

Future Northants FAQs

1 - What is this unitary talk all about?

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 has invited proposals from any council or group of councils in the county, and has expressed a strong preference for one proposal that is signed up to by everyone.

2 - What are the options?

The Government requires that any proposal adheres to 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

These criteria mean that only a two-unitary solution is possible. In addition:

- Only one proposal will be accepted, not a range of options
- It must demonstrate clear potential for savings
- It must command a good deal of local support
- Due consideration should be given to Max Caller's recommendations
- Any solution should prioritise the Government's wider housing and growth agenda
- Extensive consultation must be carried out

The Government originally set a deadline of 27 July, 2018 for us to submit our proposal. That has now been extended to 31 August 2018.

3 - Will the public get a say on the future of public services in Northamptonshire?

Yes. Before the government considers any proposal to create new unitary councils, extensive consultation has to take place across the county. That consultation is taking place from 18th June to 22nd July.

4 - How do I have my say?

You can give your views by going online to complete a questionnaire at www.futurenorthants.co.uk

There you will also find a detailed consultation document that fully explains the proposal. Alongside the consultation website, copies of the consultation document and the questionnaire are also available in libraries and local council offices. If you can't complete the survey online, please check your local council website for details of venues where you can pick up a copy.

5 - I have just completed the online questionnaire. Where is the control? There is nothing to stop anyone completing many multiples of the questionnaires and enhancing or invalidating true results.

The open consultation questionnaire is not intended to be a referendum, or a survey that is designed to represent any specific population, and ORS (the experts running the consultation process) often observe disproportionately greater levels of response from particular areas or groups; it is by its very nature an opportunity for anyone that wants to provide feedback about the proposal. It is therefore potentially susceptible to multiple completions by individuals and/or organisations, or local groups who sometimes organise campaigns.

However, during analysis and reporting of findings, ORS will seek to identify and describe where there is clear evidence of duplicate questionnaires being submitted by a single respondent or as a result of organised campaigns (for example, identical photocopied forms, identical organised responses or identical online submissions from the same IP address and cookie).

6 - What if the public doesn't want change?

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.

7 - What are the key dates?

None of the dates is set in stone; however, the key milestones below are likely:

May-Jun 2018 – councils put together draft proposal

Jun-Jul 2018 – Public consultation on draft proposal

July-Aug 2018 – Proposal finalised

End Aug 2018 – Proposal submitted to Secretary of State

Sept - Nov 2018 – Proposal considered and decision issued by SoS

Dec 2018 – Start of process to formulate draft legislation

April 2019 - Shadow Authorities created

1 April 2020 - New unitaries come into existence

May 2020 - Elections to new unitaries

8 - What happens if all councils don't agree on what the proposal should be?

All eight councils in Northamptonshire have agreed to work together with the aim of finding the best solution for the county's residents and businesses. Once the final proposal is produced, taking into account the feedback from all parties concerned, each council will need to decide whether to sign up to it. The Secretary of State does not require every council to agree at that stage, and he will consider the level of agreement that has been achieved when making his decision.

9 - Where will any proposed changes to the boundaries be?

Any proposal must be based on the existing boundaries of the District and Borough Councils, so only combinations of those areas will be permitted.

10 - 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.

11 - 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 consultation document and will be included in any proposal to the government.

12 - NCC is in financial trouble and has significant debts so will we end up with two new unitary authorities in the same situation? Will customer service levels reduce?

Our aim is to ensure that any proposed new unitary councils are financially sustainable. The county council is working alongside commissioners and an

improvement board to tackle the financial challenges it faces to ensure that the unitary councils are set up to succeed, and that service levels are maintained.

13 - 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.

14 - Where would the two unitary councils be based?

This level of detail has not yet been discussed.

15 - 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.

16 - 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.

17 - What changes will residents see to services?

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

18 - 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 still take place in May 2019.

19 - Who will run the 2019 elections?

Existing councils will be responsible for the elections in their area in May 2019 and any other elections, referendums or by-elections that take place between now and April 2020.

20 - 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. The proposal is likely to be for significantly more than that to ensure proper democratic accountability.

21 - What allowances will the new councillors get paid?

That will be for the new councils to decide.

22 - 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.

23 - 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.

24 - 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.

25 - 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.

26 - 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.

27 - 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.

28 - 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.

29 - Would this affect which school my child attends?

No

30 - 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.