# Full Council
# 4 December 2025
# Wessex Devolution – Strategic Update and Renewed Mandate
## For Decision
**Cabinet Member:**
Cllr N Ireland, Leader of the Council, Climate, Performance and Safeguarding

**Local Councillor(s):** All Councillors

**Senior Leadership Team:**
C Howe, Chief Executive

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**Statutory Authority:** N/A

**Report status:** Public (the exemption paragraph is N/A)

## 1. Executive summary

1.1 Following the 2024 General Election, the UK government introduced a renewed and standardised approach to devolution in England, outlined in the English Devolution White Paper (December 2024). This framework prioritises the establishment of Mayoral Strategic Authorities (MSAs), with directly elected mayors, to drive national growth through devolution at scale.

1.2 In response, Dorset Council collaborated with Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole (BCP) Council, Somerset Council, and Wiltshire Council to form the Wessex Partnership and submitted an expression of interest to join the Government's Devolution Priority Programme. However, in February 2025, the Government announced six initial areas for new MSAs, which did not include the Wessex Partnership.

1.3 Despite this, the four councils have continued to work together to advocate for a Wessex devolution agreement. The introduction of the English Devolution and Community Empowerment Bill in July 2025 further clarified the Government's approach, establishing a three-tier model for Strategic Authorities: Foundation, Mayoral, and Established Mayoral.

1.4 In anticipation of the Bill becoming law, Dorset Council is seeking a renewed mandate from Full Council to continue pursuing a mayoral devolution agreement as part of the Wessex Partnership.

1.5 Final decisions regarding the establishment of a new Strategic Authority will depend on further government guidance, the final provisions of the Bill, and will require the formal consent of Dorset Council's Full Council.

**2. Recommendation(s)**

That Council:

i. Note the implications for Dorset Council of not being on the pathway to a mayoral devolution agreement, including reduced access to funding and missed opportunities to drive economic growth. While recognising the potential benefits that could be realised through a devolution agreement and the establishment of a Mayoral Combined Authority, including bringing decision making closer to local residents.

ii. Support the continuation of discussions with government and partner authorities: BCP, Somerset and Wiltshire Council to secure a mayoral devolution agreement for the Wessex area.

iii. Note that any formal proposals, including governance arrangements, will be brought back to Full Council for approval at the appropriate time.

iv. Note the Wessex Partnership will continue to keep Swindon Borough Council and other regional partners updated where relevant.

**3. Reason for the recommendation(s)**

3.1 Devolution offers Dorset Council, in partnership with Wessex authorities, the opportunity to gain greater control over key functions such as transport, housing, skills, economic growth, and climate related priorities, including de-carbonisation. These functions are currently limited under existing governance arrangements. A Mayoral Strategic Authority (MSA) would unlock long-term, multi-year investment funding and provide a direct route into national decision-making. Devolution supports the de-centralisation of decision making from central government, bringing decision making closer to the interests and needs of local residents.

3.2 Recent government policy has increasingly prioritised Mayoral Combined Authorities (MCAs). These authorities benefit from exclusive funding streams such as the Transport for City Regions programme, the Creative Places

Growth Fund, and the Mayoral Renewables Fund. In contrast, unitary authorities rely on smaller, often short term and competitive grants.

3.3 Economic analysis by the Wessex Partnership suggests that if Wessex held MCA status, it could receive an estimated £300 million in additional annual funding, the equivalent to £159 per resident. Over 30 years, devolution could deliver £16 billion in additional Gross Value Added (GVA) to the region.

3.4 Without mayoral devolution, Dorset risks reduced access to funding, fragmented regional coordination, and diminished influence in national policy. Pursuing devolution through an MSA is crucial to help secure Dorset's long-term economic resilience and prosperity.

## 4. The report

### Background

4.1 Devolution has been a consistent theme of both the previous Conservative Government and the current Labour Government. Dorset Council previously explored the potential for a devolution 'deal' with neighbouring councils under the Conservative government, supported by a Full Council mandate agreed under the previous council administration.

4.2 Following the general election in 2024, the UK Government has reaffirmed its commitment to devolving powers to regional and local levels, positioning devolution as a key driver of national growth and community-led decision-making. To note, this report addresses the Government's ambition with respect to regional devolution i.e. the creation of a regional strategic authority, rather than 'double devolution' (the transfer of some assets and services from Dorset Council as the principal council to parish and town councils, where they are willing and able to take them on).

4.3 In July 2024, the Deputy Prime Minister wrote to council leaders, following the King's Speech (which included plans for an English Devolution Bill), inviting councils to 'partner with Government to deliver the most ambitious programme of devolution this country has ever seen'. This stated an intention to devolve new powers over transport, skills, housing, planning and employment support. This reflected the Government's ambition to de-centralise decision making and shift of power away from central government.

4.4 Over the summer of 2024 councils were invited to submit Expressions of Interest (EoIs) in devolution stating their preferred geographies and preferred governance models. Dorset Council explored devolution options via discussions with neighbouring authorities. Devon has already secured a devolution agreement through the Devon and Torbay Combined County

Authority. The West of England Mayoral Combined Authority, covering Bath and North East Somerset, Bristol, and South Gloucestershire, is already established.

4.5 Both of Dorset's neighbouring authorities, Wiltshire and Somerset Councils, were seeking partners for devolution, and discussion took place to submit a joint Expression of Interest (EoI) on this geographical footprint as requested by government in September 2024 as a means for all three local authorities to set out their aspirations.

4.6 Although initial talks with Swindon and BCP Councils were inconclusive, the leaders of Dorset, Somerset, Wiltshire agreed to promote a Wessex devolution footprint. A revised EoI supporting mayoral devolution was submitted in November 2024 and subsequently amended to include BCP in January 2025 following a decision by their Full Council. This EoI aligned with the Government's preference for Mayoral Strategic Authorities (MSAs).

4.7 The English Devolution White Paper published in December 2024 introduced a vision for universal coverage of Strategic Authorities across England. This stated that government will create in statute a new type of devolved authority known as a 'Strategic Authority' with three tiers of Strategic Authority. The government indicated a clear preference for tiers with elected mayors i.e. Mayoral Strategic Authorities (MSAs).

4.8 The White Paper also set out that devolution proposals must meet the following criteria:

- Have a population of at least 1.5 million, though smaller areas may be considered. Proposals must reflect coherent and contiguous economic geographies, avoiding isolated "devolution islands."
- Enable effective delivery of key functions, such as transport and planning, across a workable geography, along with alignment to existing public sector boundaries.
- Strong local identity to ensure public accountability.

4.9 In February 2025, the UK Government launched its Devolution Priority Programme which proposed the creation of Mayoral Strategic Authorities in six new areas: Cumbria, Cheshire & Warrington, Greater Essex, Hampshire & the Solent, Norfolk & Suffolk, and Sussex & Brighton. Wessex was not included in this initial wave.

4.10 The subsequent English Devolution and Community Empowerment Bill, introduced in July 2025, formalised the framework set out in the White Paper in legislation. The Government has indicated that areas adopting the mayoral model will benefit from a “devolution premium,” including enhanced powers, long-term infrastructure funding, and increased private sector investment. These benefits are not available under non-mayoral arrangements.

4.11 The Bill is structured around three core themes:

- **Devolution** – It establishes a new framework for devolved governance, expanding the powers of Mayors and Strategic Authorities. It sets out clear routes to devolution and introduces a statutory Devolution Framework to ensure consistency across England.
- **Local Government** – The Bill proposes reforms to local authority governance, including enhanced accountability and the introduction of neighbourhood governance structures.
- **Communities** – It introduces a new Community Right to Buy, allowing communities the first opportunity to purchase local assets, and includes reforms to commercial leases, such as the removal of upwards-only rent reviews.

4.12 The Bill also sets out the detail of the different types of Strategic Authority that will be made law. There are three tiers of Strategic Authority:

- **Foundation Strategic Authorities (FSA)** - available to those authorities without an elected Mayor. FSAs will have limited devolution and include non-mayoral Combined and Combined County Authorities as well as single councils that have been specially designated as a Strategic Authority. These are intended to serve as ‘stepping stone’ to further devolution and not a permanent state.
- **Mayoral Strategic Authorities (MSAs)** - available to areas with an elected Mayor, MSAs will have greater devolution and include mayoral Combined and Combined County Authorities.
- **Established Mayoral Strategic Authorities (EMSA)** - available to MSAs who can satisfy additional governance requirements. ESMAs will have access to the broadest range of devolved powers and functions, including the ability to request further devolved powers from the government. They will also have access to integrated settlements.

4.13 The Bill includes provision for new Ministerial Powers of Direction to require the creation of Strategic Authorities in a geography decided centrally by Ministers where Ministers consider that local leaders have not been able to make sufficient progress towards devolution, although MHCLG have advised that the strong preference is for devolution geographies to be locally generated.

4.14 The government’s devolution framework in the Bill also details seven areas of competence for Strategic Authorities:

- Transport and local infrastructure
- Skills and employment support
- Housing and strategic planning
- Economic development and regeneration
- Environment and net zero
- Health, wellbeing and public service reform
- Public safety

4.15 The Bill also introduces additional rights for Mayors including:
- New licensing powers
- A requirement for mayors to prepare a proposed designation of a key route network.
- The ability for mayors to be able to intervene in planning decisions if they are deemed of “potential strategic importance”
- Allowing mayors to charge a community infrastructure levy, a charge on new development in the area to fund infrastructure.
- New powers to institute Mayoral Development Orders and a process to establish Mayoral Development Corporations.
- A requirement for Mayoral Strategic Authorities, except the GLA, to produce and publish a local growth plan.

4.16 Areas with a directly elected Mayor (i.e. MSAs) benefit from full devolution powers across the above areas, alongside access to long-term, multi-year funding and a formal role in national decision-making. They gain greater visibility, regional coordination, and lobbying power. In contrast, areas without a Mayor face limited powers, fragmented coordination, and must rely on competitive bidding for funding, with fewer opportunities to influence national policy or deliver integrated public services.

**The Wessex Partnership**

4.17 The partnership is made up of Dorset, BCP, Somerset and Wiltshire Councils. The geography is set out in Figure 1 below.

4.18 The rationale for this proposed geography is twofold. First, it meets the government’s criteria for a Strategic Authority: it has a combined population of 1.9 million people; shares travel to work and housing market areas as well as other economic characteristics; and displays contiguous boundaries. Second, it provides Dorset Council with the strongest and most viable route for securing a comprehensive devolution agreement. Section 6, ‘Alternative options considered’ sets out this rationale in more detail.

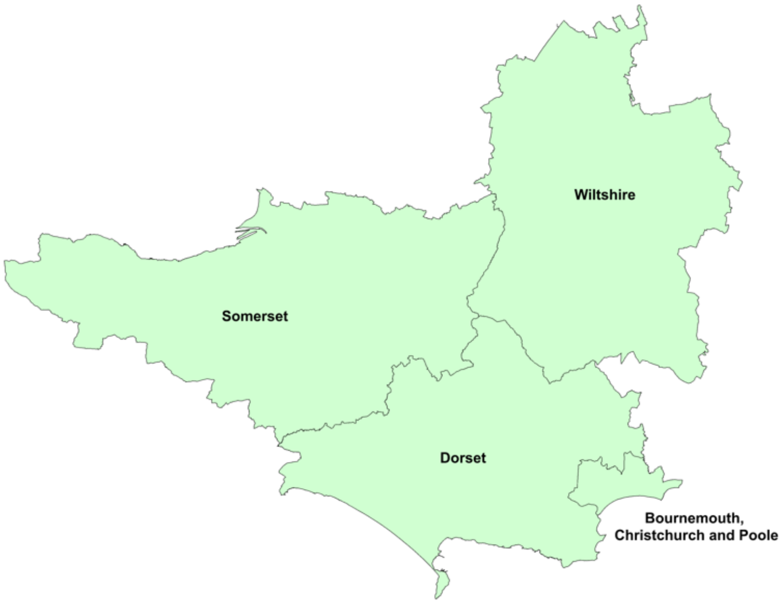


**Figure 1. A map of the proposed Wessex area incorporating Dorset, BCP, Somerset and Wiltshire council boundaries**

4.19 This Wessex proposal is not a merger of councils, nor does it imply further Local Government Reform, but rather it is a strategic collaboration to unlock additional powers and investment. If events require, such as a direction from Government, the Wessex partnership maintains an open door for other Councils in the region, so that no devolution islands are created and to ease delivery of functions and alignment of public sector boundaries.

4.20 Although Wessex was not included in the Government's initial Devolution Priority Programme, the partnership has continued to strengthen its case. This includes a ministerial visit by Baroness Taylor in June 2025, senior-level meetings with civil servants, and ongoing dialogue with Ministers.

4.21 The Wessex councils have also committed to collaborative proposals delivering tangible regional benefits and have begun exploring alignment of public sector boundaries in order to reflect the direction set by the English Devolution and Community Empowerment Bill.

4.22 The rationale for this continuing work is based on a shared understanding of the benefits a devolution agreement would bring to the Wessex region. The government has made it clear that access to substantial funding and powers increasingly depends on securing a devolution agreement. Devolution is a necessary step to unlock infrastructure and skills investment critical to the long-term growth of the region.

4.23 Consequently, without devolution, Dorset Council as part of Wessex risks:

- Losing access to integrated settlements, limiting the ability to plan and invest strategically over the long term;
- Restricted access to targeted funding, including in areas such as skills and training, which are now being prioritised in areas with elected mayors;
- Reduced competitiveness for innovation pilots and national programmes, which are often trialled in areas with established devolved governance.

4.24 While the government has yet to confirm timelines or the scope of a possible next round of devolution decisions, the partnership remains focused on deepening engagement with central government and refining its proposals to ensure it remains a credible candidate for devolution.

**Funding**

4.25 Since 2024 there have been a number of examples of how the ‘mayoral premium’ in practice and the resulting disparity of funding between those areas with and without mayoral devolution agreement. Examples of this disparity include:

- **Transport capital funding**. MCAs benefit from the ‘Transport for City Regions’ programme, which provides multi-year, consolidated funding to transform infrastructure and decarbonise transport. The equivalent scheme for unitary authorities is the ‘Local Transport Grant’ which is comparatively limited.
- **Creative and Science & Technology Sectors:** All local authorities can compete for funding from programmes worth £380m (creative industries) and £22.5bn annually until 2029 (science and tech). However, MCAs are guaranteed a portion of this funding (£150m has been set aside for six MCAs as a ‘Creative Places Growth Fund’) in addition to any competitive awards.
- **Youth Guarantee and the Mayoral Renewables Fund** are only available to MCAs. All MCAs are awarded a guaranteed 30-year stream of investment funding upon signing their devolution agreement. There is no equivalent scheme for unitary authorities.
- **UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF)**. All lead authorities experienced cuts to UKSPF allocations for 2025/26 with the Fund expected to end in April 2026. However, government introduced an adjustment that gave MCAs a 22% top-up on what they would have otherwise received.

4.26 Wessex Partnership analysis suggests that if Wessex held MCA status, it would receive an estimated £300.74m in additional funding each year (equivalent to £159.29 per Wessex resident). This analysis also suggests devolution could deliver an additional £16 billion GVA to Wessex in its first 30 years. Aside from the potential value of this additional funding, there is the added benefit to Dorset Council and its residents in terms of the stability this type of funding would provide, allowing long-term regeneration and infrastructure projects to be planned without the risk of sudden changes to government funding schemes and with the ability to lever in significant amounts of private sector investment. MSAs may also ultimately receive a single 'integrated settlement' and borrowing powers.

**5. Alternative options considered**

5.1 In exploring devolution, Dorset Council considered a range of potential pathways. Other configurations outside of the Wessex Partnership were assessed but did not offer the same coherence, scale, or alignment with government's criteria for Strategic Authorities. The government has been explicit that councils cannot achieve mayoral devolution on a single authority basis and so this is not a viable option for consideration.

5.2 Choosing not to pursue devolution would be challenging as the government's current policy framework strongly favours Mayoral Strategic Authorities as the primary route for accessing devolved powers and long-term investment. Without a mayoral model, Dorset would be excluded from key national programmes and funding streams and would remain reliant on competitive bidding for limited grants. As set out above, it is estimated that if Wessex held MCA status, the region would receive an estimated £300.74m in additional funding each year, funding which otherwise cannot be guaranteed across the geography.

**6 Legal considerations**

6.1 If Wessex secures a devolution agreement, the creation of a MSA would introduce a new strategic tier of government and a framework for regional cooperation. This would not be a merger of the constituent councils.

6.2 Establishing an MSA involves a formal statutory process and parliamentary approval. Each council will retain its existing powers and responsibilities. The MSA would focus on strategic functions such as transport, skills, housing, and economic development. Each Wessex council will be required to vote to agree the statutory instruments to allow the creation of a devolved authority across the Wessex region.

**7 Financial implications**

7.1 The funding and associated implications for remaining without a devolution agreement are set out in paragraphs 4.23 to 4.24 above. There are also likely to be financial considerations for Dorset Council associated with the establishment of functions within an MSA. There may be some changes to how certain programmes currently managed by the Council (e.g. relating to economic development, skills and employment support) are delivered and the implications of a future role for the MSA in aspects of certain functions (including economic development, strategic planning and transportation) will need to be considered by the local authorities, Government and, in due course, the MSA.

**8 Natural environment, climate & ecology implications**

8.1 There are no direct implications arising from the recommendations set out in this report. However, an MSA would take a role supporting the development and implementation of Local Nature Recovery Strategies and elements of climate delivery programmes as well.

**9 Well-being and health implications**

9.1 There are no direct health and wellbeing implications arising from the recommendations set out in this report. However, a MSA has the potential to improve the health and wellbeing of Dorset's residents through the provision of additional funding to tackle inequalities.

**10 Other implications**

10.1 No other implications have been identified

**11 Risk implications**

11.1 HAVING CONSIDERED the risks associated with this decision the level of risk has been identified as:

- Current Risk: N/A
- Residual Risk: N/A

11.2 This report recommends the continuation of a conversations and discussions with government with the ambition of securing agreement to progress with a devolution agreement. It therefore does not have a rating to consider related to decision as the recommendation relates to emerging exploratory steps. However, should a devolution proposal be agreed with government the final proposal will be subject to a thorough risk analysis in line with Dorset Council's Risk Management Framework.

**12 Equalities**

12.1 There are no direct equality implications arising from this report. However, one of the aims of devolution would be to secure funding to improve social mobility and tackle inequalities via skills and other funding streams.

## 13 Appendices

13.1 None

## 14 Background papers

- English Devolution White Paper
- English Devolution and Community Empowerment Bill
- Minutes of Cabinet meeting held on Tuesday 25 July 2023
- Full Council Report – 14 December 2023

## 15 Report sign-off

15.1 This report has been through the internal report clearance process and has been signed off by the Director for Legal and Democratic (Monitoring Officer), the Executive Director for Corporate Development (Section 151 Officer) and the appropriate Portfolio Holder(s)