

WRITTEN MINISTERIAL STATEMENT 22/02/21

LOCAL GOVERNMENT UPDATE

As I told the House on 12 October 2020 [[hyperlink](#) / column reference (HCWS502)] I have issued invitations under the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007 (the 2007 Act) to principal councils in Cumbria, North Yorkshire, and Somerset, including associated existing unitary councils, to submit proposals for moving to unitary local government in those areas.

On 9 December, I received eight locally-led proposals - four from councils in Cumbria, two from councils in North Yorkshire and two from councils in Somerset. In the case of each area there is a proposal made by the county council for a unitary authority covering the whole area. In the case of North Yorkshire and Somerset there is a proposal from district councils for two unitary authorities in each area. In Cumbria district councils have made three proposals, each of which involve establishing two unitary authorities.

Today I have launched a consultation on all eight proposals. I would welcome views from any interested person, including residents, and I am consulting the councils which made the proposals, other councils affected by the proposals, and councils in neighbouring areas. I am also consulting public service providers, including health providers and the police, Local Enterprise Partnerships, and certain other business, voluntary sector and educational bodies.

The consultation period will run for eight weeks until Monday 19 April. The consultation document is available [here](#) and those responding may do so on the department's online platform 'Citizen Space' or by e-mail or post. The consultation will provide information to help my assessment of the merits of each proposal and I will carefully consider all the representations I receive, along with all other relevant information available to me.

The context of this consultation is that the 2007 Act provides that before any proposal is implemented I must consult any council affected by the proposal that did not make it and any other persons I consider appropriate. Once the consultation is concluded, I will decide, subject to parliamentary approval, which, if any, proposals are to be implemented, with or without modification. In taking these decisions I will have regard to all the representations I have received, including those from the consultation, and all other relevant information available to me, and reach a balanced judgement assessing the proposals against the three criteria - whether they are likely to improve local government and service delivery across the area of the proposal, whether they command a good deal of local support as assessed in the round across the whole area of the proposal, and whether the area of any new unitary council is a credible geography.

I am also announcing today that I intend as soon as practicable to make and lay before Parliament Orders under the Local Government Act 2000 to reschedule the ordinary elections to principal councils in the three areas due to be held on 6 May 2021 for one year to May 2022. The elections for local Police and Crime Commissioners, as well as elections to any town or parish councils, will continue to take place in May 2021.

In deciding to reschedule the 6 May 2021 local elections to principal councils in the three areas, I have carefully considered all the representations I have received including the views expressed by councils. I have also had regard both to the importance of local elections as the foundation of our local democracy and ensuring the accountability of councils to local people, and to the risks of continuing with the May 2021 elections in the areas when consultations are taking place on proposals which could, if implemented, result in the

abolition of those councils. Elections in such circumstances risk confusing voters and would be hard to justify where members could be elected to serve shortened terms.

Accordingly, I have concluded that, irrespective of what my future decisions might be on the restructuring proposals, the right course is to reschedule the May 2021 local elections. If no unitary proposal is implemented in an area, the rescheduled elections will take place in May 2022. If a unitary proposal is implemented the rescheduled elections will be replaced by elections in May 2022 to the new unitary authority or authorities which could be in shadow form or a continuing council taking on the functions of the other councils in the area.

Finally, I would reiterate that the Government will not impose top-down government solutions. We will continue, as I am now currently doing, to follow a locally-led approach where councils can develop proposals which have strong local support. This has been the Government's consistent approach since 2010, when top-down restructuring was stopped through the Local Government Act 2010. When considering reform, those in an area will know what is best – the very essence of localism to which the Government remains committed.