



Committee and Date

Item

Public



Marches Forward Partnership Memorandum of Understanding

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Cabinet Member (Portfolio Holder):	Lezley Picton		

1. Synopsis

This report seeks approval for the Council to sign a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between Shropshire Council, Herefordshire Council and Monmouthshire and Powys County Council's for collaboration as a Marches Forward Partnership.

2. Executive Summary

- 2.1 The Shropshire Plan's healthy organisation priority recognises the importance of putting the Council's resources in the right place to deliver the organisation's priorities and meet the needs of our residents. This includes maximising external funding opportunities and collaborating with neighbouring authorities to share best practice and support financial resilience of services through joint working initiatives.
- 2.2 Shropshire Council has been working collaboratively with Herefordshire Council and both Monmouthshire and Powys County Councils to develop a common understanding of each other's organisations. The aim has been to establish areas where there is mutual benefit and added value in working together, supporting each other's strategic aims and leveraging combined knowledge, resources and activities.
- 2.3 Geographically, the neighbouring local authorities cover a contiguous area which straddles over 80% of the English and Welsh border. Commuting patterns and access to retail, education, business support and healthcare services all reflect the functional profile of the area.

- 2.4 The local authorities are bound together by common purpose based on a high quality rural environment, but with consequent more expensive access to services, changing service demands from an ageing population and low levels of productivity and employment growth. Given this profile, the local authorities are keen to explore a shared ambition for rural based growth, identifying opportunities for strategic collaboration on agreed projects and initiatives. This approach is aimed at ensuring effective local joint working and provides a basis, using the power of the collective area, to develop investment propositions for Government and partners.
- 2.5 Whilst the local authorities have interacted with one another as neighbouring areas on many levels for a long time, these activities have not previously been fully coordinated. There is now an opportunity and willingness to align respective strategic visions, plans and resources for the maximum benefit on the Marches and cross border area.
- 2.6 This emphasis on greater cross border understanding has intensified for many local authorities over recent years, with a shared focus on partnership working. This is supported by greater flexibility and an emphasis on strategic collaboration from Government, recently illustrated by the Wales and Cornwall Celtic-Heritage Collaboration Agreement.
- 2.7 Covering the gateway between England and Wales, the Marches Forward Partnership could provide opportunity for the border local authorities to coordinate future joint working under a flexible umbrella framework. It is aimed at supporting a shared understanding of 'life on the borders' as a focus for strategic joint working and as a means to unlock additional investment into the area.
- 2.8 The Partnership will focus its collaboration only where it adds the greatest value. All participating councils will maintain independent decision making and local delivery within each local authority area, where this continues to be most appropriate, including involvement in other beneficial partnership arrangements.
- 2.9 This report was considered at Cabinet on 6 September and received cross party support and formal Cabinet agreement to seek Council approval for the recommendations.

3. Recommendations

Council agree to:

- 3.1. The establishment of a Marches Forward Partnership with neighbouring local authorities.
- 3.2. The signing of a Memorandum of Understanding between the local authorities to reflect the spirit of cooperation and joint working between them.
- 3.3. Support the development of the Marches Forward Partnership through representation on a joint local authority Leaders Group.
- 3.4. Delegate to the Chief Executive and Executive Director of Place to proceed with development of a work programme to meet the objectives within the Memorandum of Understanding, in consultation with relevant Portfolio Holders (depending on the service under consideration).

Report

4. Risk Assessment and Opportunities Appraisal

- 4.1. Significant opportunity is provided by the development of the Marches Forward Partnership. The Partnership provides a flexible umbrella framework for joint working which supports local service delivery based around how people and places function rather than being confined within organisational or geographical boundaries. It also enables the Council to harness the unique value of Shropshire's cross border location.
- 4.2. The Partnership is not intended to be a legal entity. There will be no formal governing structure and no elements of the MOU will be legally binding. As a result, there are no currently identified legal risks to the Council since the Partnership will operate on an informal basis, based around joint working on areas of common purpose.
- 4.3. Mapping has been undertaken to understand existing strategic partnership arrangements across the area. As a result, the development of the Partnership and its intended work programme do not pose a risk in terms of duplicating existing arrangements. Instead, the Partnership will only focus on areas of added value, addressing an existing gap in strategic cross border working between England and Wales.
- 4.4. As a flexible arrangement, each local authority within the Partnership has the freedom to either not undertake a particular activity or not participate further in the Partnership at any point in time. The Partnership does not therefore pose a risk in terms of prejudicing or constraining any of the constituent partners or groupings of partners in being involved in alternative partnership arrangements. The MOU does not restrict, in any way, other arrangements that a partner local authority may wish to develop independently.
- 4.5. The risks and opportunities relating to this report are predominately focused on Shropshire Council's role in developing an informal partnership and the associated working arrangements. Whilst this poses resource implications, the proposed management structure for the Partnership is focused on joint resourcing. Each local authority will share skills, data and learning as well as the provision of a portfolio lead for thematic working groups. There are significant opportunities for greater efficiency and effectiveness through joint working initiatives as well as the potential to use the Marches Forward Partnership as a platform to secure wider investment support.

5. Financial Implications

- 5.1. The MOU makes clear that nothing in the agreement involves a commitment of funds from the partner local authorities. Work to date has used existing local authority resources, focused on shared staff time and skills. It has not involved any other financial implications.

- 5.2. The Partnership provides opportunity for continued sharing of staff resources to support development of cross border joint working. Through the development of the Partnership work programme, partners may decide to commission work on particular topics to progress key areas of activity. Future work by the Partnership may therefore involve an ask for partner investment. However, the Partnership framework provides a basis to prioritise, agree and divide such costs across the collective partners, thereby providing benefit and reducing the financial implications to each individual organisation.
- 5.3. Given the informal working relationship under the strategic collaboration, the MOU does make clear that each local authority will have individual responsibility for relevant Cabinet and Council briefings. This will include ensuring all the necessary financial agreements are in place within each partner local authority for any future key areas of work associated with the Partnership. Political leadership and oversight through a Leaders Group will ensure regular updates on progress and future work programmes.
- 5.4. As a strategic collaboration, the Partnership provides opportunity as a means of unlocking new funding into the area. Using the additional value of the unique cross border location and collective approach, the Partnership provides a platform to attract investment for effective service delivery and critical infrastructure across the area.

6. Climate Change Appraisal

- 6.1 The Partnership provides a significant opportunity for the partner local authorities to support one another on climate and net zero plans and local delivery.
- 6.2 Early scoping work for the Partnership identified key areas of service alignment and priority across the neighbouring authorities. As a grouping with a shared, high quality, rural environment, a key thematic focus has already emerged around nature, energy and climate adaptation. This is reflected in the MOU which highlights opportunity to work together on strategic scale projects to address current and future resilience challenges in relation to climate change and nature recovery. The Partnership could also support rural resilience through work around land management and exploring common local authority aspirations around net zero and renewable energy solutions.

7. Background

- 7.1 The Marches Forward Partnership brings together strategic joint working between Shropshire, Herefordshire, Powys and Monmouthshire local authorities. It covers a population of approximately 737,000 residents and covers an area of approximately 1,140,000 hectares.
- 7.2 For many people, the border between England and Wales is somewhat of an artificial boundary and can limit potential for collaboration. A strategic cross border partnership provides opportunity to support government ambitions around Union Connectivity, improving join up between England and Wales and helping to increase investment and accelerate delivery of key infrastructure projects.

- 7.3 Early scoping work by the neighbouring local authorities has highlighted the potential to innovate and look at creative solutions which are not bound by statutory delivery timescales or regulatory frameworks. The Partnership offers a flexible framework to explore how local services and corporate priorities can be delivered differently using shared skill sets and an unusual level of freedom. It provides a unique opportunity to focus on the added value of working as a collective whole whilst not seeking to duplicate or impact on individual partner relationships or partnerships explored in the future by constituent partners.
- 7.4 Whilst initially focused on short term opportunities for more efficient and effective service delivery, the Partnership also provides opportunity for constituent partners to seek and gain greater recognition of the need for joint working across borders with respective Governments. As such, it provides a platform to raise the profile of the area and seek greater investment for delivery.
- 7.5 Functionally the area is already united, with significant flows of people between the Mid Wales-English border in all areas including healthcare, education, skill development, jobs and service provision. This cross border movement is attributable to a number of interrelated factors including geographic convenience, specialities in sector and service provision and infrastructure availability.
- 7.6 Cross border partnership working has been a focal point for some time. Shropshire, Telford and Wrekin and Herefordshire already operate as a collective economic geography under the Marches Local Enterprise Partnership and whilst there is not a similar LEP structure for Wales, cross border joint working is a focus of activity between Shropshire, Herefordshire, Powys and Monmouthshire on a local service delivery basis. The Marches has also been progressing conversations, for some time, on the potential for a cross border Growth Deal with Powys. This is based on recognition of the importance of the cross border relationship between Mid Wales and the Marches.
- 7.7 Between Summer 2022 and January 2023, Local Authority Leaders within the Marches discussed, with the Marches LEP, options for securing more freedoms to make decisions at a local level. Such discussions were also driven by consideration of the types of means available in the future to unlock greater investment into the area as an enabler of growth.
- 7.8 At the same time, local authority Leaders across Shropshire, Herefordshire, Powys and Monmouthshire started to explore areas of collective interest and ambitions to bring together both Welsh and English Governments to support, in principle, joint working across borders. It was agreed that joint scoping should take place across the local authorities to understand shared priorities and opportunities that are worthy of further investigation. This was aimed at identifying those key focal points where strategic thinking and joint work at the collective scale provides the most benefit.
- 7.9 Alongside this early scoping work, ongoing conversations are taking place with both Wrexham Council and Telford and Wrekin Council as the two other local authorities with a shared interest in this functional geography. An open invitation has been established for these partners to join the Partnership, as the development work progresses and more information is known and shared on priority areas and joint working opportunities.

7.10 From the early scoping work, key areas of shared interest have been identified around nature and climate adaptation, energy, transport and connectivity, housing, digital, economic regeneration, skills and innovation. In June 2023, a draft MOU was developed to reflect some of the outputs from the early scoping work. This is summarised within the following six objectives:

- **Objective 1: Data, Evidence and Research:** Leveraging joint intelligence and research expertise to improve the quality of life for our rural, cross border communities through sharing information and carrying out research.
- **Objective 2: Nature, Energy and Climate Adaptation:** Working together to identify and collaborate on strategic scale opportunities based around our high quality natural environment, addressing current and future resilience challenges in relation to climate change and nature recovery.
- **Objective 3: Transport and Digital Transformation:** Working together to improve rural connectivity, to level up access to jobs, education and opportunity and bring mutual benefits for our neighbouring areas.
- **Objective 4: Sustainable Communities:** Working together on the development of sustainable communities, creating a social infrastructure offer which realises the growth and sustainability of the rural economy and supports our residents, employers and users of our geography.
- **Objective 5: Food, Rural Development and Visitor Economy:** Working together to identify opportunities for closer collaboration which encourages the economic growth of our rural economy, developing and promoting our unique offer.
- **Objective 6: Government and Strategic Relations:** Working together on strategic communications to raise the regional, national and international profile of our area.

7.11 These objectives now provide a starting point, to be built on through the Marches Forward Partnership.

8. Additional Information

8.1. In supporting the MOU, Shropshire Council is asked to agree that:

- Appropriate support is prioritised to respond and progress work within the MoU, with each partner Local Authority in the Partnership taking individual responsibility for relevant Cabinet and Council briefings, as needed, to update on progress and ensure widespread support for this work.
- the MoU will run for an 18-month term before review;
- the broader activity of the Partnership may evolve and expand during implementation and will be reflected in subsequent reviews;
- nothing in the MoU will be interpreted as a commitment of funds from each local authority; and
- the MoU does not restrict, in any way, other arrangements that a local authority may wish to develop independently.

9. Conclusions

9.1. The Marches Forward Partnership offers opportunity to establish a collaboration framework for neighbouring local authority areas with shared needs and interests. It provides a flexible basis for joint working without the need for formal governing

structures and without impacting existing strategic partnerships or individual local authority working arrangements.

- 9.2. It offers the ability to consider where strategic joint working across borders between England and Wales provides the most significant value and can bring together shared resources and skill sets to maximise delivery and opportunity for the area.
- 9.3. Across the partner local authorities, the Marches Forward Partnership is seen as an opportunity to:
- Focus on the shared geography and maximising the potential of the area.
 - Provide the right tools for effective service delivery within each local authority.
 - Understand and work together to attract the right investment, for example for critical infrastructure.
 - Understand and innovate to address the needs of rural communities.
 - Harness the value of shared rural assets.
 - Align policy and investment drivers to obtain the best from cross border political ambitions.
 - Understand future trends and service demands across a functional area.
 - Focus on where collaboration adds the greatest value.
 - Share learning and best practice.

List of Background Papers (This MUST be completed for all reports, but does not include items containing exempt or confidential information)

Local Member: *All Members*

Appendices [Please list the titles of Appendices]

Draft MOU Marches Forward Partnership- August 2023