



HOUSE OF COMMONS

To: Conservative Members of Parliament

12 October 2020

Dear Colleague,

LOCAL GOVERNMENT REFORM & JOINT WORKING

Throughout the pandemic, the hard work and determination of Conservative colleagues in local government to support communities has made a meaningful and significant difference to our national response.

From protecting the vulnerable to keeping essential services like bin collections going, mobilising volunteers to keeping schools and parks open, to helping to steer their local economies through the recession brought about by Covid-19, their work has been immensely important. That work continues and should be our overwhelming focus this winter.

Today in a Written Ministerial Statement¹ I issued formal invitations to principal councils in Cumbria, North Yorkshire and Somerset, including associated existing unitary councils, to submit proposals for moving to unitary local government. I am now writing to set out how we will consider proposals for reform of our system of English local government in two tier areas, where local services are delivered by both county and district councils. This re-affirms the broad principles on local government re-organisation, as set out in a Written Ministerial Statement in July 2019.

Localism and devolution are at the heart of this Government's 'levelling up' agenda, based on a recognition – highlighted throughout the pandemic - that local areas know best their unique circumstances.

Locally-led improvements: Locally-led changes to the structure of local government, whether in the form of unitarisation or district mergers, can be an appropriate means of improving local service delivery, saving taxpayers' money and improving local accountability. It is important that those seeking to pursue locally-led proposals can demonstrate that there is broad local support for reform. It is up to local areas to decide on whether or not they want to reform their structures.

Not compulsory or required: It is important to note, therefore, that unitary structures are not and will not be compulsory or required by central government. The clear rationale for this approach is that experience shows that any reform of an area's local government is most effectively achieved through proposals put forward by those who best know the area. The three areas that I have issued formal invitations to have been considering reform for some time, and have broad local support.

¹ <https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-statements/detail/2020-10-12/hcws502>

No top-down restructuring: It is essential that any council restructuring should be on the basis of locally-led proposals and should not involve top-down Whitehall solutions being imposed on local areas. The Government does not support top-down restructuring. This has been the Government's consistent approach since 2010, when we scrapped Labour's top-down restructuring plans and Labour's unelected regional quangos.

Other ways of delivering reform: Restructuring is only one of the different ways that councils can streamline and make savings. Joint working with other councils and partners could be an appropriate and sustainable way forward. Such partnerships can take a variety of forms including adopting joint plans, setting up joint committees, sharing back office services, merging district councils or creating special purpose vehicles.

Those in an area will know what is best – the very essence of localism to which the Conservative Government remains committed. Indeed, councils' general power of competence under the Localism Act 2011 enhanced councils' ability to get on with sharing services.

I am aware that there are other areas beyond the three I have announced today where councils have been discussing ideas about unitary reform. However, given the pressures councils face this winter with the pandemic, I believe it would not be right at this time for them to further progress or focus on ideas for reform. The pandemic has rightly necessitated resources across Whitehall being re-allocated to tackling Covid, and this must be Whitehall's and town halls' number one priority at present. And, as outlined, there is no expectation that such restructuring is a Whitehall requirement.

More broadly, the 2019 Conservative Party manifesto made clear that 'we remain committed to devolving power to people and places across the UK. Our ambition is for full devolution across England, building on the successful devolution of powers to city region mayors and others, so that every part of our country has the power to shape its own destiny.'

At the Prime Minister's September 2019, Rotherham speech, he set out his vision that as the first former Mayor since Clement Attlee to become Prime Minister, he would 'do devolution properly', and establish new mayoralities. We remain committed to introducing more of them across the country where there is local interest and support, which clearly will not be found everywhere. We will publish a Devolution White Paper in due course.

As we look ahead to next May's local elections, what matters most to voters is the quality and responsiveness of local services, the protection of local amenity, and the level of local taxes. Conservative councils have a great record, and are at the forefront of championing local communities during this pandemic. Councillors who campaign and engage with the public are ones who are most likely to get re-elected, and given the scale of the challenges local councils are confronting, this should be our primary focus.

Yours truly,

Robert Jenrick.

RT HON ROBERT JENRICK MP

Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government