

19 April 2021

PR8-21 | RESPONSE TO PROPOSALS FOR LOCALLY LED RE-ORGANISATION

I am writing in response to the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) consultations on proposals for locally-led reorganisation of local government in Cumbria, North Yorkshire and Somerset.

The National Association of Local Councils (NALC) is the nationally recognised membership and support organisation representing the interests of around 10,000 local (parish and town) councils and many parish meetings in England. Local councils are the backbone of our democracy and closest to local people, providing our neighbourhoods, villages, towns and small cities with a democratic voice and structure for taking action, contributing in excess of £2 billion of community investment to supporting and improving local communities and delivering neighbourhood level services.

- We welcome the opportunity to comment on proposals for the creation of unitary authorities, where these command local support. Our comments focus on the prospects for local councils in any unitary authority outcome. In general, these reorganisations will be worthwhile if they achieve new unitary authorities of sufficient size, scale and footprint to enable local councils to be empowered and take on a bigger role where they have the will and the capacity.
- We strongly support the key role played by the Local Government Boundary Commission for England in providing a critical dispassionate view during the unitarisation process that reflects an agreed set of criteria such as size, resources, democratic accountability and local support.
- From the experience of local government reorganisations over the past 10-15 years elsewhere in England, we advocate that the following good practice is adopted, in relation to the part which local councils can usefully contribute to the design and implementation of any new unitary principal authority arrangements.
- Local councils and county associations of local councils have a very powerful voice which should be listened to from the very beginning of a process to create new unitary authorities. It is important that county associations of local councils are appropriately equipped to contribute to the reorganisation process. Collaboration, communication and cooperation

are vital. Adequate resourcing for all local council bodies involved in a unitarisation process can only have sound long and short term benefits.

- The relevant county association of local councils must be involved as a full member of the Joint Implementation Team establishing any new unitary authority.
- With local support, new local councils must be established in unparished areas as part of the reorganisation process, and any Charter Trustees abolished. This must be part of the design of the new unitary authority(ies) and the process should start at the earliest opportunity and not be left until after the new unitary authority(ies) are established. The government must strongly encourage this. After the government has made the decision to formally create a new unitary authority, where there is local disagreement over whether and where new local councils should be created (and where mediation is needed), such cases must be referred to MHCLG for determination and resolution.
- One task of the Joint Implementation Team must be to develop and ensure adoption of a charter which sets out the roles, respective responsibilities and relationships between the unitary authority and the local council sector, including matters concerned with resources and property. It is important that this charter must take account of the varying size and capacity within the local councils' sector, including the prospective circumstances of any local councils which are due to be created.
- Where policies and practices are being harmonised across a new unitary authority area, there must be a levelling-up of relations by local councils with new unitary authorities; these relations must not be less productive, positive or harmonious than enjoyed previously.
- Any devolution of assets and services from a new unitary authority should be properly negotiated with local councils in that new unitary authority's area, and framed as a formal written agreement.
- The county association of local councils can have a beneficial role in nurturing and supporting the creation of any new local council, including the provision of temporary clerking.

Should you require any further information on this response please do not hesitate to contact Chris Borg, policy manager, on 07714 771049 or via email at chris.borg@nalc.gov.uk.