

Barton under Needwood Parish Council Parish Council Meeting 5th March 2026

Report of the Planning Committee

English Devolution, the Government's Consultation Local Government Reorganisation - Staffordshire

Introduction

The Parish Council received an e-mail dated 5th February 2026 from the Staffordshire Parish Council's Association informing us that the Government had launched a formal consultation on the proposed Local Government Reorganisation for Staffordshire. This statutory consultation seeks views on the proposals that the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government has received from the Staffordshire and Stoke on Trent's principal councils.

The proposals are:-

- (1) Two Unitary Authorities consisting of **North Staffordshire** (Newcastle under Lyme, Staffordshire Moorlands and Stoke on Trent) and **South Staffordshire** (Cannock Chase, East Staffordshire, Lichfield, South Staffordshire, Stafford and Tamworth);
- (2) Two Unitary Authorities consisting of **East Staffordshire** (East Staffordshire, Lichfield, Staffordshire Moorlands, Stoke on Trent and Tamworth) and **West Staffordshire** (Cannock Chase, Newcastle under Lyme, South Staffordshire and Stafford);
- (3) Two Unitary Authorities consisting of **North Staffordshire** (Newcastle under Lyme, Stoke on Trent, Staffordshire Moorlands and 15 parishes from East Staffordshire and 6 from Stafford) and **Southern and Mid – Staffordshire** (Cannock Chase, Lichfield, South Staffordshire, Tamworth and the remaining 22 parishes from East Staffordshire and 34 from Stafford);
- (4) Three Unitary Authorities consisting of **North Staffordshire** (Newcastle under Lyme, Staffordshire Moorlands and Stoke on Trent), **South West Staffordshire** (Cannock Chase, South Staffordshire and Stafford) and **South East Staffordshire** (Lichfield, East Staffordshire and Tamworth);
- (5) Four Unitary Authorities consisting of (1) **Newcastle under Lyme**, (2) **Cannock Chase, South Staffordshire and Stafford**, (3) **Staffordshire Moorlands and Stoke on Trent** and (4) **East Staffordshire, Lichfield and Tamworth**

The Staffordshire Parish Council's Association is encouraging every local council to submit a formal response, as well as sharing the response with local residents, and encouraging them to take part. **Responses are required by 26th March 2026**

Background Context

We need to step back a little to try and put this particular consultation into its context. In December 2024, not long after coming into office, the present government produced a White Paper on English Devolution. A White Paper is generally produced as a prelude to legislation. The aim of the White Paper is summed up nicely within the first paragraph of the Executive Summary, "**England is one of the most centralized countries in the developed world. Devolution across England is fundamental to achieving the change the public expect and deserve: growth, more joined up delivery of public services and politics being done with communities not to them**".

The White Paper was prescriptive in its solution – universal coverage in England by Strategic Authorities. These will be a kind of new regional authority, with the long-term ambition that they will be led by Mayors who will chair the authority and lead strategic planning. The existing situation in London and the West Midlands will provide the model for this arrangement. There is a lot in the White Paper about the role of Mayors and so it looks like the Government is seeing this role as the publicly recognizable figurehead for each Strategic Authority.

Existing below this level will be one or more Unitary Authorities. The consequence of this reorganization is that the existing two-tier structure of County Councils and District Councils will be abandoned in favour of one joined-up authority providing all the services currently run by both district and county. Parish Councils represent the third tier of local government. The White Paper notes that unitary councils can lead to better outcomes for residents, save significant money, which can be reinvested in public services, and improve accountability with fewer politicians who are more able to focus on delivering for residents. It also proposes to rebuild local authority workforces and modernize how councils do business.

The Government had invited reorganization proposals from local areas and set a deadline of November 2025. Invariably this has meant existing districts and boroughs combining in some shape or form to make up the unitary authorities. The rules for this indicate that mergers are to be along existing local authority areas, and proposals should be for sensible economic and geographical areas. Proposals must be supported by robust evidence and should aim for a population of 500,000 or more. Efficiencies should be identified to ensure that council taxpayers get the best value for money and proposals should set out how the transition process will be managed. Unitary structures should prioritise the delivery of high quality and sustainable services and engage meaningfully with the local community.

"Redefining Staffordshire"

A Working Group of the associate local authorities developed an Interim Plan in March 2025 for a Southern and Mid-Staffordshire Unitary Authority, consisting of the six local authority areas as set in the first of the options above. This proposal was developed in parallel with a

similar case for a Northern Staffordshire unitary authority. The six authorities' Interim Plan acknowledged that the final proposal, in terms of the two new unitary Authorities, will be determined by the need to secure financial stability and how it supports a wider devolution settlement for Staffordshire as a whole. The total population of the 6 districts is 674,676.

Residents in East Staffordshire Borough were asked for their views on the principle of local government reorganisation and also had to consider a range of 5 options for unitary areas within Staffordshire. These options were not the same as the ones on which the government is now consulting, but they did include the six authority South Staffordshire area which includes East Staffordshire (ESBC). The Planning Committee prepared a report for the Parish Council at its meeting on 4th September 2025. The report set out the background to the White Paper, and the conditions which had been set by the Government for local areas to put forward proposals. The general gist of the Parish Council's position was that if there was to be a large unitary authority then it should be fully staffed and resourced to deal efficiently and effectively with Parish Councils and local residents' needs. We felt that this was more important than any grouping of local authority areas and so we did not express any opinion for any specific option. The Parish Council's comments were sent to the Chief Executive of East Staffordshire Borough Council (ESBC).

Whilst drafting our report last September, we became aware of increasing criticism about the potential costs associated with the Government's proposals for reorganisation. Ministers have tended to promote reorganisation as a potential cost saving measure which could then result in re-investment in public services. We understood that the Government's figures were based on an assessment undertaken in 2020 which suggested cost savings of £2.9bn over 5 years. A recent report by the County Council Network, however, indicated that reorganisation could actually cost £850m over 5 years and deliver no savings if 58 new councils were created with a minimum of 300,000 population. Similarly, the District Councils Network has suggested that mega councils with populations of half a million could be imposed on areas when there is no independent evidence to justify councils of this size and when many large councils created previously are struggling.

As a Parish Council we were not in a position to comment on the veracity of these costs. We did assert, however, that as a country we seem to be in the middle of a period of severe constraint on public finances, especially as the prospects and forecasts for growth, nationally, appeared limited. This made us question that if savings cannot be achieved, so as to be reinvested, then should the reorganisation of local government continue to be pursued as a priority at the present time?

During the course of 2025, the associate authorities also prepared a more detailed case for this six authority South Staffordshire unitary area. This Report, "Redefining Staffordshire" concluded that their option provided a clear vision, a robust financial case and a practical implementation plan. This would focus on residents, remove duplication, streamline governance and empower residents. (For some reason this document also seems to be referred to as, "Delivering a Stronger Staffordshire").

A report on reorganisation was considered by the Full Council of the Borough Council on 10th November 2025 and The Cabinet on 17th November 2025. This report considered the

feedback from their consultation, noting that residents of East Staffordshire emphasised social care, roads and residents needs as their priorities. There were also worries about unitary areas being too large, but they saw opportunities for these new authorities to provide better services. The Borough Council endorsed this six authority solution as they felt that this option could achieve a clear single tier of local government, meet the Government's population and financial sustainability criteria and establish a credible platform for devolution.

The Government's Consultation on proposals for Staffordshire

The Government's consultation poses a number of questions. In this report, we will attempt to address these questions by reference to our earlier response to the ESBC Consultation. In addition, we have read through the case for a South Staffordshire authority report entitled, "Redefining Staffordshire" as this was the favoured option supported by ESBC. We have not read, in any great detail, the similar reports for the other options set out above and, therefore, our responses relate primarily to the case for the North and South Staffordshire division of the County.

To what extent do you agree or disagree that the proposal suggests councils that are based on sensible geographies and economic areas?

We agree that Unitary Authorities need to be based on geographical and economic allegiances. The problem, however, is that the Government's insistence for a 500,000 population means that some local authorities now proposing to be merged may not have any ties with each other. We feel that East Staffordshire has some allegiance with Lichfield and Tamworth. We would have looked more thoroughly at this option but for this Government's population threshold. We have some links with Stafford, but this is focused on it being the headquarters for the County Council. We have no real links with Cannock Chase or South Staffordshire. We do recognise the links between Lichfield and Cannock Chase. So, if the threshold population is an imperative then we would have to conclude that geographical and economic areas forming the proposed South Staffordshire area will feel contrived and, therefore, may not achieve the role of true economic and geographic allegiances.

The 'Redefining Staffordshire' report indicates that the proposed South Staffordshire authority will bring together, "*.... nuances and individualities of the component parts under a shared sense of place that acknowledges the history, culture and economy of the area*". This comes across as management speak. It is not clear what it means and so we are uncertain, for example, as to what 'shared sense of place' we have with South Staffordshire District Council.

To what extent do you agree or disagree that the proposed councils will be able to deliver the outcomes they describe in the proposal?

We hope that they can. The document 'Redefining Staffordshire' offers laudable ambitions. What it does not really address is how it will deliver these outcomes, how they can be

certain that they are the outcomes that residents require and how will they be implemented and monitored. Without more information about how outcomes can be delivered in practice, it is difficult to answer this question.

To what extent do you agree or disagree that the proposed councils are the right size to be efficient, improve capacity and withstand financial shocks? / To what extent do you agree or disagree that this proposal will put local government in the area as a whole on a firmer footing, particularly given that some councils in the area are in receipt of exceptional financial support?

Looking at the 'Redefining Staffordshire' document, the financial analysis claims to deliver a positive net financial gain achieving breakeven after 1.4 years taking into account initial costs of implementation and transition. The analysis results in a net financial positive impact over five years of £92.7m. If this is achieved, then it will justify the Government's claim of reorganisation saving money. But something in the order of 30% of local government funding comes from the Revenue Support Grant. We have seen over the last 10-15 years that local government has not necessarily been a priority for government spending. In the present financial climate, we cannot see that situation improving. The savings look substantial but if Government funding to local authorities continues to decline, then we just wonder if even this level of savings will be sufficient to compensate, especially as many councils are struggling under the weight of the social care budget and spending on SEND.

We are also aware of the government's published intention to reduce the Revenue Support Grant for some allegedly wealthier council areas and redirect it to other allegedly deprived areas as part of levelling up. It is unclear what this would mean for the proposed South Staffordshire area as we have both relatively wealthy and some deprived and low income areas.

We would hope that a Unitary Authority of the proposed size of South Staffordshire will be financially robust enough because of the size of the tax base. But this is not always the situation as the case of Birmingham City Council exemplifies. Allegedly the largest local authority in Europe, but through a number of financial decisions going awry, it has fallen into financial difficulties.

We are, therefore, not convinced that a new Unitary Authority will be any more financially robust than the present situation. The financial savings put forward in the case for South Staffordshire appear impressive, but we are not convinced that this will be enough unless and until the financial relationship between central and local government is resolved and placed on a firmer and long-term footing.

To what extent do you agree or disagree that the proposed councils will deliver high quality, sustainable public services? / To what extent do you agree or disagree that the proposal has been informed by local views and will meet local needs?

In 2024, the Parish Council undertook a survey of local residents and so we feel we have a reasonable up to date idea of the village's concerns and issues. As far as the survey was concerned, it highlighted some issues which included:-

- Blocked highway drains and potential flood risk;
- The need to ensure local businesses continue to thrive and the village centre remains robust and sustainable;
- Potholes!!
- Through traffic and parking;
- The poor reception of the mobile signal;
- Need for increased police presence to deal with anti-social behaviour;
- Re-open a former local railway station.

No doubt these sorts of concerns will be common to most parishes and areas within a combined unitary authority. But these are the stated needs that are important to local people. The fact that they have been identified means that they are not being met at the moment. We are not confident that a larger local authority will be able to address them, because if there is no money or resources now to tackle them then how will they be tackled in a larger unitary authority? How can we be certain that meeting these local needs will have any priority for limited expenditure?

Some of the issues identified above cannot necessarily be resolved solely by a new Unitary Authority. They require a more joined-up approach by working with statutory undertakers and other service providers. The Parish Council has recently commented on a planning application for 70 houses in the village. Through this process we have become aware of local capacity issues. We know that both the Infant and the Junior schools are, more or less, at capacity. We were also told that the GP Practice would have difficulty in coping with the extra demand. This application has also highlighted the local problems regarding the capacity of the local highways, sewage works and the drainage system. Whilst the public utilities and NHS fall outside the scope of local government, if a unitary body wants to genuinely tackle local problems, then they will need to work proactively with all service providers to address these local needs.

Our fear is that when you have an authority covering such a large geographical area and serving a large population then major infrastructure projects, seen as beneficial for the area as a whole, and tackling the most deprived parts, will always take priority over more local and especially rural needs. Unless the new Unitary Authorities can guarantee that they will be well staffed and resourced then we are sceptical as to whether both high-quality services can be provided and that they can respond effectively and efficiently to local needs.

To what extent do you agree or disagree that establishing the councils in this proposal will support devolution arrangements?

In theory, the notion of a joined up and fully staffed and resourced unitary authority is to be welcomed. The issues mentioned in the 'Redefining Staffordshire' document of ensuring economies of scale through joined up procurement, developing universal or at least linked IT systems, considering council assets and existing Town Hall space, and taking an holistic view

of regeneration are all advantages that a unitary authority can bring. For a Parish Council, it will be good to be able to liaise with just one authority. From a planning standpoint, for example, it will be refreshing to think that we may be able to discuss transport issues within the wider context of the needs of the village. So, we do see some advantages in terms of combining services within just one authority.

To what extent do you agree or disagree that the proposal enables stronger community engagement and gives the opportunity for neighbourhood empowerment? / To what extent do you agree or disagree that the proposal sets out a strong public services and financial sustainability justification for boundary change?

From the perspective of a Parish Council, we find it very disappointing that the White Paper does not really address the role of Parish and Town Councils and, particularly, the problems of rural areas. What may be appropriate in Battersea may not work in Barton and so some form of devolved local government which can reflect local needs by engaging more effectively with local areas is to be welcomed

There is also irony in the government's desire to want to ensure that local communities and neighbourhoods have a greater say in their future while at the same time creating local authorities with a population of half a million people or more. This will potentially mean that local communities are further distanced from local government. The Associate Councils' Interim Report recognizes that a unitary authority must be delivered in a way, ***"that enables stronger community engagement and delivers genuine opportunities for neighbourhood empowerment"***. The Government Minister, in response to a query about the role of Parish Councils stated, ***"We will rewire the relationship between town and parish councils and principal Local Authorities, strengthening expectations on engagement and community voice"*** (Jim McMahon Minister of State for Local Government and English Devolution 28th February 2025).

These are all fine words, and we are sure that they are well intentioned, but they have to mean something. At present there is not enough detail about how this rewiring will be enacted or indeed how the proposed Unitary Authority will deliver genuine empowerment. The 'Redefining Staffordshire' document suggests that a steamlined model of a single unitary structure, ***" will make it easier for communities to access the services they need, fostering greater trust and responsiveness"***. We are sure technology can be harnessed to enable a better relationship between local government and the community, but it is not at all clear what this means in practice and how it will be enacted.

If we are going to support these ambitions for greater empowerment, then we need to see in detail exactly how South Staffordshire proposes to strengthen engagement with town and parish councils such that our local communities are better listened to and our needs met.

The impression we get is that the reality of this proposed reorganization, because of the size of the Unitary Authority, is that local communities will be further removed from contact with their local authority than they are now. We are, however, heartened by the South

Staffordshire model which suggests that with 92 Councillors in 46 Wards this could mean a ratio of 1 Councillor to every 5.847 members of the electorate, within a 2 member ward. This level of contact seems reasonable, and it should ensure that each Councillor would be able to develop a strong understanding of the needs of their patch. But the downside is that groupings of Councillors for the urban areas may still predominate when it comes to voting, and there appears to be no checks and balances in the system for how the needs of the rural areas will get any priority for services or funding.

The main vehicle for achieving empowerment in the case proposed for the South Staffordshire authority is a Neighbourhood Area Committee (NAC). "The purpose of the NACS is, ***' to empower local communities by amplifying their voice, preserving their unique identity and influencing programme design and delivery in local services through engaged member- led decision making and effective action plans, ultimately shaping a better future for their neighbourhoods'***". NACS are intended to work at a district or sub-district level, be member-led and include opportunities for co-opted members from business or youth sectors. Regular forums are intended as well as locally devolved budgets.

As a Parish Council we are concerned that what appear to be unelected NACs will usurp the role of the elected Parish Councils. The document suggests that they will complement the role of Parish Councils but again it is not at all clear how this will work in practice. Because they operate at a particular local level and are an established tier of local government, Parish Councillors are embedded in the community and know their area well. Creating NACS would just seem to establish another level of bureaucracy which could lead to confusion about who does what. We are also concerned about who nominates or appoints co-opted members to NACS. How can we be sure that vested interests will not dominate such a grouping? How will any devolved budget operate in practice? If some sub-area body is deemed to be necessary, then why not build on what is already in existence? Some form of grouping of Parish Councils representing small villages and rural areas might provide a better way of ensuring that the rural voice is heard in the corridors of power. The Needwood Division Forum attended by Parish Councillors and Council officers and chaired by a County Councillor could provide a useful template. In addition, if the ratio of Councillor to electorate is achieved then, then areas will already have an elected representative within the authority. This further begs the question as to what role the unelected NACS will perform.

Whilst the emphasis of both the Government's and the South Staffordshire case is one of addressing local communities and their empowerment, we are not convinced the Neighbourhood Area Committees, as proposed, provide the most appropriate vehicle to achieve this. Reading the 'Redefining Staffordshire' document we get the impression that financial stability and saving money are higher objectives and concerns. Within that context, we are not sure how addressing local needs fits into this framework. We also fear that the rural voice will be lost unless more robust structures are proposed so as to enable a fair division of the available resources.

Recommendation

That this report and the response to the Government's questions as set out in the consultation be submitted to the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local

Government. For information purposes a copy of this report will also be submitted to East Staffordshire Borough Council and the Staffordshire Parish Councils' Association. The report should also be made available on the Parish Council's website. Parish Councillors will make local residents aware of the proposals and encourage them to respond.