

Local Government Reform in Northants

Bulletin No 1

From Ian McCord – Leader, South Northamptonshire Council

Dear all – I thought you would find it helpful if we provided regular updates on the status of and progress with the Local Government reform activity. This will be the first of many updates I am sure!

I will start at the beginning so we are all in the same place with the facts. I appreciate many of you in the Parish Councils will be asking, what does this mean for us? What is happening? How will it work? – all the same questions both District Council Members and Staff are asking. At this stage – I am unable to answer most but we will keep talking...

As I suspect you will remember, on 27 March the Minister issued an invitation to all the Northamptonshire district and borough authorities, including the County Council, to make proposals for a restructuring of local government. In response all Leaders from across the County met with the lead civil servant who made it very clear that a joint response from all Districts and the County would be the preferred option. As a result we jointly procured consultants to develop the submission to be on the Secretary of State's desk on 27 July. I attach the scope for you information.

This is a situation no-one wanted to be in but the message from central Government is clear and I want to ensure we (us, you, our communities etc.) are in a position to drive and influence the future with our residents and businesses at the heart of the discussion.

As I have explained, we are all working together on this and as a result have had our request for the submission deadline to be extended from July to August agreed by central government. This is good news as it will enable a more realistic opportunity for local community engagement and consultation, and the development of locally generated proposals. We want to have the maximum time we can for the consultation.

Senior officers and I have just started working with the consultants and are gathering data and information for analysis. We are establishing a project plan and are agreeing who we need to talk to and, importantly, when. You are of course critical to these discussions. The Programme Director for this work (Richard Lundie-Sadd) has already engaged with Danny Moody from Northants CALC in order to establish how best to link with you as a collective. As you would expect, this topic is also on the agenda of the next Clerk's meeting.

Last week the Minister also announced the arrival of the commissioners into Northants County Council (NCC) - this was a key recommendation of the Best Value report. They are Tony McArdle, lead commissioner, and Brian Roberts, finance lead and both are very experienced senior local government officers. Over the coming months they will work with NCC officers and members to provide stronger leadership and improved financial stability.

The other question many have is – what does this mean for the partnership between South Northants and Cherwell? It is with great sadness that Cherwell District and South Northamptonshire councils have announced that the partnership between them dating back to 2010 will draw to a close.

The Local Government Review in Northamptonshire has required the Leader and the administration of Cherwell District Council to reflect upon its future and consider what is best for its residents. As a result they are 'minded to' formally end the successful partnership with South Northamptonshire Council. We fully understand and accept Cherwell District Council's decision, and emphasise that the separation is totally amicable. The exact details and process for this separation have yet to be worked out but please be assured that all decisions will be taken with the best interests of residents at their heart. Both myself and Barry Wood at Cherwell regret that external circumstances have forced this split. The Chief Executive of both Cherwell and South Northamptonshire councils, Yvonne Rees, has written to staff saying that there will be no immediate changes and reassures residents that all service delivery will continue as normal.

It is very unfortunate that probably one of the most successful district council partnerships in English local government has to be finished because of the external pressures. Cherwell Council, its residents and taxpayers are the most innocent of all innocent victims. There are legal and other barriers to SNC and CDC combining to form a unitary authority. The forced re-organisation of the council structures in Northants results in this being the only logical conclusion.

Luckily for all of us there is no falling out, just immense sadness and extreme frustration. I will continue to work in full co-operation to ensure that the unwinding is as smooth as the integration was in the first place.

So this is the end of the first update. I shall try to inform you as we go along with this process; it is not what we at SNC want. However, I firmly believe that if we just oppose it the end result will be the same but we will have had little chance to shape any of it.

I am sure you will have many questions - as indicated we will proactively engage with you so watch this space for events, calls for information and your input. We have commissioned an experienced company to help with engagement – this is important so we have to get it right.

If you have any burning questions – please just ask, but be mindful I do not have detail at this stage but I commit to updating you regularly. To ensure we keep track of requests please email LocalGovernmentReform@SouthNorthants.gov.uk