

Interim Plan for Devolution and Local Government Reorganisation in Staffordshire and Stoke-on-Trent.

Introduction

This submission represents the pan-Staffordshire and Stoke-on-Trent initial response to the Minister of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government's invitation to submit a proposal for a single tier of local government in the area. This plan goes further in that it describes an emerging option for a Mayoral Strategic Authority and leading options for a two unitary council structure. We should make clear that we believe strongly that the question of reorganisation and devolved structures must be considered and answered together.

The local authorities have had very little time to consider their positions, individually and collectively, since the publication of the White Paper and more particularly since the receipt of the Ministerial letter of 5th February. The bulk of the work to test and refine options lies ahead of us. We will take an evidence-led approach in developing all options and proposals and will consider the views of our residents, businesses and partners. We continue to support the best interests of the residents of Stoke-on-Trent and Staffordshire and will test our work

Our approach to devolution was established in 2024 and is based on four core principles:

- Devolution must work for all: plans must reflect and respond to a deep understanding of local needs and opportunities.
- Form must follow function: if we are to accept more or different governance in the county, then the prize in terms of devolved functions, powers and resources has to be significant.
- Governance has to be inclusive: our Leaders' Board works because all local authorities get to participate and contribute, and we want to ensure that this is also the case in any devolved arrangements.
- Commitment to subsidiarity: devolution should be to the most appropriate level of governance for the function in any question, and that should mean a combination of county-wide, local authority level and, perhaps most importantly, community level. We seek a devolution deal that gives us flexibility to make those judgements together.

At this early stage, we have identified an early lead option for devolution which is the establishment of a Mayoral Strategic Authority based on the

combined geography of the Staffordshire County and the City of Stoke-on-Trent. We recognise that there are also other options that may need to be considered.

Although none of the councils that are signatories to this submission were seeking reorganisation, we have identified two early options based on a two unitary structure but recognise that others may emerge, and all will need to be fully tested and refined. No detailed analysis has been completed at this stage. Jointly, we will ensure that:

- Our ongoing work has due regard for what is in the best interest of our residents and businesses.
- Any proposals are financially sustainable and that the continued delivery of highly valued council services is guaranteed.
- Any proposals make sense in socio-economic terms, are relevant to local communities and supports local representation and decision making.

This is a complex undertaking and budgets for the coming year have already been established. In making this submission, we request that government adequately funds the pre-November proposal development phase. This will support the capacity within the Staffordshire and Stoke-on-Trent system. Any approved solution will have inter-generational implications for the people of Staffordshire and Stoke-on-Trent. We need to get this right and therefore need to invest in a rigorous and comprehensive programme of activity between now and November.

As is hopefully clear, we are committed collectively to use best endeavours to secure a common position and presentation of a proposal by the November deadline. However, if this proves impossible, and authorities choose to submit separate and competing proposals, we are determined that this will not be at the expense of long-term working relationships, which will be crucial for any implementation phase.

Our track record in this is strong – from existing shared management teams and shared services to collective investment and tourism promotion and tackling some of the great challenges of local authorities such as sustainability, Staffordshire and Stoke-on-Trent are recognised locally and nationally for effective partnership and joint working.

Answering your questions

The invitation to submit an Interim Plan includes a number of questions. Although there has been little time to develop this plan and therefore little time to adequately consider and develop an evidence base to fully and

reliably respond to these, we have attempted with best endeavours to offer an interim reflection relating to the questions posed. They remain interim and subject to change as our work to develop the final proposal takes shape over the coming months.

(a) Identify any barriers or challenges where further clarity or support would be helpful

An undertaking of this magnitude is not without risks. The creation of any new unitary, and the termination of councils, with the associated simultaneous bringing together of and possible disaggregation of finances, staff and services is a matter to be undertaken with a great degree of detailed planning.

The combined councils employ in excess of 10,000 staff. The combined budgets can be measured in £billions. We offer support to a combined population of 1.1 million people and rising.

We provide services to the most vulnerable in society through our adults and children's safeguarding and care functions and support to the homeless. The need to ensure the successful continuation of these services in the build-up, during and post-transition will be one of the most important tasks that we face. Uncertainty, a lack of support and poor organisational behaviour would have serious negative impacts on all services but the most serious ramifications on our children's and adult services if not managed and mitigated.

We will therefore require the following.

- Sufficient funding support to ensure the development and submission of a credible proposal in November
- Named senior officials for the devolution and local government reorganisation elements of this transition but with an undertaking that support and advice from the two theme areas will be coordinated and seamless.
- Ensure we have Ministerial engagement, including access to decision makers to help guide our proposals
- An undertaking that appropriate public and partner consultation will be supported during the development of the proposal.
- A transition of this nature is complex and challenging. Our existing councils have many sensitive and mission critical improvement and transformation projects ongoing many of which will support the reorganisation but will necessarily need to be concluded to ensure the immediate resilience and success of the successor arrangements. We therefore ask that a timeline to the previously quoted April 2028 vesting day is confirmed and fully detailed as a part of this process, noting the previously shared 'Indicative LGR Timeline's.

(b) Identify the likely options for the size and boundaries of new councils that will offer the best structures for delivery of high-quality and sustainable public services across the area, along with indicative efficiency saving opportunities

With regards to devolution the most supported and emerging option is a pan-Staffordshire (Staffordshire and Stoke on Trent) mayoral authority. However, other options exist and will be explored over the coming months and the likely composition of the unitary structure will be clearly linked to the devolution model (Statutory Authority), hence the need for early clarity on this latter point.

With regards to Local Government Reorganisation, there are two main options emerging with different sponsor organisations. These are:

1. One preference for a two-unitary structure combining the county council and all district and borough councils into one new unitary council for the current Staffordshire administrative area. The existing Stoke-on-Trent City Council unitary would remain on its current boundaries.
2. One preference for two new unitary councils, one for Northern Staffordshire covering as a minimum the current borough of Newcastle-under-Lyme, the district of Staffordshire Moorlands and the city of Stoke-on-Trent, and the creation of a complementary Southern Staffordshire unitary covering the district of Lichfield, the district of Cannock Chase, the borough of East Staffordshire, the district of South Staffordshire the borough of Tamworth and the borough of Stafford.

We are aware that other options may well emerge, and we intend to work collaboratively to explore these alongside the two options currently in play.

(c) Include indicative costs and arrangements in relation to any options including planning for future service transformation opportunities

It is not possible to fully determine the costs anticipated with this extensive project. Once any proposal is approved, the cost of transition to the new unitary arrangements is likely to be measured in £millions. These cost estimates, plus any potential efficiencies and savings will be developed prior to the submission of the November proposal. We note that at this stage government has not stated its intention to fund the

costs likely to arise from this process and would welcome positive clarity of your commitment to support this process going forwards.

(d) Include early views as to the councillor numbers that will ensure both effective democratic representation for all parts of the area, and also effective governance and decision-making arrangements which will balance the unique needs of your cities, towns, rural and coastal areas, in line with the Local Government Boundary Commission for England guidance

It is too early to be definitive about the final number of councillors, noting there will be a significant reduction. This work will be undertaken in the development of the November proposal and guided by best practice and examples of similarly sized unitaries.

(e) Include early views on how new structures will support devolution ambitions

The interim plan outlines a future solution based on a Mayoral Strategic Authority for the Staffordshire and Stoke-on-Trent area. The new structures will therefore fully support and unlock our devolution ambitions, and our expectation is that both devolution and local government reorganisation will progress together.

(f) Include a summary of local engagement that has been undertaken and any views expressed, along with your further plans for wide local engagement to help shape your developing proposals

The 21st of March deadline has given councils little time to fully explore this matter. However, in the short time that we have been afforded, dialogue between all council leaders has been ongoing within the Staffordshire Leaders' Board, briefings of all councillors and staff have taken place, alongside briefings with our key partners. It should be noted however that the imposed timeline has limited this to briefing only, and not meaningful and respectful engagement. We have engaged in early dialogue with the ICB and NHS provider trusts and other major public sector colleagues including Staffordshire police and the Staffordshire Commissioner for Police, Fire and Rescue and Crime. We have engaged with Keele University and the University of Staffordshire plus each of the further education colleges in Staffordshire and Stoke-on-Trent. We have also engaged with our two area wide Chambers of Commerce and some briefings held with Parish Councils in some local authority areas. We have

not however been able to engage with our communities a meaningful way within these initial timescales. Any proposal will have to maintain the unique identities of each of our Staffordshire and Stoke-on-Trent communities. We will be seeking to develop a proposal that will ensure local representation and where possible local decision making so that the cities, towns, villages and parishes in Staffordshire feel connected to and supported by the new structural arrangements.

(g) Set out indicative costs of preparing proposals and standing up an implementation team as well as any arrangements proposed to coordinate potential capacity funding across the area

It is not possible to fully determine the costs anticipated with this extensive project. Once approved, the cost of transition to the new unitary arrangements is likely to be measured in £millions. It would be usual to establish a standing transformation team within each council to ensure the safe transition of services to the new arrangements. This would call on service staff as and when required and would rely heavily on internal leaders including in the fields of programme management, legal services, financial services and human resource specialists.

(h) Set out any voluntary arrangements that have been agreed to keep all councils involved in discussions as this work moves forward and to help balance the decisions needed now to maintain service delivery and ensure value for money for council taxpayers, with those key decisions that will affect the future success of any new councils in the area

The Staffordshire Leaders Board and the supporting Staffordshire Chief Executive group has been the main forum in ensuring that all councils have been involved in this process to date. The Staffordshire Leaders Board (a formal Joint Committee) has established a nominated Devolution Sponsors group of Chief Executives tasked with developing the devolution proposals. Through this approach we were able to reach a unified joint position with our submission to government's call for expressions of interest in September 2024, which was co-signed by all 10 local authorities. It is hoped that these arrangements will continue going forward and the councils remain committed to co-operative working as much as possible.



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