

# CYNGOR SIR POWYS COUNTY COUNCIL.

## Cross Border Marches Partnership Memorandum of Understanding

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**REPORT TITLE:** The Marches Forward Partnership

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**REPORT FOR:** Decision

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### 1. Purpose

- 1.1 This report seeks approval for the Council to sign a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) (see Appendix A) with Shropshire Council, Herefordshire Council and Monmouthshire County Council's to collaborate on the cross-border Marches Forward Partnership.

### 2. Background

- 2.1 The Marches Forward Partnership brings together 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. A Vision and ways of working document is attached to this report to provide some additional information.
- 2.2 For many people, the border between England and Wales is a rather artificial boundary and has the potential to limit 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.
- 2.3 Early scoping work by the partner 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 a level of geographic 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 held or explored in the future by constituent partners.
- 2.4 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.

- 2.5 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, specialist sector / service provision and infrastructure availability.
- 2.6 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.
- 2.7 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.
- 2.8 At the same time, Local Authority Leaders across Powys, Shropshire, Herefordshire, 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.
- 2.9 Alongside this early scoping work, ongoing conversations have taken 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.
- 2.10 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. These now provide a starting point, to be built on through the Marches Forward Partnership.

2.11 In June 2023, a draft MoU was developed to reflect some of the outputs from the early scoping work. The final draft of the MoU is attached to this report as Appendix A. This is summarised within the following six objectives and is intended to provide the initial basis for the strategic collaboration:

- **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.

### 3. Overview

3.1 The authority 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.

3.2 We have been working collaboratively with Shropshire Council, Monmouthshire County Council, and Herefordshire Council 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.

3.3 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.

- 3.4 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 to unlock greater investment into the area.
- 3.5 Whilst the local authorities have interacted as neighbouring areas on many levels for a long time, these activities have not previously been fully coordinated to align respective strategic visions, plans and resources for the maximum impact on the Marches and cross border area.
- 3.6 The establishment of the Marches Forward Partnership will enable the neighbouring local authorities to coordinate future joint working under a flexible umbrella framework. It is aimed at supporting a shared strategic understanding of the area as a focus future for joint working and to unlock additional investment into the area.
- 3.7 The Partnership will focus its collaboration only where it adds the greatest value and partners will maintain independent decision making and local delivery within each local authority area, where this continues to be most appropriate.
- 3.8 Significant opportunity is provided by the development of the Marches Forward Partnership. The Partnership provides a flexible overarching 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 Powys's border location.
- 3.9 The Partnership is not intended to be a formal 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 legal risks to the Council since the Partnership will operate on an informal basis, based around joint working on areas of common purpose.

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.

- 3.10 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.

- 3.11 The risks and opportunities relating to this report are predominately focused on Powys County 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.

#### **4. Legal implications**

- 4.1 Legal: The recommendations in the Report and the draft MOU are supported from a legal point of view.
- 4.2 The Head of Legal services and the monitoring Officer has commented as follows: "I note the legal comment and support the recommendations and the draft MOU."

#### **5. Data Protection**

- 5.1 There are no specific data protection issues at this preliminary stage.

#### **6. Comment from local member(s)**

- 6.1 There are no specific local member comments at this preliminary stage, noting that the work of the Partnership will be of benefit to all Council Wards.

#### **7. Financial implications**

- 7.1 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. The Partnership provides opportunity for continued sharing of staff resources to support development of the cross border joint working programme.
- 7.2 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.

- 7.3 The Partnership provides a significant opportunity for the partner local authority to support one another on climate and net zero plans and local delivery.

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. The Partnership provides opportunity to work together on strategic scale opportunities around the natural environment, addressing current and future resilience challenges in relation to climate change and nature recovery. It could also support rural resilience through work around land management and exploring common local authority aspirations around net zero and renewable energy solutions.

- 7.4 The Head of Finance (Section 151 Officer) notes the report and can support the recommendation.

## **8. Impact Assessment**

Given the early stage of the Partnership it is not possible to undertake a meaningful Impact Assessment and specific assessments will be undertaken as decisions are required for individual initiatives and projects.

## **9. Conclusion**

- 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 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.

10.4 Noting that the partnership MoU will:

- Remain in place for an 18-month term before review.
- Not be interpreted as a commitment of funds from any of the partner local authority.
- Not restrict, in any way, other arrangements that a local authority may wish to develop independently.

The broader activity of the Partnership may evolve and expand during implementation and will be reflected in subsequent MoU reviews.

## **11. Recommendations**

11.1 In supporting the Marches Forward Partnership Cabinet is asked to agree that:

- The authority continues to progress the work of the Marches Forward Partnership.
- To approve the draft Memorandum of Understanding in Appendix A and delegate to the Chief Executive, in consultation with the Council's Leader, to agree changes in finalising the Memorandum of Understanding to reflect feedback from each cabinet and once completed to sign on behalf of Powys County Council.
- Further updates will be brought to Cabinet in due course.

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