

LOCAL GOVERNMENT UPDATE

On 12 October 2020 [HCWS502] I told the House that I had issued invitations under the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007 (“the 2007 Act”) to principal councils in Cumbria, North Yorkshire, and Somerset, including associated existing unitary councils, to submit proposals for moving to unitary local government in those areas. Councils in these areas had requested such invitations and had been developing ideas about restructuring local government in their areas for some time.

The consultation

On 22 February 2021 I told the House [HCWS785] that I was launching a statutory consultation on all of the eight locally-led proposals for reorganising local government that I had received on 9 December in response to the invitation. These proposals were - four from councils in Cumbria, two from councils in North Yorkshire and two from councils in Somerset. In the case of each area there is a proposal made by the county council for a unitary authority covering the whole area. In the case of North Yorkshire and Somerset there is a proposal from district councils for two unitary authorities in each area. In Cumbria district councils have made three proposals, each of which involve establishing two unitary authorities.

When launching the consultation I made it clear that I welcomed views from any interested persons, including residents, in addition to the named consultees. The named consultees were the councils which made the proposals, other councils affected by the proposals, councils in neighbouring areas, public service providers, including health providers and the police, Local Enterprise Partnerships, and certain other business, voluntary sector and educational bodies. The consultation closed on 19 April and I have received a total of 13,020 responses. I will be placing a summary of the consultation responses in the libraries of Parliament.

The decisions on unitary proposals

I am now able to inform the House of my decisions as to which of the eight proposals, subject to Parliamentary approval, are to be implemented. The 2007 Act provides that I may implement a proposal with or without modifications. I have decided that in each of the areas to make no such modifications.

In reaching my decision, I carefully considered each of the proposals. I assessed each proposal against the three criteria set out in the invitation sent to all the principal councils on 9 October. These criteria provide that for a proposal to be implemented, that proposal is likely to improve local government and service delivery across its area; commands a good deal of local support as assessed in the round overall across the whole area of the proposal; and any unitary councils to be established have a credible geography.

I have also had regard to all the representations I received, including those received through the consultation, and to all the relevant information available to me, including the results of the local poll that the Somerset district councils held during the period

from 18 May to 4 June and the representations received about the poll and its conduct.

For Cumbria I have decided to implement, subject to Parliamentary approval, the proposal for two unitary councils - an East unitary council covering the existing areas of Barrow, Eden and South Lakeland and a West unitary council covering the existing areas of Allerdale, Carlisle and Copeland. I considered that this proposal met all three of the criteria.

I also considered that the proposal for a single unitary council for the whole of Cumbria also met all three of the criteria. However, having regard to the size and geography of Cumbria, including the geographic barriers of lakes and mountains, and the rurality of its population, I have decided that it would be more appropriate to implement the East West unitary proposal, allowing for more localised decision making, which could be important given the geography of Cumbria.

I have decided not to implement the proposal for two unitary councils – one council comprising the existing areas of Barrow, South Lakeland and Lancaster City and the other council comprising the existing areas of Allerdale, Carlisle, Copeland and Eden. I considered that this proposal did not meet the improving local government and service delivery and credible geography criteria. I have also decided not to implement the proposal for two unitary councils – one council comprising the existing areas of Allerdale, Carlisle and Eden and the other council comprising the existing areas of Barrow, Copeland and South Lakeland. I considered that this proposal did not meet the credible geography criterion.

For North Yorkshire I have decided to implement, subject to Parliamentary approval, the proposal for a single unitary council for the whole of the existing administrative county of North Yorkshire. I considered that this proposal strongly met all three of the criteria. I have also decided not to implement the proposal for two unitary councils - one council comprising the existing areas of Ryedale, Scarborough, Selby and the current unitary of York, and the other council comprising the existing areas of Craven, Hambleton, Harrogate and Richmondshire. I considered that this proposal did not meet the improving local government and service delivery and credible geography criteria.

For Somerset I have decided to implement, subject to Parliamentary approval, the proposal for a single unitary council for the whole of the existing administrative county of Somerset. I considered that this proposal met all three of the criteria, strongly meeting the improving local government and service delivery criterion. I have also decided not to implement the proposal for two unitary councils - one council comprising the existing areas of Mendip District and South Somerset and the other council comprising the existing areas of Sedgemoor and Somerset West & Taunton. I considered that this proposal did not meet the improving local government and service delivery and credible geography criteria.

Future steps

I now intend to seek Parliamentary approval for the necessary secondary legislation to implement my decisions. I intend to lay the draft structural changes Order before

Parliament around the turn of the year and they will include provisions for appropriate transitional arrangements, including for elections in May 2022 for the future unitary councils; for cancelling elections currently scheduled for May 2022 for existing councils, including those rescheduled from May 2021 as a result of the orders made earlier this year; and for the unitary councils to assume the full range of local authority responsibilities on 1 April 2023, when predecessor councils would be abolished.

Establishing these new unitary councils will be a significant step towards ensuring the people and businesses across Cumbria, North Yorkshire and Somerset can in future have the sustainable high-quality local services they deserve. I expect all the existing councils and their partners to work collaboratively and constructively together to drive forward the process of establishing unitary councils and transforming local service delivery for the residents, businesses and local communities of these three areas.

I would like to reiterate that Government will not impose top-down government solutions. We will continue, as I am now currently doing, to follow a locally-led approach where councils can develop proposals which have strong local support. However, restructuring is only one of the different ways that councils can streamline and make savings, and deliver strong leadership. This has been the Government's consistent approach since 2010, when top-down restructuring was stopped through the Local Government Act 2010.

When considering reform, those in an area will know what is best, and as my Rt Hon Friend the Prime Minister set out in his speech on 15 July we remain committed to devolving power to people and places across the UK. We are open to devolution where there is strong local leadership, whether supported by two tier local government, unitary structures or various joint arrangements. Our plans for doing this and strengthening local accountable leadership will be set out in the forthcoming Levelling Up White Paper