



COTSWOLD DISTRICT COUNCIL

Council name	COTSWOLD DISTRICT COUNCIL
Name and date of Committee	CABINET - 7 SEPTEMBER 2020
Report Number	AGENDA ITEM 16
Subject	LOCAL GOVERNMENT REORGANISATION
Wards affected	ALL
Accountable member	Cllr Joe Harris / Leader of the Council Email: joe.harris@cotswold.gov.uk
Accountable officer	Christine Gore – Interim Chief Executive Tel: 01285 623605 Email: christine.gore@cotswold.gov.uk
Summary/Purpose	To consider a proposal to allocate £25,000 towards the development of a proposal promoting a two unitary authority solution for Gloucestershire, in the context of a Government White Paper to be published in the near future
Annexes	
Recommendation/s	<i>To agree the allocation of £25,000 from the Council Priorities Fund for the purpose of addressing local government reorganisation, in order to develop a proposal promoting a two unitary authority solution for Gloucestershire</i>
Corporate priorities	Help residents, businesses and communities to access the support they need to ensure a high level of health and wellbeing
Key Decision	NO
Exempt	NO
Consultees/ Consultation	None

1. BACKGROUND

The Government has announced that it will publish the 'Devolution and Recovery White Paper' possibly as soon as September. It is widely expected that this White Paper will contain proposals for wide-ranging local government reorganisation, with proposals for establishing unitary councils and combined authorities across large parts of England and possibly in all of those areas which remain two-tier, i.e. county and district councils. Whilst many people might assume that the logical conclusion in this scenario for Gloucestershire would be a single unitary council for the whole county, there is a strong justification for exploring and promoting alternative options.

2. MAIN POINTS

- 2.1.** Local government reorganisation has been on central government's agenda several times since 1974, but there has never been a wholesale solution for the entire country. This has resulted in a mixture of unitary and two-tier arrangements, and, most recently, a relatively small number of combined authorities and elected mayors. Those areas which have embraced change have also been those which have benefited most from devolution deals with central government, often attracting substantial funding packages. In the majority of cases reorganisation has taken place on the basis of consensus between the relevant councils, with the occasional imposition of unitary status in response to a failing county council.
- 2.2.** The anticipated White Paper appears to be government's response to the Covid-19 emergency and the very substantial amounts of money provided to support councils which, across the board, have lost income and incurred expenditure. The content is not yet known but there are strong indications that it will include a mandate for local government re-organisation on a scale unprecedented since 1974.
- 2.3.** In the Gloucestershire context, it is anticipated that there will be strong arguments made for the creation of a single unitary council for the county, based on the fact that many, if not all, of the public sector organisations – police, health, local enterprise partnerships etc. - have coterminous boundaries with the County Council. However, from a district council perspective this represents a less than ideal solution, creating the third largest unitary authority in England and making the council and its services remote from large swathes of its population.
- 2.4.** A two unitary authority solution would be far more proportionate and would preserve some of the unique characteristics of Cotswold District, keeping public services closer to our residents and businesses, and ensuring that investment in infrastructure, housing, the economy and climate change is not simply focussed on the central urban core of Cheltenham and Gloucester and the M5 corridor.
- 2.5.** Awaiting the publication of the White Paper risks a solution being imposed upon Gloucestershire which is not the best for our area. The Council's revised budget 2020/21 and draft budget for 2021/22 will be considered at this meeting and include an allocation of funding from the Council Priorities earmarked reserve to undertake work in relation to the possibility of local government reorganisation. It is proposed that £25,000 of this is drawn down now in order to develop an options paper for a two unitary solution.

Cheltenham Borough Council and Stroud District Council are also supportive of this approach and will contribute equally to this work which will be undertaken on behalf of all three Councils, with the option for any of the other Gloucestershire Districts to join in at a later date should they choose to do so.

3. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 3.1. As indicated above, the revised budget for 2020/21 includes a provision of £75,000 from the Council Priorities Fund to undertake work in relation to the possibility of local government reorganisation. The £25,000 requested in this report will be drawn down from that allocation.

4. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

- 4.1. There are no legal implications associated with this proposal.

5. RISK ASSESSMENT

- 5.1. The principal risk is that of doing nothing at this stage, and finding an unpalatable solution is imposed by government.

6. ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS

- 6.1. As previously stated, the alternative option is to do nothing until the White Paper is published, with the associated risk of a solution being imposed by central government, or the County Council making a stronger case than the districts are able to in the time available.

7. BACKGROUND PAPERS

- 7.1. None.