

Full Council

14 December 2023

Governance Arrangements for Dorset Council

For Decision

Portfolio Holder: Cllr S Flower, Leader of the Council

Local Councillor(s): All Councillors

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Report Status: Public

Brief Summary:

On 15 July 2021, Full Council resolved that a review of governance arrangements should be undertaken during the current council term, with a vote taking place before the scheduled elections in 2024. A cross-party Executive Advisory Panel has met on a number of occasions since the motion was passed at Full Council to consider options for future governance arrangements.

The Panel met on 24 November 2023 and, in light of the decision of Full Council on 12 October 2023 to support further work by the Leader of the Council to secure a Devolution Deal for Dorset, propose a recommendation to Full Council that a decision on the future governance arrangements of Dorset Council be deferred until such time as a decision on a devolution deal has been made.

Recommendation:

Full Council agree to pause and defer the review of the Governance Model until such time as a decision is made regarding a Multi-Authority Devolution Deal and an Expression of Interest submitted to the Secretary of State and a response from Government has been received.

Reason for Recommendation:

To ensure that Dorset Council is able to make decisions about its governance in the light of any devolution deal and bring options to a future meeting of Dorset Council for consideration.

1. Background

1.1 On 15 July 2021, Full Council resolved that a review of governance arrangements should be undertaken during the current council term, with a vote taking place before the scheduled local elections in May 2024. A cross-party Governance Executive Advisory Panel (EAP) has met on a number of occasions since the motion was passed at Full Council to consider options for future governance arrangements.

1.2 The Governance EAP noted at its first meeting that it would need to consider all the implications of a change from a Leader and Cabinet model to a committee model in terms of ensuring that the council would not be disadvantaged. At the time the motion was supported at Full Council, the potential impact on pursuing a devolution deal with a committee system was not clear.

2. Information considered by the Governance Executive Advisory Panel

2.1 The EAP was presented with information about the governance arrangements of all unitary authorities in England, and additional information about 6 authorities that had converted from a Leader and Cabinet model to a committee model, and then reverted back to a Leader and Cabinet model. The reasons given for reversion were:

- The new administration's significant transformation and change programme will require more regular, timely and efficient decision-making which may not be well-served by an old-style traditional committee system – London Borough of Barnet
- More agile decision making – Maidstone
- Led by new administration – Norfolk County Council
- To pursue a devolution deal – Nottinghamshire
- As a result of feedback from LGA peer reviews held in 2016 and 2019 - Sherwood & Newark District Council
- No reason given – South Gloucestershire

Note: The controlling groups at these authorities are from various political parties.

2.2 The governance arrangements for the 58 unitary councils in England are as follows:

Mayor and Cabinet (4), Leader and Cabinet (50), and Committee system (4)

3. Devolution Deal for Dorset

3.1 At the meeting of Full Council on 12 October 2023, Council confirmed its approval to add the pursuit of a Devolution Deal for Dorset to all sections of the Council Plan. It was noted that a Devolution Deal for Dorset had the potential to contribute across the range of priorities set out in the Council Plan including:

- Protecting our natural environment, climate, and ecology
- Creating stronger, healthier communities
- Creating sustainable development and housing
- Driving economic prosperity
- Becoming a more responsive, customer focused council

3.2 The Levelling Up White Paper identifies four principles which underpin the new devolution framework and will guide future devolution deals in England. The first of these principles is effective leadership.

3.3 The Government see strong local leadership as essential for delivering better local outcomes and more joined up public services. The white paper therefore expects powers to be devolved to authorities which have the necessary structures and leadership for clear, strong local decision-making.

3.4 The white paper refers to three levels of devolved powers based on a directly elected Mayor - level 3 [which has been ruled out] or the level 2 option relates to a non-Mayoral governance model, which is the preferred governance option supported by all of the councils involved in the Devolution Deal discussions. There is an acknowledgement that a level 3 deal may not be suitable for all areas. Therefore, Government has indicated that non-Mayoral option 2 deals would be considered favourable. The white paper is silent regarding committee system of governance. It is clear therefore that the preference of the government is towards what it sees as stronger models of leadership and accountability and that it will incentivise those models through access to higher levels of devolved powers.

3.5 A report on a devolution deal for Dorset to the 12 October 2023 Full Council meeting recognised that following a General Election a new Government may revisit the policy regarding Devolution and Devolution Deals. However, subsequent to the Full Council meeting, on 26 October 2023 the Levelling Up and Regeneration Bill received Royal Assent. The

Act provides the statutory basis through which the objective of ensuring that every area in England that wants a devolution deal can have one by 2030. It is anticipated that there will be secondary legislation coming forward over the coming months which will progress specific provisions in the Act. With the Act now on the statute book and having provisions that extend to 2030 it places the matter of devolution and devolution deals on a strong statutory footing.

3.6 Any decision that Full Council makes to change governance arrangements would be binding for a period of 12 months. This means that any decision by the current Council to move to a committee decision-making model would inhibit its successor's ability to seek a Devolution Deal from government. In light of the decision of Full Council on 12 October 2023 to support further work by the Leader of the Council to secure a Devolution Deal for Dorset, the EAP propose that a decision on the future governance arrangements of Dorset Council be paused and deferred until such time as a decision is made for submitting an Expression of Interest to the Secretary of State and a response from Government has been received.

3.7 The report to Full Council on 12 October 2023 also set out a number of components that have been contained in devolution deals that have been created thus far, and are seen as the type of benefits that may be secured in a devolution deal for Dorset including:

- A long-term investment fund.
- Devolution of the adult education budget.
- An enhanced role in designing local employment programmes.
- Increased powers over transport and bus franchising.
- A greater role in business support and economic development, taking over the functions of Local Enterprise Partnerships.
- Housing and planning functions, including compulsory purchase powers, the ability to establish development corporations, and the power to create a spatial strategy for the area.
- Energy, environment and climate related areas

4. Financial Implications

4.1 There are no immediate financial implications associated with the recommendation set out in this report to pause the review of governance arrangements. There are though potentially very significant benefits associated with a Devolution Deal from Government. The recommendation reflects the view of the Executive Advisory Panel that current councillors should not make a decision now about governance

which might hamper the ability of their successors to achieve the best possible Devolution Deal for Dorset.

5. Natural Environment, Climate & Ecology Implications

- 5.1 There are no natural environment and ecological implications associated with the recommendation set out in this report to pause the review of governance arrangements.

6. Well-being and Health Implications

- 6.1 There are no well-being and health implications associated with the recommendation set out in this report to pause the review of governance arrangements.

Other Implications

- 7.1 There are no financial implications associated with the recommendation set out in this report to pause the review of governance arrangements.

Risk Assessment

- 8.1 **HAVING CONSIDERED:** the risks associated with this decision; the level of risk has been identified as:
Current Risk: Low
Residual Risk: Low

9. Equalities Impact Assessment

- 9.1 As the report is concerned with pausing the review of governance arrangements, an equalities impact assessment is not considered necessary at this stage.

Appendices

- 10.1 None.

11. Background papers

- 11.1 [Minutes of Full Council 15 July 2021 \(Minute 29\)](#)