

Local Government Reform for Northamptonshire

Frequently-asked Questions

General

What is the background to all this unitary talk?

Northamptonshire County Council (NCC) has significant financial challenges. In January 2018, the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government at the time, Sajid Javid, appointed Max Caller to carry out a Best Value Inspection of NCC.

In his report, published in March 2018, Mr Caller concluded that NCC's financial, cultural and governance problems could not be solved in isolation. He recommended that plans be worked up for two unitary authorities to be introduced, one covering the north and the other covering the west of the county. These would replace the current eight-authority, two-tier system consisting of NCC and the seven District and Borough councils across the county.

The Secretary of State invited proposals from any council or group of councils in the county, and expressed a strong preference for one proposal that is signed up to by everyone. The government set the following criteria:

- A single county-wide unitary is explicitly excluded as an option
- Each new proposed authority must have a population substantially in excess of 300,000
- The proposal must be based on existing council boundaries

Government also stated that the proposal must demonstrate clear potential for savings, prioritise the Government's wider housing and growth agenda and command a good deal of local support.

Who do I contact if I have a question about the potential new authority?

Continue to contact your current district and borough council or the county council.

Process

So has a proposal to restructure public services in Northamptonshire now been made to the Government?

Yes. During June and July 2018, all eight councils held a joint public consultation into future local government reform in Northamptonshire, focusing on the two-unitary model – the only option which met all of the Government’s criteria.

This consultation feedback was used helped to inform and develop the Northamptonshire Local Government Reform Proposal, which was presented to each of the eight councils for consideration in August 2018.

The proposal is for two unitary councils: West Northamptonshire, comprising the current area of Daventry, Northampton and South Northamptonshire; and North Northamptonshire, comprising the current areas of Corby, East Northamptonshire, Kettering and Wellingborough.

The proposal was agreed and submitted to the Secretary of State on 31 August by seven of the county’s eight local authorities (Corby Borough Council decided not to).

How do the public have their say in the process?

Residents, businesses and other stakeholders across the county were invited to give their views on local government reform during the five-week public consultation which ran from 18 June to 22 July 2018.

The joint consultation was run on behalf of the councils by Opinion Research Services (ORS), who received over 5,000 responses.

Feedback from the consultation showed that, while there were differences of opinion across the county, with a strong preference among many respondents in the West for a 3-unitary solution, ORS concluded that: ‘the government requirement for the proposal for two unitary councils to command “a good deal of local support as assessed in the round across the whole area of the proposal” is more than satisfied’.

Now that the proposal for a two-unitary model has been submitted to the Secretary of State, people will have another opportunity to give their views when the Government carries out its own consultation before making a decision. That consultation is expected to run for between 6-8 weeks and take place later this autumn.

The Secretary of State will take into account all the responses received during the consultation process and will consider them ‘in the round’. The views of partner organisations such as the police, the health sector, businesses and the voluntary sector will be important factors in his decision, as well as the views of the general public.

Not all councils agreed to submit the proposal, so what happens now?

The proposal was agreed and submitted by seven of the county's eight local authorities – Corby Borough Council decided not to.

The Secretary of State did not require every council to agree to the Proposal for it to be submitted, and he will consider the level of agreement that has been achieved when making his decision.

Corby Borough Council's decision not to sign up to the submission of the proposal to the government is recognised and respected by the other councils. However, this has had an impact on their involvement in the process of designing the new unitary councils as they have not been included in the initial meetings to discuss the process going forward.

However, as they decided to approve the proposals regarding funding and governance, they have now been invited to join discussions from 26th September.

What are the key dates?

The below is an expected timeline only and may be subject to change once the Parliamentary agenda is set.

2018	
End of August	Proposal submitted to Secretary of State (completed)
October	Expected announcement from Secretary of State and start of consultation on the proposal
October-December	Government to draft legislation
2019	
January	Draft legislation finalised
February	Draft legislation presented to House of Commons and House of Lords
April	Legislation approved New shadow authorities to form and begin to prepare for Unitary
April – March	Integrate services within new unitary areas
November – January	Budget preparation
2020	
February	Budget setting
April	New unitary authorities come into being
May	Elections

What are the councils doing in the meantime while we await the Government's decision?

Although we await a decision on the Proposal, the provisional timescale for implementing two new unitary authorities, if agreed by the Government, is by April 2020 so preparations must continue within this timescale. We are setting up a central team and project boards for West and North Northamptonshire to steer forward preparations for the creation of two new

shadow authorities that would be required to manage the transition to two unitaries by April 2020.

We will also continue to speak to government officials to identify ways to address the ongoing challenges facing Northamptonshire and to help shape the content of future legislation that the Government will need to make to create the two new unitary councils.

Impact

What would the creation of unitary councils mean for staff of the current authorities?

Councils will continue to operate as separate independent bodies until March 2020, at which point staff will be transferred over to the new unitary councils. Details of how the new councils could be structured will be discussed towards the end of this process and staff will be involved in the consultation about that, as required by employment legislation.

Where would the two unitary councils be based?

This level of detail has not yet been discussed.

Is it possible that two new unitary councils would be more remote than the current arrangement and unable to keep in touch with local areas or support local parish and town councils?

It will be important for the new councils to put in place arrangements to ensure that the interests of local areas, as well as those of different groups within our communities, are recognised and addressed.

Does this mean the libraries would stay open?

The libraries will remain the responsibility of the county council until the new unitary arrangements are in place and so any further decisions on libraries will be made by them.

Would this affect which school my child attends?

No

Would there be any impact on other public bodies in Northamptonshire?

All public services will be consulted about how the new unitary authorities will work with them in the future.

Democratic

Where will any proposed changes to the boundaries be?

The proposal is for two unitary councils: West Northamptonshire, comprising the current area of Daventry, Northampton and South Northamptonshire; and North Northamptonshire, comprising the current areas of Corby, East Northamptonshire, Kettering and Wellingborough.

What arrangements would be made for the 2019 elections and when will these take place?

District and Borough Council elections in Northamptonshire during 2019 will probably be deferred and elections for the new authority are expected to be in May 2020. However, this will depend on the Secretary of State's decision. Town and Parish Council elections will probably also be deferred until 2020.

Who will run the 2019 elections?

Existing councils will be responsible for any elections, referendums or by-elections that take place between now and April 2020.

How many councillors would there be on the new authorities?

The Best Value report proposed 45 councillors for each new authority, but this would create a far higher ratio of residents to councillors than elsewhere in the country. It is likely that a proposal will be made to the government for about twice that many, with a few more in the West than the North to reflect its higher population. An appropriate level of representation is vital, to ensure proper democratic accountability.

Financial

How much would it cost to put these changes in place? And how much would it save?

The estimated costs and savings are set out in the Proposal document to Government – [view the proposal document](#).

NCC is in financial trouble and has significant debts so will we end up with two new unitary authorities in the same situation?

Our aim is to ensure that any proposed new unitary councils are financially sustainable, but this can not be achieved through a unitary restructure alone.

The District and Borough Councils supporting the Proposal, along with the new leadership at the County Council, have made it clear to the Government that they are very keen to leave the past behind, but cannot solve the current financial challenges alone and will require support to help deliver future success.

The Proposal for two unitaries presents an opportunity to create sustainable, high quality services across the county but this is only achievable by transformation of the wider public sector in the county and with significant government support.

The councils are speaking to government officials about identifying opportunities and addressing these challenges.

Meanwhile, the County Council continues to work alongside Commissioners and an Improvement Board to tackle the financial challenges it faces.

What will happen to the current money that district and borough councils hold as reserves should unitary councils be formed?

Any money that councils hold as reserves, that is equivalent to the savings they have in the bank, would be pooled. It would be for a new council to decide how they would then be used.

What allowances will the new councillors get paid?

That will be for the new councils to decide.

How much would the elections to the new unitaries cost?

The elections to the new unitaries are likely to cost about the same as the elections to the District and Borough Councils in 2019 would have done.

Will I have to pay more Council Tax?

If councils join together, their council tax levels will be harmonised, so that everyone in the whole area of each new council pays the same (subject to allowances that people may be entitled to). The level at which they will be harmonised and the period over which that will happen will be discussed at a later date.

How would business rates be affected?

Business rates are set nationally and the role of local authorities is just to collect them. However, there are various discretionary rate relief schemes and the new councils will need to decide how they will apply those in future.

Will I still be able to claim benefits should the changes be made?

Yes, the new authorities will take over responsibility for benefits from the existing councils.

Services

Would all services of the county council, boroughs and districts transfer to the two unitary councils if this is the proposed option?

Yes. All services would be provided by the new unitary councils.

What changes will residents see to services?

There shouldn't be any immediate changes as a direct result of the restructure. Services that are provided to residents do change over time and councils are always looking for ways to improve services.

Would my bin be emptied on the same day?

It's very unlikely that changes to services like bin collections would happen from April 2020 as a result of the introduction of unitary councils. However, councils may make improvements to any of the services they provide in order to provide residents with the best service. Any changes will be communicated to you well in advance of them happening.