

Local Government Update:Written statement - HCWS1058

WS Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government

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HCWS1058

Local Government Update

In the written statement of 12 March 2018, (HCWS535), my Rt Hon. Friend, the then Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Sajid Javid), told the House that there was consensus amongst the five Buckinghamshire councils that local government across the county should be reorganised, and that two alternative approaches for doing this were being proposed. He announced that he was minded to implement, subject to Parliamentary approval, the locally-led proposal for replacing the current structures with a single new unitary council, and that he was not minded to implement the locally-led proposal for two new unitary councils for the same area. There followed a period for representations.

Since then I have received over 3,000 representations, which I have carefully considered along with all other relevant information available to me. I am clear that there is broad consent for change in Buckinghamshire. A survey, conducted by Opinion Research Services of a representative sample of residents, found that 75 per cent agreed with the principle of reorganisation in Buckinghamshire, and overall 87 per cent of the representations made to me supported change. Both proposals made it clear that retaining the status quo is not an option.

Having assessed both proposals against the criteria that we announced to the House on 28 February 2017 (PQ 65271), I have concluded that whilst both proposals meet the criterion for a “good deal of local support”, only the proposal for a single unitary council satisfies the criteria for “improving local government” and for “being a credible geography” and that in any event the proposal for a single unitary council is better able to meet the criteria overall.

The Government’s policy – as explained to the House by Ministers on 22 May 2018 (Hansard, Col. 336WH) is that we will not seek to impose top-down solutions on local government; where there is a desire and a thrust for more change and innovation we will look to support those involved, according to the criteria we have laid out. Given the desire and thrust for change and innovation in Buckinghamshire, that the five councils agree that the current structures are not sustainable, and that the locally-led proposal for a single unitary is the only proposal that meets the three criteria, I am persuaded that the right course of action is to establish a new single unitary district council for Buckinghamshire.

Accordingly, I am today announcing that I have decided to implement, subject to Parliamentary approval, the locally-led proposal to replace the existing five councils across Buckinghamshire – the two tier structure of Buckinghamshire County Council and the district councils of Aylesbury Vale, Chiltern, South Bucks and Wycombe – by one new single unitary district council, and that I have decided not to implement the proposal for two new unitary councils.

Whilst I am clear that the single unitary proposal fully meets the three criteria, I recognise that some have questioned whether such a structure might weaken local democratic engagement at the most local level. To help reassure any who might be concerned on this, I intend to speak with the five councils to determine whether I should modify the proposal before implementing it, in relation to councillor numbers, perhaps providing for three-member electoral wards. I will also expect the new unitary council, and in the meantime the existing councils, to engage with their local communities about the appropriate arrangements for civic representation for towns and parishes. I similarly expect the councils to promote and help support the development of neighbourhood plans, as I consider these can be key building blocks for the successful implementation of change in Buckinghamshire that residents deserve.

In March, the then Secretary of State was clear that, in relation to establishing a single council, further steps were needed to secure local consent amongst the local partners. Further steps have been taken, with Ministers having meetings with council leaders. The great majority of local partners do support the proposal for a single unitary council including the police, the ambulance service, CCG, NHS Trust, Independent Chair of the Adult Safeguarding Board, Thames Valley Local Enterprise Partnership, and Bucks Business First. In addition to enjoying a good deal of local support, I am satisfied that the proposal meets the requirement for local consent set out in the Cities and Local Government Devolution Act 2016.

I now intend to prepare and lay before Parliament drafts of the necessary secondary legislation to give effect to my decision. My intention is that if Parliament approves this legislation the new council will be established on 1 April 2020 with the first elections to the council held on 7 May 2020. I intend to explore with the district councils whether they would like me to make and lay before Parliament an Order to delay for one year the May 2019 local elections in Aylesbury Vale, Chiltern, South Bucks and Wycombe, so as to avoid councillors being elected for only one year if Parliament approves the legislation establishing the new council.

From March 2019 the sunset clause means that the consent provisions in the process we are currently using for reorganisations fall away. In future, any proposal considered under the Cities and Local Government Devolution Act process will require unanimous consent from all councils. Alternatively, I may issue a formal invitation for proposals, and the specific circumstances in which I would do so will be set out in due course.