



Committee and Date

Item

Cabinet 5 March 2025

Public



## Marches Forward Proposition

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<b>Cabinet Member (Portfolio Holder):</b>	Lezley Picton, Leader		

### 1. Synopsis

This report seeks approval for the Marches Proposition, Appendix 1, which sets out the vision for the Marches Forward Partnership and establishes light touch governance arrangements, through establishment of a quarterly Partnership Board. This will enable the partnership to focus delivery on agreed priorities around the environment, health, transport and food production.

### 2. Executive Summary

- 2.1 Over the last 12 months, Herefordshire, Monmouthshire, Powys and Shropshire Councils have been working with partners and independent think tanks to develop the Marches Proposition. This sets out evidence led vision and working arrangements for the cross border Marches Forward Partnership.
- 2.2 Priorities and programmes have evolved to absorb input from stakeholders and government officials following the general election and recent budget announcements. The Marches Proposition therefore provides the most up to date response on how the Marches region can drive growth and prosperity.
- 2.3 Whilst the Proposition focuses on adding long term value to Marches communities, there is now a need to target resources on delivery. The following four immediate priorities have therefore been identified:

**A high productivity city, town and rural based economy:**

- **1. Marches Good Food Movement** - a rural innovation region, leading food production for the nation, expanding the food sector and supporting future climate adaptation techniques and land management opportunities.

**A green economy trailblazer region:**

**2. Marches Environmental Innovation and Investment Platform** - a proposed platform to use the unique environmental assets of the region to drive major private sector investment.

**Healthy and connected places:**

**3. Marches Health Prevention Pilot** - delivering early intervention health inequalities initiatives, working with health partners to take a whole system approach to ill health prevention.

- **4. Marches Connects** - to create an equitable and connected cross border transport system which supports cross border movement and reforms services, providing coherent and integrated rural transport.

- 2.4 The establishment of a simple governance structure, based around quarterly Partnership Board meetings, reflects the strategic and voluntary nature of the partnership and will enable progress in a resource light and non-bureaucratic approach.

### 3. Recommendations

Cabinet agree to:

- 3.1 Approve the 'Marches Proposition', in Appendix 1, as the agreed vision and collective ambition for the Marches Forward Partnership.
- 3.2 Take forward the informal governance arrangements, set out within Annex 2 of the Marches Proposition, as a basis for collective delivery and resourcing.

## Report

### 4. Risk Assessment and Opportunities Appraisal

- 4.1 Significant opportunity is provided by the Marches Forward Partnership as a flexible umbrella framework for joint working which supports local service delivery. It is 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 border location.
- 4.2 The Partnership is not intended to be a legal entity. There will be no formal governance but a simple structure that reflects the agile, strategic and voluntary nature of the partnership. The Board will have responsibility for focusing shared resources on agreed priority areas to ensure targeted delivery over the short, medium and longer term. As a result, there are no legal risks, 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. Engagement has also taken place with both Governments to understand emerging policy under the English Devolution White Paper and review of Corporate Joint Committees. As the Marches Proposition seeks to respond to an existing gap in strategic cross border working between England and Wales it does not pose a risk in terms of duplicating existing or emerging arrangements. Instead, the Marches Proposition focuses only on areas of cross border added value and opportunity.
- 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 informal governance arrangements will 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 progressing the associated working arrangements to support delivery. Whilst this poses resource implications, the proposed way of working is aimed at progressing in a resource light and non-bureaucratic approach. In addition, the Marches Proposition provides an evidence led basis to seek a £1.5m capacity funding grant from Central and Welsh Government.

## 5. Financial Implications

- 5.1. Shropshire Council is currently managing an unprecedented financial position as budgeted for within the Medium-Term Financial Strategy and detailed in our monitoring position presented to Cabinet on a monthly basis. This demonstrates that significant management action is required over the remainder of the financial year to ensure the Council's financial survival. While all Cabinet Reports provide the financial implications of decisions being taken, this may change as officers review the overall financial situation and make decisions aligned to financial survivability. Where non-essential spend is identified within the Council, this will be reduced. This may involve:
- scaling down initiatives,
  - changing the scope,
  - delaying implementation, or
  - extending delivery timescales.
- 5.2 The Marches Proposition provides clarity on the scale of activities and priorities to accelerate. It supports the local authority's ability to position the Marches region and seek wider and more innovative opportunities to unlock new funding into the area. It also helps to apply collective resources to deliver greater value for money across the Marches area.
- 5.3 The partner local authorities have already pooled funds to commission feasibility studies and support shared resourcing through the appointment of a Marches Programme Lead. The establishment of a Partnership Board enables the continued prioritisation, agreement and apportionment of shared resources across the partner authorities, thereby reducing financial implications to each individual organisation.

5.4 Each Local Authority will continue to 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 key areas of work associated with the Partnership. Political leadership, through the Partnership Board, will ensure regular oversight and identify additional requirements for scrutiny and assurance in relation to specific deliverables.

## 6. Climate Change Appraisal

- 6.1 The Marches Proposition provides a significant opportunity to showcase the region's shared, high quality, rural environment and for partner local authorities to support one another on climate and net zero plans and local delivery.
- 6.2 An immediate priority to position the Marches as a trailblazing region for green growth has already been identified. This highlights the opportunity to work together on strategic scale projects which address current and future resilience challenges in relation to climate change, water quality and nature recovery. The Partnership also supports rural resilience through work around land management and exploring common local authority aspirations around net zero and renewable energy solutions.

## 7. Background

- 7.1 Following Cabinet approval in September 2023 ([Marches Forward Partnership Memorandum of Understanding](#)) the Marches Forward Partnership officially launched on the 10<sup>th</sup> November 2023 with the signing of a high level Memorandum of Understanding between the four local authorities.
- 7.2 In the early discussions of the Partnership, a review of each local authority plan and programme of strategic projects identified areas of alignment and common purpose. This review resulted in the identification of four themes for more detailed scoping:
- *Nature, Energy and Climate Adaptation*, led by Shropshire Council
  - *Health, Housing and Skills*, led by Powys County Council
  - *Transport and Digital Connectivity*, led by Herefordshire Council
  - *Food, Development and Visitor Economy*, led by Monmouthshire County Council.
- 7.3 Between September- December 2023, the four thematic groups were tasked with exploring how the Partnership can best offer a flexible framework to deliver local services and corporate priorities differently using shared skill sets. With an unusual level of freedom to innovate and look at creative solutions, not bound by statutory delivery timescales or regulatory frameworks, the focus of the thematic groups was on identifying those areas of added value.
- 7.4 In December 2023, this work was packaged into a focused work plan for detailed scoping:

### **Nature, Energy and Climate**

#### *A cross border Environmental Investment Zone*

- To recognise the shared current and future environmental challenges across the Marches area and harness our unique assets and trading potential, using

the existing Enterprise Zone principles around designating areas to unlock investment and resources.

- Potential to accelerate through feasibility of an investment zone as part of a pilot for the upper Severn catchment aligned to Severn Valley Water Management Scheme.

#### *Strategic Area Energy Planning*

- To drive investment and delivery in local carbon projects which help address our collective net zero ambitions.
- To scale up with Government support to provide green energy solutions and energy resilience for partner organisations.

#### *A joint local authority approach to carbon insetting*

- To explore a joint approach to offsetting local authority capital investment programmes through a framework for carbon offsetting, which enables environmental benefits and betterment to be retained locally.

### **Health, Housing and Skills**

#### *Scale up of housing delivery models*

- To expand the existing local authority led housing across the Marches area.

#### *Cross border health care services*

- To improve communications and planning for future services and housing development. Improved links regarding public health.

#### *Sharing of skills strategies and priorities to include alignment of skills work*

- To understand gaps and lead to development of a cross border 'skills plan' and 'skills offer'.

#### *Joint work to share plans and strategies and UKSPF priorities.*

- To support mapping of skills gaps and strength areas.

#### *Joint work to bring together health leads as a joint network.*

- To understand the unique detriments of rural health across the 4 counties.

#### *Shared understanding of rural health inequalities across the Marches corridor.*

- To understand the impact of borders/travel for rural health.

#### *Mapping of Marches healthy and nutritious food initiatives*

- To identify opportunities to address health issues.

#### *Joint work to look at demand and capacity planning*

- To understand the cross border flows with patients in different health systems.

### **Transport and Digital Technology**

#### *EV hub and nodes network*

- To consider key locations and deliverability e.g. electricity supply.

#### *Cross Border Connects- Single ticketing framework*

- To consider digital infrastructure needs to support single ticketing and framework to enable cross border delivery

#### *Collaboration on highway contracts.*

- To explore innovative solutions around delivery vehicles for highway maintenance.

#### *Delivery of the River Severn Partnership Innovation Region*

- To develop use case around digital technology in water management, agri-tech and public sector

#### *Information exchange on Local Transport Plan development and strategic highway schemes*

- To demonstrate how our transport networks work to complement each other and to ensure that our residents and businesses are not disadvantaged as they cross borders.

## **Food, Development and Visitor Economy**

### *Marches Market Town Revitalisation*

- To identify the critical success factors of thriving Marches market towns to address and reduce High Street decline.

### *Marches Good Food Movement/ Sustainable Food Networks*

- To pilot an innovative approach, linking existing Sustainable Food Partnerships and identifying strategic commonalities to inspire the unique food culture of The Marches.

### *Celebrate The Marches as a green, sustainable and accessible tourism destination for all*

- To coordinate tourism activity with a medium-term ambition to consider the development of a Marches Destination Development Partnership.

### *Celebrate the unique culture and heritage of The Marches*

- To facilitate joint working through Cultural Compacts and Creative Clusters with a medium-term ambition to develop an ambitious cultural framework, events and marketing programme.

7.5 A partner event in April 2024, enabled sense checking and wider shaping with key stakeholders, including investors, regulatory bodies and strategic delivery partners. A series of workshop sessions provided opportunity for detailed discussion on the thematic areas of focus and proposed priorities. It aided in providing confirmation on the key areas of opportunity and added value. The partner event was complemented by an all-member event, bringing together all local authority members across the four local authorities to discuss and share thinking on the work to date and providing local political leadership on the emerging areas of focus.

7.6 The outcomes from the partner and member events were further supported by a commission with the New Economics Foundation in summer 2024. This provided an independent and evidence led review of the work to date and an understanding of the unique assets and functional geography of the Marches region.

7.7 In September 2024, the New Economics Foundation provided an early draft of the Marches Proposition. This included a revised focus on three outcomes, rather than the four generic themes. This was aimed at emphasising what the Partnership can uniquely seek to drive as areas of comparative advantage and unique opportunity:

- A high productivity city, town and rural based economy
- A green economy trailblazer region
- Health and connected places.

7.8 A Leader led workshop in October 2024, provided a refocus on four immediate priorities to achieve these three agreed outcomes:

### ***A High Productivity Rural, Town and City Based Economy***

- **Marches Good Food Movement** – development of a regional model and innovative pilot linking together local food partnerships with the Marches reputation as a food and drink destination with good food culture.

### ***A Green Economy Trailblazer Region***

- **Marches Environmental Investment and Innovation Platform (MEIP)** – development of a pioneering place based green finance scheme (both domestically and internationally) utilising our national award winning River Severn Partnership, to leverage public and private capital, respond to key environmental challenges such as

water quality, flood risk and water resource management and unlock the Marches as a leader in green growth.

### ***Healthy and Connected Places***

- **Marches Health Prevention Pilot** - piloting an early intervention and prevention health inequalities programme.
- **Marches Connects** – creation of an equitable and connected cross border transport system which supports movement between the union and reforms services, providing a coherent and integrated rural transport approach.

7.9 Whilst these provide the initial agreed focus, the Marches Proposition does set out the wider areas of opportunity, should wider funding to resource them become available.

These longer term opportunities include:

- *Marches Innovation and Knowledge Network*- development of a Marches hub and spoke model of innovation and technology skill centres, utilising existing FE expertise and sectoral strengths. The Marches Model will reset skills for the future economy, growing the skills base and addressing low wages, by developing the region as a centre of excellence for climate adaptation and fairer pay.
- *Marches Affordable Market Towns* – establishing an evergreen investment housing loan fund, to catalyse and scale up affordable housing opportunities, to ensure delivery of the Government's new housing targets for our region, for key workers in growth sectors using an existing delivery model.
- *Marches Strategic Energy Plan* – working with Great British Energy on the development of a cross-border energy masterplan to drive resilient energy systems.
- *March The Marches*- Utilizing Offa's Dyke as the cultural spine of the region, linking and building on the Marches market towns, historic assets, landscape, rivers and canals. This will open up accessibility to all, creating a connected tourism offer to walk in the history and natural beauty of the Marches region.

7.10 The Marches Proposition has been progressed collaboratively by the partner local authorities, in accordance with the agreed MOU. However, as the partnership progresses towards targeted delivery, a Marches governance and delivery model is required.

7.11 A quarterly Partnership board comprising leaders and chief executives from partner organisations is now proposed. This will oversee the strategic focus of the partnership. A revolving chair will be appointed. The partnership and board will not be able to make any decisions on behalf of, or which bind, any partner organisation. The board will approve the establishment of time-bound programme management groups, brought together as required to drive interventions. The board will determine on a case-by-case basis whether programme management groups operate under agreed terms of reference or require a more formal joint venture arrangement with additional scrutiny and assurance. The partnership will be resourced through in-kind contributions of staff time and will be coordinated by a dedicated programme lead.



7.12 The proposed governance structure is deliberately intended to be simple and proportionate, to reflect the agile, strategic and voluntary nature of the partnership. There is currently no legal mechanism for a cross-border partnership of local authorities with statutory powers. The recently published English Devolution White Paper also only provides devolution and local government arrangements across England and does not cover Wales. The Marches Forward Partnership is therefore intended to enable effective joint working across the England and Wales border as a complimentary approach, reflecting the functional profile of the Marches geography.

## 8. Additional Information

### Delivery and Achievements over the last 12 months

8.1 Whilst the main focus of work to date has been on developing a robust programme, the Partnership has already sought to maximise delivery:

#### *A high productivity city, town and rural based economy*

- Feasibility work to establish a Centre of Excellence for Living with Climate Change (CLiCC) has commenced with the University of Chester. This is exploring the academic offer for green skills development and whilst initially linked to a programme of water management infrastructure (Severn Valley Water Management Scheme) has been aligned to the wider Marches Innovation and Knowledge Network to explore expansion into a wider hub and spoke network of skill centres.
- A Homes England facilitated workshop on housing and market towns regeneration has taken place to help identify the key areas of opportunity across the Marches and feasibility work is underway to identify and explore future use for vacant units in key settlements.
- A Marches Good Food Movement Proposal has been developed in partnership with all food partnerships across the Marches and has been shared with funders (Esmée Fairbairn Foundation and the National Lottery) with a £1.2million ask for a 3 year project. Work has also taken place to align with wider activity across the Marches on farm clusters to explore and identify sustainable farming funding opportunities.

#### *A green economy trailblazer region*

- Feasibility work has been completed for the 'March the Marches' tourism programme with recommendations from this report expected by March 25.
- Joint work has been undertaken with energy providers to agree the scope for a Marches Energy Plan.
- An initial design framework is now in place for the Marches Environmental Investment Platform (MEIP). Work has been undertaken to test this design with key local and national stakeholders including private sector investors and local landowners and ENGOS. Alignment has been made to the funding and finance work of the Severn Valley Water Management Scheme as a potential pilot for the MEIP. A proposal is also in development to take the MEIP forward as a second phase to the River Severn Partnership Advanced Wireless Innovation Region, scaling up work with landowners on piloting digital technology and water management and exploring opportunities through the MEIP to unlock longer term investment. This innovative work has recently been shared with both the National Infrastructure Commission and the National Infrastructure Commission Wales.

#### *Healthy and connected places*



- A health sub group has been established to bring together cross border health partners with joint mapping of strategies and evidence bases underway.
- Joint work between health partners and the Precision Health Initiative (University of Cambridge) has commenced to understand opportunity for a pilot bringing together primary and secondary health prevention work. This could include an initial 3 year R&D phase fully funded by the Precision Health Initiative to establish case studies in support of a longer term Priority Health Outcomes Fund.
- Feasibility work is underway to draw together work on Local Transport Plans and establish a cross border programme.

- 8.2 In addition, a dedicated Programme Lead for the Marches Forward Partnership has been appointed on a 12month contract to aid focus on immediate delivery.
- 8.3 Proactive engagement with the National Wealth Fund (NWF) has led to the signing of an agreement between Shropshire Council and the NWF on behalf of the Marches Forward Partnership. This will provide the Partnership with dedicated advisory support on the Marches project pipeline, with a focus on the private sector market and helping to unlock investment opportunities.

### **Engagement and Governance**

- 8.4 Ongoing engagement with both Welsh and UK Government has taken place throughout the formative stage of the Partnership. A detailed joint discussion with the Deputy Director for MHCLG and Deputy Director, Wales for MHCLG in August offered clear support for the Partnership and ambition to work over larger spatial areas. The Partnership was seen as an important means by which to consider future service delivery and design in support of growth. However, clarity was sought on the governance model for the Partnership and how this would work in practice in accordance with the differing legislative arrangements between England and Wales as devolved nations.
- 8.5 Legislation does exist to support partnership working across administrative boundaries. The 2011 Localism Act for instance provided general powers of competence to local authorities, whilst the Local Government Act 2016 enabled devolution of powers to combined authorities. Existing legislation has enabled partners across the Marches to benefit from partnerships such as the Western Gateway, Cardiff Capital Region and Mid Wales CJC. However, existing legislation does not currently enable devolved powers (comparable to a Combined Authority or Corporate Joint Committee), to be secured by a cross border partnership. All examples of cross border working to date have been non-statutory and based on voluntary arrangements.
- 8.6 The development of the Marches Proposition has therefore included a separate focused commission with independent consultants, Metro Dynamics. This focused on assessing the options for an appropriate democratic model which aligns with partner preferences for an agile, responsive arrangement with longevity and low resourcing requirements. Given the lack of a legal mechanism for a cross border deal with statutory powers, an informal, voluntary partnership or Joint Committee were the only two options considered.
- 8.7 Taking on board the legal context, preferences of partners and role and function of the partnership, a voluntary arrangement which builds on the existing MoU was recommended as providing the most appropriate way forward. This governance

structure has been included within the Marches Proposition, as Annex 2, to provide clarity on both the vision and working structure.

- 8.8 Whilst the overarching Partnership will progress, in the first instance, on an informal basis, some of the specific programmes of work within the Partnership will require their own more formal arrangements to support implementation. For example, where the partnership progresses interventions which require greater levels of assurance, or are more novel, complex or significant in scope and duration, formal joint ventures for specific priorities (e.g. environmental investment, health pilots) could be established.

## 9. Conclusions

- 9.1 The Marches Proposition summarises the vision and opportunity provided by the Marches Forward Partnership. It has been reviewed and shaped by independent think tanks to provide the technical assurance on how the cross border collaboration between England and Wales provides the greatest value. The proposition takes on board the latest policy steer from government post election, post budget announcement and in the context of wider proposals under the English Devolution White Paper.
- 9.2 Research has not identified any legislation which would currently enable devolved powers (comparable to a Combined Authority or Corporate Joint Committee), to be secured by a cross border partnership. The establishment of an informal quarterly Partnership Board enables the Marches Forward Partnership to work effectively across the England/Wales border whilst being flexible, non-bureaucratic, resource light, and easy to establish. It will support the continuation of joint working, targeting shared resources at priority areas of joint delivery, with partners being able to progress many of the priority activities under general powers of competence.

**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** Marches Proposition (including Annex 1 and Annex 2)