

**MINUTES
OF THE MEETING OF THE
COUNCIL**

THURSDAY, 20 MARCH 2025

Held at 7.00 pm in the Council Chamber, Rushcliffe Arena, Rugby
Road, West Bridgford
and live streamed on Rushcliffe Borough Council's YouTube channel

PRESENT:

Councillors A Brown (Chair), J Cottey (Vice-Chair), M Barney, J Billin, T Birch, R Bird, A Brennan, R Butler, S Calvert, J Chaplain, K Chewings, N Clarke, T Combellack, S Dellar, A Edyvean, S Ellis, G Fletcher, M Gaunt, E Georgiou, P Gowland, C Grocock, R Inglis, R Mallender, S Mallender, D Mason, P Matthews, H Om, H Parekh, A Phillips, L Plant, D Polenta, N Regan, D Simms, D Soloman, C Thomas, R Upton, D Viridi, J Walker, R Walker, L Way, T Wells, G Wheeler, J Wheeler and G Williams

OFFICERS IN ATTENDANCE:

L Ashmore	Director of Development and Economic Growth
D Banks	Director of Neighbourhoods
A Hill	Chief Executive
S Pregon	Monitoring Officer
E Richardson	Democratic Services Officer
H Tambini	Democratic Services Manager

63 Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest made.

64 Local Government Reorganisation in Nottingham and Nottinghamshire

The Leader and Cabinet Portfolio Holder for Strategic and Borough-wide Leadership, Councillor Clarke MBE presented the report of the Chief Executive, which provided an overview of the Government's requirement for plans for Local Government Reorganisation to be developed in Nottingham and Nottinghamshire.

In formally moving the recommendations detailed in the report, the Leader referred to this significant issue, stressed that the recommendations did not constitute any final decision, and confirmed that the nine councils would produce a final submission by 28 November 2025. The Leader stated that maintaining the highest quality services for residents and businesses was his priority, whilst remaining debt free and having the lowest Council Tax in the County, and he questioned if a new unitary authority would be able to maintain that. The Leader felt that proper public consultation was required and that the Government's guidance on population size referred to in the Schedule in the report was flawed, as the figures were out of date. The Leader stated that the Borough maintained more accurate house building and occupation figures, which would bring populations proposed by Rushcliffe for a three unitary model

close to the guidance figures. As this model had gained little support, an additional recommendation had been added, showing that the Council was open to investigating various options, without diminishing Rushcliffe's high quality services. The Leader stated that public engagement was required. Any expansion would cost over £8m, and lead to Rushcliffe's residents receiving inadequate services, with the potential loss of facilities and increased charges. The Leader concluded by reiterating that residents came first, with the need to maintain high quality services and that a final decision was not being made tonight.

Councillor Brennan seconded the recommendation and reserved the right to speak.

Councillor J Walker advised that the Labour Group could not support the additional recommendation, questioned the accuracy of the £8m figure and that this would not address the issues that had led to the need for reform. She referred to the advantages of being close to the City, with its world class infrastructure and facilities, and that no tax from Rushcliffe was paid towards them. She questioned how front line services would be managed and that the recommendation was playing politics with issues which required proper debate. Councillor Walker felt that there were four key issues; impact on services, what would happen if nothing was done, impact of the Spending Review, and sense of fairness. She asked for better leadership and representation for all and stated that whilst the Group supported some elements of the recommendation, the party political elements, which would completely tie the Council's hands could not be ignored.

Councillor Thomas proposed the following amendment, which was seconded by Councillor Way, who reserved the right to speak.

It is RECOMMENDED that Council:

- a) endorses the submission of a Local Government Reorganisation Interim Plan to Government by 21 March 2025 (Appendix B);
- b) endorses continuing to work with the other local authorities across Nottinghamshire and Nottingham with a view to developing a final unitary proposal to be considered by Full Council prior to submission to Government by 28 November 2025;
- c) acknowledges that there is significant opposition to any of the Borough of Rushcliffe joining a new Council which encompasses the current Nottingham City boundary and therefore requests that the Government considers an alternative proposal for an option comprising three unitary authorities (Appendix C);
- d) requests Government to also consider an alternative proposal for an option of creating a single unitary authority covering both Nottingham City and Nottinghamshire (Appendix D);
- e) requests Government to further consider an alternative proposals for two unitary councils:

- i) South Nottinghamshire comprising Nottingham City, Broxtowe, Gedling and Rushcliffe;
 - ii) North Nottinghamshire comprising Bassetlaw, Ashfield, Mansfield, Newark and Sherwood (Appendix E);
- f) writes to the Government to express concern that it is undertaking the cost and disruption of abolishing district councils at this time and to request a public consultation exercise or referendum for the people of Nottinghamshire to have their say on any final proposal.

Councillor Thomas stated that Option 2 in the Interim Plan failed to meet the Government's criteria regarding minimum population size, and the additional option to create a three unitary model would also not be accepted, leaving just two options, one of which involved Rushcliffe joining the City. Councillor Thomas referred to possible boundary changes; however, she felt that this could lead to more areas being drawn into the City and the amendment provided better options for residents, whilst providing more support for the City. The Government model was that more affluent areas would support the City and she felt that going forward it would be better for it to be part of a larger area. Councillor Thomas referred to recommendation d) which would prevent fragmentation of the provision of upper tier services, whilst providing the most support to the City. It had the potential to deliver the greatest economies of scales; however, its size would create challenges and require careful management. She felt that recommendation e) made geographical sense, and having three districts joining the City would provide more support than two.

The Leader stated that he did not accept the amendment.

In supporting the amendment, Councillor Billin acknowledged that the Council's positive financial position made it an attractive proposition for merger and if Rushcliffe had to join the City, it would be better to include more authorities to share the load. Councillor Billin felt that all residents in Nottinghamshire should be helped, questioned the fairness of Rushcliffe not doing so and stated that Rushcliffe's excellent officers should be involved in shaping any new authority. He stressed the importance of being involved in discussions and whilst noting the significant opposition to the Borough joining a new council encompassing current City boundaries, the two extra options would only be submitted for consideration.

In acknowledging the amendment, Councillor Gaunt stated that he could not support it or the original motion, as they were both too rigid, leaving the Council weak and unable to fully negotiate going forward. Councillor Gaunt also felt that it was wrong to say that in the future there would be no possibility of offering support to residents in the City.

On acknowledging the amendment, Councillor Edyvean advised that he could not support joining the City as that would not help rural areas with no connection to it.

Councillor Gowland clarified that the vast majority of services were provided by the County Council, with the majority of funds currently supporting services in

the north of the County, which was necessary. She supported recommendation d) in the amendment and questioned why it had been excluded, as it was one of the original options put forward by Price Waterhouse Cooper (PWC).

Councillor Chewings advised that he could not support the amendment in its entirety, noted the significant opposition to Rushcliffe joining the City and agreed with the amended wording in recommendation c). Councillor Chewings could not support recommendation e)(i) referred to the funding challenges the City faced due to the archaic funding system and years of Government austerity and that LGR was driven by cuts rather than making efficiencies.

Councillor J Wheeler agreed that whilst it was important to debate all options a strong message had to be sent that Rushcliffe did not want to join the City and the amendment did not make this clear.

Councillor Polenta reiterated thanks to the Leake Independent Group but advised that she could not support the amendment. She agreed with the removal of the word 'referendum' as she felt that there were better ways to engage with residents through meaningful debate. She stated that it was particularly important to engage with the young to provide fresh ideas and to ensure that their needs were met going forward. Councillor Polenta stated that the motion assumed without substantial evidence that residents were against joining the City, especially when many were unaware of what LGR would mean, and it was important to challenge social division and not reinforce it.

Councillor R Mallender stated that the Government should not go ahead with LGR and agreed that the City was under bounded and had been poorly governed. He referred to the Conservative Group petition, and expressed concern that many residents thought it was from the Council. LGR would result in the loss of a layer of local democracy; however, with the introduction of Mayoral Combined Authorities there would still be two tiers, just more remote from residents, and he felt that the current system should be retained and improved.

Councillor Simms agreed with Councillor Mallender and stated that he had been elected to represent his residents in Rushcliffe and reiterated that this was a well-managed Council.

In seconding the amendment Councillor Way reiterated that it was providing alternatives for the Government to provide feedback on and believed that it would not agree to leaving the City on its own. She referred to the County Council's proposal to retain both the County and City as they were, which could lead to areas close to the City being forced to join it. Councillor Way believed that the amendment in d) would be a reasonable alternative, allowing residents in the City to benefit from better quality services and officers' expertise.

Councillor Thomas thanked everyone for the constructive debate, emphasised that d) and e) would not tie Rushcliffe into the City and felt that it was important to have more options to improve the debate, with e) providing a bigger base to become an entity of its own, as of the two options left for the Government to consider, one would involve joining the City. Councillor Thomas agreed with Councillor Mallender and was concerned that the recommendation had no

push back against LGR, and she felt that the Government had made it clear that Councils should be more than 500,000 people.

The Leader thanked Councillor Thomas and agreed with Councillor Mallender. He disagreed that the Government had made it clear regarding numbers, there was a guidance of 500,000 or more; however, if evidence could be provided for having less, it would be considered. The Leader referred to d) and e) in the amendment and confirmed that they had been in the original PWC report; however, they had not been supported and he concluded by agreeing that negotiations would continue over the summer.

On being put to the vote the amendment was defeated.

The debate continued on the substantive motion.

In acknowledging that all Councillors had residents best interest at heart, Councillor Grocock felt that recommendation b) was both premature and unnecessary and was concerned about the constant unfavourable comparisons made between the City and Rushcliffe. He stated that under LGR, current councils would be abolished, new ones formed, and therefore Rushcliffe would not be joined to the current City Council and felt that in effect b) derided Nottingham itself. Councillor Grocock referred to the importance of Rushcliffe's role in promoting the Greater Nottingham and East Midlands economy and to coordinated development planning and was concerned that the Council had ruled out any potential integration with this area, which would benefit many residents in Rushcliffe. Councillor Grocock stated that the LGR proposals required more careful consideration and that political opportunism was not limited to any one party. He could not support recommendation b), as it would be in direct contradiction to preferences expressed by other councils, and a better option would be to redraw the political boundaries to create an area based on the functional economic geography of the Nottingham Urban Area.

Councillor Calvert agreed that the City boundaries were too tightly bounded to be a financially stable new unitary authority, and referred to concerns raised back in 1998, that it would be unable to maintain effective services, due to high levels of need and low income, which had proved the case, since 2010, due to successive funding cuts. Councillor Calvert acknowledged that coming up with options had been challenging, trying to put aside local and personal ambitions to propose the best options for the County. He felt that the Conservative Group's petition was very insulting to residents in the City, with residents in Rushcliffe signing it in good faith, having been persuaded by threats of potential closures and increased Council Tax. He stated that recommendation b) replicated the negativity contained in the petition and that it was inappropriate to propose an alternative option in isolation, as councils should be working collaboratively.

Councillor R Walker felt conflicted in having a moral obligation to try and find a solution, coupled with futility, given the difficulty the nine councils would have in trying to reach an agreement. He felt that the strength of feelings raised was not about comparing Rushcliffe with the City, it was because of the poor performance of the City Council compared to other core cities in the country,

coupled with the continuing disastrous financial and political leadership, and he could not support any option to join the City.

Councillor Polenta felt that this process should be focusing on how best to deliver sustainable services through constructive dialogue rather using political spin to mislead residents about the City Council. She referred to the successive years of funding cuts and reminded Council that 80% of homes in the City were in Council Tax Bands A and B, and despite this, the City provided cultural and economic benefits across the region. Councillor Polenta stated that many councils had declared bankruptcy, which was not just due to local mismanagement, but because of national priorities and policies. She stated that the system should work for everyone by reducing inequality and increasing democracy, with LGR not just being about managerial efficiencies. She hoped going forward that Local Government could become a transformative force for everyone.

Councillor Gowland stated that LGR should improve services, as current arrangements were not working, were inefficient and confusing for residents. She agreed that the City Council had made mistakes, which had been exacerbated by lack of resources and high service demands. Councillor Gowland stated that this issue mattered as many residents in Rushcliffe felt part of the City and wanted to improve it and use it.

Councillor Edyvean clarified that according to the Government, all proposals must be within pre-existing boundaries and the report covered the Government's requirements.

Councillor Matthews also felt conflicted and agreed that it was good to feel, connected to the City; however, he stated that Rushcliffe's residents were helping to support it by paying for services. Councillors were elected to listen to and represent local residents, and Councillor Matthews stated that he had yet to hear any resident support Rushcliffe joining the City. This Interim Plan did not commit the Council to any decision, and it was hoped that more constructive debate would take place.

Councillor Soloman felt sorry for residents in the City who she believed had been consistently failed due to the City Council's incompetence and poor decision making, which contrasted to Rushcliffe's well managed Council, delivering well run services, whilst remaining debt free, with the lowest Council Tax in the County. Councillor Soloman confirmed that she had come to the meeting with an open mind but had failed to be persuaded of any benefit to joining the City and reminded Councillors that they had been elected to serve Rushcliffe's residents and it was their duty to ensure the best outcome for them. The petition had provided a voice to residents, who overwhelmingly did not want to join the City and she supported the recommendations.

Councillor Phillips agreed that Rushcliffe was an excellent authority and that everything must be done to resist any proposal to merge with a consistently failing City Council.

Councillor J Wheeler agreed that residents were concerned about joining the City, referred to the many residents from the City that enjoyed using

Rushcliffe's great facilities and stated that he had heard nothing this evening to change his views. He clarified that any funding given to the north of the County was related to thresholds and was not a direct subsidy. Councillor Wheeler felt that the City's problems were related to poor decision making and leadership rather than problems with boundary size and housing numbers and that Rushcliffe residents would be worse off if the City boundary was increased.

Councillor Gaunt clarified that the Interim Plan did mention that more complex boundary changes would be considered if there was strong justification. He stated that the core cities previously referred to all had bigger boundaries than Nottingham incorporating wealthy suburbs, and yet recommendation b) if agreed would mean that the City would remain the same. In acknowledging mistakes made by the City Council, Councillor Gaunt referred to the £100m funding lost annually for a decade and stated that Nottingham was one of the most deprived cities in the country, and he felt that given the funding already going to the north of the County, it would be appropriate to help the City too. He stated that it was inappropriate to take away any option to join the City going forward.

Councillor J Walker proposed that the motion be put to the vote. The Mayor advised that there were four more speakers and then a vote would be taken.

Councillor R Mallender called for funding changes, to ensure the City could help its deprived areas, just as the County Council did. LGR would result in Rushcliffe disappearing, and becoming part of a larger area, reducing engagement and democracy at lower levels, which he was concerned about. Councillor Mallender stated that some residents in West Bridgford wanted to join the City and their views should be listened to and he hoped that going forward Councillors from Rushcliffe would stand for re-election in any new authority to fight for Rushcliffe's residents.

Councillor S Mallender stated that officers at the City Council worked very hard in extremely difficult circumstances and agreed with Councillor Gaunt's comments that any new authority would be completely different and she was concerned that the recommendations in the report were unlikely to be accepted. Councillor Mallender reminded Councillors that the City Council did win awards and referred to the many young people from West Bridgford who were unable to live there as it was too expensive and felt that Rushcliffe should be helping those who had no choice.

Councillor Birch advised that he was against joining the City as his ward was rural, where residents' needs were different and his main priority was to represent them. He felt that opposition group members had made some very reasonable points, which he hoped would be talked about going forward as LGR would take place. He was concerned about organisational structures changing together with governance issues and noted that Conservative led Councils had gone bankrupt and changes needed to be made. Councillor Birch was concerned that this additional option had gained no support and left the Council in a weak position. He stated that whilst Rushcliffe's element of the Council Tax was low, as a County it was one of the highest in the country, and in effect less affluent areas were being subsidised.

Councillor Chewings stated that whilst he recognised the benefits of moving to a unitary system to eliminate inefficiencies and improve access to services, he could not support the proposed minimum size of 500,000, as they would be too large to manage effectively, and would erode local democracy. He felt that smaller unitary authorities would cut out duplication and keep local decision making, and that the option in Appendix C was still too large. Whilst the process was deeply flawed, Councillor Chewings stated that the Council must engage to demand a system that worked for residents. He agreed with recommendation b) that Rushcliffe should not join the City, as Rushcliffe had a distinct identity, with differing needs and priorities and bringing them together would fail to serve anyone and he supported having a referendum to ensure that local views were heard.

In seconding the recommendation, Councillor Brennan thanked everyone for the excellent debate, which she hoped would be helpful going forward. She questioned if this proposal represented any form of devolution and noted that with services moving up to the East Midlands Combined Authority, a layer closest to residents was disappearing. Councillor Brennan stated that the County Council's proposal for a single unitary authority would represent nearly one million population, and it was important for Rushcliffe to keep its own voice and she referred to the uncertainty regarding the Local Government Financial Review. Councillor Brennan referred to the importance of democracy, agreed that the Council had to engage in the process and that work would continue once more information was available.

The Leader reiterated the importance of this issue and that residents came first. He clarified that the £8m previously referred to was in the PWC report and that it was not an option to do nothing. He referred to previous comments regarding a boundary review and clarified that the Government's guidance clearly stated that any reviews, if required, would only occur later. He stated that Rushcliffe's population would continue to grow and that the 500,000 was flawed and the situation needed to be resolved. The Leader thanked everyone for the debate and requested that a recorded vote be taken, which was agreed by four Councillors.

In accordance with Standing Order Paragraph 4.80, a recorded vote was taken for this item as follows:

FOR: Councillors M Barney, T Birch, R Bird, A Brennan, A Brown, R Butler, K Chewings, N Clarke, T Combellack, J Cottey, S Dellar, A Edyvean, S Ellis, E Georgiou, R Inglis, D Mason, P Matthews, H Om, H Parekh, A Phillips, N Regan, D Simms, D Solomon, R Upton, D Viridi, R Walker, T Wells, G Wheeler, J Wheeler, and G Williams

AGAINST: Councillors C Thomas

ABSTENSIONS: Councillors J Billin, S Calvert, J Chaplain, G Fletcher, M Gaunt, P Gowland, C Grocock, R Mallender, S Mallender, L Plant, D Polenta, J Walker and L Way

It was RESOLVED that Council:

- a) endorses the submission of a Local Government Reorganisation Interim Plan to Government by 21 March 2025, as detailed in Appendix B to the report;
- b) does not support any of the Borough of Rushcliffe joining a new Council which encompasses the current Nottingham City boundary and therefore requests that the Government considers an alternative proposal for an option comprising three unitary authorities, as detailed in Appendix C to the report;
- c) writes to the Government to request a public consultation exercise or referendum for the people of Nottinghamshire to have their say on any final proposal; and
- d) endorses continuing to work with the other local authorities across Nottinghamshire with a view to developing a final unitary proposal to be considered by Full Council prior to submission to Government by 28 November 2025.

The meeting closed at 9.30 pm.

CHAIR