

Today marks an important next step in our work to ensure our city and its people reap the biggest benefits possible from the government's drive to deliver devolution to the English regions.

Let me once again remind you of the points made when I talked about this issue in the Chamber months ago - last December, to be exact.

As I told you then – a combined authority is simply a formal arrangement that allows two or more councils to work together on the economic development of their wider area.

Everyone knows the real world doesn't stop at local authority boundaries so it's sensible for councils to collaborate on issues that for decades have been decided by government officials in Whitehall – and then imposed on us.

So, if by working as an equal partner with other councils across the Midlands we can make the decisions that matter why on earth wouldn't we?

If that means being in control of transport for the area – perhaps introducing an oyster card for the Midlands, for instance – what's wrong with that?

Or if it means introducing a specific apprenticeship scheme for our young people that means they can get the jobs being created by Jaguar Land Rover and other manufacturers here – why wouldn't we want that?

And, as I said last year, and have been consistently saying ever since - as a member of a combined authority Coventry will not become part of Birmingham – greater or otherwise. We will be an equal partner with an equal say in making decisions that used to be made by central government.

The new government has made it very clear it wants to drive change and deliver devolution quickly and across the Midlands we've stepped up to this challenge.

On 28 May Members supported, in principle, the creation of a combined authority with a preferred option of councils from Coventry and Warwickshire (and Hinckley and Bosworth) with councils from the Greater Birmingham and Solihull and the Black Country Local Enterprise Partnership.

And on 6 July West Midlands Leaders and Chairs of the three local enterprise partnerships met here in Coventry to launch a Statement of Intent. This important document begins to set out the strength of the case for the seven West Midlands metropolitan council to work together and – ideally – for the work to take place across the three local enterprise partnership areas, including Warwickshire.

The statement recognises the role of the West Midlands combined authority in driving the UK economy through a Midlands Engine which will grow to encompass the entire Midlands region.

It sets out the challenge facing us here and the issues we need to tackle if we're to deliver more jobs, economic growth and prosperity across the region.

We want control of issues like transport, skills, finance and investment. We think we can make better decisions about these here in the West Midlands, rather than leaving it to London civil servants.

The statement was “strongly supported” – his exact words – by the Chancellor in last week's budget. Last Thursday's parliamentary debate on this subject saw parliamentary undersecretary of state for the department of communities and local government and local MP, Marcus Jones also talk about us. He said:

“I congratulate the seven metropolitan councils of the West Midlands on the launch of their statement of intent to establish a combined authority, which is the first stage in a process of consultation and engagement with other councils in the area. We welcome that development, and we are determined to hand as much power as possible to places with a clear, strongly led plan.”

He went on to say “the seven West Midlands councils are showing what can be achieved by working together to bring greater opportunity to their area.”

Our decision has prompted a lively debate in the media and amongst Coventry residents about the issue. And it’s clear that people want to know more about what it really means to be a West Midlands combined authority.

So we’re just beginning a comprehensive engagement programme that’s focusing on answering the questions people are asking about combined authorities, listening to peoples’ concerns and taking into account the views of Coventry people.

Ward forums are now underway and give residents the opportunity to have their say about combined authorities. Next month there will also be informal drop-in sessions at locations across the city for people.

There’s already been a double page feature in Citivision, which has been distributed to homes in Coventry and there’ll be information leaflets produced with practical information about the events we’re organising and how to have your say.

There’s lots of information on our website and we’re updating it when we have more information and we’ll be using social media to have discussions and debates online.

And, of course, we hope the media will continue to take a close interest in the issue and report on the debate that’s underway.

It’s really important, too, that we talk in detail to partners like the business community, higher and further education, the third sector and special interest groups. We’ll be holding events with all these groups both here in Coventry and across the West Midlands so we can get their views, thoughts and ideas.

There’s been a lot of interest in the Citizens’ Panel we will be holding which will allow a representative group of Coventry people to consider the issues in detail,

question experts and go beyond the headlines to understand why this is such an important issue to Coventry people.

I can't give you too much detail about this, because I've been clear that this must be run independently of politicians. But I can tell you that we have engaged the Democratic Society to deliver this work for us.

They are a not for profit organisation which works with people to get them directly involved in political debate. The Democratic Society works with governments, but is independent of political parties.

The Citizens' Panel will do its work in September, and I gather preparatory work will shortly be under way. It will report back to the Council by the end of September so its findings can be incorporated – along with the results of the engagement programme taking place over the coming weeks - into the report to Full Council planned for October. This report will seek Council approval to join other councils across the area to submit a detailed scheme for a West Midlands combined authority to government.

And then, of course, the government itself, in the form of the Secretary of State will carry out further consultation with residents, businesses and other partners across the West Midlands before making a final decision – later this year.

I hope, by the end of the year, no one can say they didn't have a chance to find out more, get the facts and have their say about this issue.

I'm delighted there's so much interest in what could have been seen as a boring decision about sub-regional working – certainly there was not this level of interest when regional development agencies like AWM and local enterprise partnerships were set up with far-reaching powers and budgets.

So I would urge every one in Coventry who thinks they don't really know much about this issue to find out more – and once they feel they understand and know the details about what a combined authority will mean to us here in this city – please let us know.

This report outlines the importance of explaining, engaging and consulting. It makes clear our ambition for this city and the importance of working together across the West Midlands to achieve our ambitions. Coventry wants to reclaim its place at the heart of the UK economy driven by the Midlands Engine. Now is the time for us to grasp this once in a generation opportunity.

I move that Council approves the recommendations.