authority. The legislation that will be required to increase the number of devolution powers and devolved programmes to Cheshire and Warrington is contained within the English Devolution Bill (see separate report) – and will ultimately create a Mayoral Strategic Authority for Cheshire and Warrington.

Local Decision Making

- 21 Officers across the councils, working with the devolution programme team, have been preparing for a number of scenarios in terms of timing and local decision making. Given the 17th July Ministerial Statement, the provisional timeline (which includes a requirement to potentially call additional and/or extraordinary council meetings) is now as follows:
- (a) **Cheshire and Warrington Join Committee:** 29th August 2025.
 - (b) **Cheshire West and Chester Council:** Full Council 9th September 2025, Cabinet 10th September 2025.
 - (c) **Warrington Borough Council:** Full Council 15th September 2025, Cabinet 22nd September 2025.
 - (d) **Cheshire East Council:** Full Council 17th September 2025.
- 22 The purpose of these meetings is to provide each Council's formal consent pursuant to s.110 of the Local Democracy, Economic Development and Construction Act 2009. It is proposed that each meeting will receive information on the contents of a Devolution Agreement for Cheshire and Warrington, including devolved powers, functions, timeline and investment package. The detailed recommendations will come to the Joint Committee at its August meeting for consideration and endorsement.
- 23 As Cheshire East Council operates a committee system of governance, its Full Council will be the relevant decision-making body for the purposes of giving its formal consent to the establishment of the Mayoral Combined Authority. As Cheshire West and Chester and Warrington Councils both operate an executive system of governance, each Councils' Cabinet will be the formal decision-making body for the purposes of providing consent.
- 24 Cheshire East's Full Council will therefore receive the report and make a decision as to whether consent is given, whereas Cheshire West and

Chester and Warrington's Full Councils will formally endorse (or otherwise) the proposal and will recommend to each authorities' Cabinet whether or not to give consent to the establishment of the Mayoral Combined Authority. The Cabinets of Cheshire West and Chester and Warrington will thereafter further consider the matter with a view to providing each Council's formal consent.

- 25 Following each Council's decision, if all three Councils approve the creation of a Mayoral Combined Authority, the Secretary of State will be informed of the agreement to progress, and the appropriate Orders will then be made through Parliament to create the new Authority.

Exception Reporting and Risk

- 26 As highlighted above, there have been changes to the initial programme outlined in January and May 2025. This shift in the programme can be managed effectively within the agreed work programme (and aligns with the cost plan outlined in the associated report at this meeting). Officers across the Councils have been preparing for this scenario. However, it should be noted that the timeline will be challenging across August and September 2025.
- 27 At the time of writing, all relevant Cheshire and Warrington specific documents from Government which are dependent on the successful outcome of the statutory consents have not yet been shared. However, MHCLG have undertaken detailed briefings and guidance on the content of the English Devolution Bill which has helped to frame preparatory work.
- 28 The risk register is included at Annex B.

Reasons for Recommendations

- 29 This is an information report to ensure the Joint Committee has the latest information on progress across the Devolution Programme and on the anticipated timeline for the creation of a Cheshire and Warrington Mayoral Combined Authority with devolved powers and investment.

Comments from the Business Advisory Board (BAB)

- 30 The Cheshire and Warrington Business Advisory Board is clear: we cannot afford to stall. While we acknowledge the rationale behind the requested delay to the Mayoral Elections until 2027, many in our business community will be frustrated by loss of early momentum. Devolution is not a political distraction – it is an economic imperative. Maintaining progress throughout the summer is vital, and we urge the constituent councils to demonstrate their collective commitment. Full support for the devolution agenda will send a clear signal to Government, and to our

business base, that we are serious about seizing this once-in-generation opportunity.

Other Consultation and Engagement

- 31 A communications and engagement plan is fully operational – this is seeking to ensure that stakeholders across Cheshire and Warrington are fully informed of the process and how they can get involved.
- 32 As the detail of the elements of the timeline outlined in this report emerge, they will be integrated into our communications, supporting effective engagement in the development of a potential Mayoral Combined Authority.
- 33 We will also be looking in detail at the findings of the statutory consultation once these are released by Government, to review and take account of public feedback during the Government's consultation process.

Implications and Comments

Legal implications

- 34 There are no immediate legal implications in this information report albeit the decision-making process should be noted. As each element of the development process for the creation of a Mayoral Combined Authority (and its associated governance) is developed, all legal implications will be considered and communicated.

Finance implications

- 35 The financial implications associated with supporting the devolution programme are set out within the report.
- 36 As each element of the development process for the creation of a Mayoral Combined Authority (and its associated funding) is developed, all financial implications will be considered and communicated.

Risk Management

- 37 A full risk register is in place and managed via Programme Management, reporting monthly to the Devolution Programme Steering Group. The latest is attached at Annex B.
- 38 The Programme Team will remain in regular contact with Government and ensure that any timeline changes are reflected in on-going programme management.

Equality, Diversity and Inclusion

- 39 There are no immediate ED&I impacts. ED&I will be fully reflected in all outcomes across future Devolution Delivery.

Policy

- 40 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	
Contact Officer:	Gemma Davies, Chair, Cheshire and Warrington Devolution Steering Group/ Director Economy and Housing, Cheshire West and Chester Council Gemma.Davies@cheshirewestandchester.gov.uk
Appendices:	Appendix A: Communications and Engagement Report Appendix B: Risk Register
Background Papers:	Joint Committee Report 31 st January 2025: Devolution Work Programme. Joint Committee Report 30 th May 2025: Devolution Work Programme Highlight Report