

## **Local Government Reorganisation in North Yorkshire**

### **Response from Action on Climate Emergency (ACE) Settle and area.**

The Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government is consulting on proposals for local government reorganisation in North Yorkshire. Details are at:

<https://consult.communities.gov.uk/governance-reform-and-democracy/northyorkshire/>

Consultation opened on 22 February 2021 and closes on 19 April 2021

The Ministry gives the following overview including two proposals on which comments are sought:

‘Residents and businesses in North Yorkshire are currently served by a two-tier system of local government. North Yorkshire County Council is responsible for services such as adult and children’s social care, maintaining roads and libraries, and the District Councils – Craven, Hambleton, Harrogate, Richmondshire, Ryedale, Scarborough and Selby - are responsible for services such as rubbish collection, housing and planning and environmental health. The City of York Council is a unitary local authority and is responsible for all local government services in its area.

The councils in North Yorkshire have been developing ideas about restructuring local government for some time. On 9 October 2020 the Secretary of State invited the principal councils in North Yorkshire, and the neighbouring unitary council of York, to submit locally led proposals for unitary local government.

The Secretary of State received two proposals from councils in North Yorkshire:

Six of the seven districts within North Yorkshire (all bar Hambleton) have proposed two unitary councils (East and West) - the East comprising Ryedale, Scarborough, Selby districts and the current unitary of York, and the West comprising Craven, Hambleton, Harrogate and Richmondshire districts.

North Yorkshire County Council has proposed a single unitary on the footprint of the existing administrative county, to operate alongside the existing unitary City of York Council.’

### **ACE’s comments:**

#### **About ACE**

ACE was formed in March 2019 and since then has been raising awareness of the climate emergency by running conferences, monthly green cafes meetings, and a web site. It also promotes actions through working groups focused around four themes: energy, food, transport & biodiversity e.g. partnering as one of four community groups working with the Yorkshire Dales Millennium Trust on their ‘Together for Trees’ project.

ACE also works with local policy makers such as Settle Town Council through their climate change & biodiversity working group; Craven District Council through the Craven Climate

Action Partnership and one of our representatives is awaiting an invitation to join the newly established Yorkshire and Humber Climate Commission, as a panel member.

**The ACE steering group (who drew up this response) and members of ACE believe that our climate and ecological systems are in crisis. We believe that until this crisis is averted, central and local government should be focused on mitigating and adapting to the threats to life and to our very existence that this poses. Now is not the time to be diverting attention. It is with this position to the fore that we provide our response to this ill-thought out and rushed consultation.**

### **The proposals**

Just eight weeks for a public consultation of such great importance to North Yorkshire is totally inadequate especially under the present circumstances. Normal public gatherings to discuss this matter are impossible given the Covid -19 pandemic restrictions and local organisations and other interested groups have to find different ways of coming together over the internet, which is not the best way of discussing an issue of such complexity.

Whatever changes are introduced they will have implications for our vital public services, jobs and local democracy, transparency and accountability for decades to come, yet many of those organisations and individuals who will be affected most are currently at the forefront of the battle against coronavirus and have little time to consider these far reaching proposals. As a letter from a local Settle resident to the Craven Herald (11 March 2021) entitled ‘Why such a rush?’ pointed out.

‘When Health Secretary Matt Hancock was recently found guilty by the courts of not fulfilling his legal obligations to publish details of contracts awarded for PPE, he pleaded that his priority was the provision of much-needed equipment rather than the publication of contract details. Does the government not recognise that those on the frontline of fighting the virus also have other priorities than responding to a rushed consultation on a limited range of options...’

**Currently much of the work of the councils involved in this consultation is firmly focused on helping residents through the COVID-19 pandemic - and this will be their priority for some time. We therefore call for this consultation to be put on hold at the present time.**

**We also believe that this consultation is premature as to date the government has not published its English Devolution White Paper (see: <https://consoc.org.uk/english-devolution-and-the-mystery-of-the-disappearing-speech/> which also points out that ‘Local government in England is now a patchwork of different governance models and powers – with a bias towards city regions with an elected Mayor – which does not look sustainable. Levelling up has not yet developed beyond being a slogan...’**

**It is also understood that local government in the area must be reorganised in order to unlock a devolution deal worth billions of pounds, but this is promising jam tomorrow**

**without any detail. We also are fully aware on the enormous financial pressure our local authorities are under in responding the unscheduled costs of the pandemic.**

A report from the National Audit Office dated 10 March 2021 'Local government finance in the pandemic' <https://www.nao.org.uk/report/local-government-finance-in-the-pandemic/> concludes: 'Steps taken by the government, led by the Department, have supported local authorities in the COVID-19 pandemic response. The Department's successful monthly collection of data and continued intensive engagement with the sector provided a good evidence base to underpin the financial and other support provided by government. Action by the Department and wider government to support the sector has averted system-wide financial failure at a very challenging time and means that the Department has managed the most severe risks to value for money in the short term.

'However, the financial position of local government remains a cause for concern. Many authorities will be relying on reserves to balance their 2020-21 year-end budgets (North Yorkshire County Council is one such authority). Despite continuing support into 2021-22 the outlook for next year is uncertain. Many authorities are setting budgets for 2021-22 in which they have limited confidence, and which are balanced through cuts to service budgets and the use of reserves.'

**We therefore believe that it is financially irresponsible to proceed with any reorganisation until the local authorities have been fully compensated for the additional costs and loss of income arising from the pandemic. We are also concerned about proper funding for councils' climate emergency expenditure which may well be squeezed because of the general pressure on budgets already mentioned. This will threaten long term planning both in terms of seeking to achieve net carbon targets and resourcing on how deal with the impact of climate change over the next few decades.**

**To reiterate whilst we do not rule out the need for reform of local government in North Yorkshire, for the reasons stated above now is not the time and we are not prepared to support either option detailed but rather call for any consideration be put on hold for at least 12 months.**

Barry White

Secretary Action on Climate Emergency (ACE) Settle and area.

17 April 2021.

ends