

**Embargoed until 08.00 am Thursday 4<sup>th</sup> June**

## **County councils warn government's reorganisation plans now pose 'significant risk' to essential services, in letter to Prime Minister**

Three quarters of county councils in line to be reorganised have signed a letter to the Prime Minister, arguing the government's approach to reorganisation now poses a 'direct threat to the most vulnerable' and the sustainability of new councils.

In March, the government announced its decision to reorganise councils in Essex, Suffolk, Norfolk and Hampshire, abolishing both county and district councils in those areas and replacing them with unitary councils.

Despite setting out a statutory criteria for decisions at the onset of the programme, including a principle to create new unitaries covering populations of over 500,000 and avoiding the unnecessary fragmentation of care services, the letter argues that the decisions are at odds with the guidance: splitting those counties into multiple smaller unitary councils in each location.

The March decisions will create 15 new unitary councils in just four counties. In Suffolk and Norfolk the county council put forward a proposal for a single county in each area, whereas in Essex and Hampshire the county councils proposed three unitaries for each county. In all four counties, the government took the most radical proposals to create three unitaries in each of Suffolk and Norfolk, four in Hampshire and five in Essex. In three of the four areas, complex changes to existing boundaries are required. Government will decide on the number of unitary councils in the remaining 16 counties later this summer.

Ahead of those decisions, the County Councils Network (CCN) has written to the Prime Minister warning *'if this pattern of large-scale fragmentation and complex boundary change, at odds with the government criteria, is repeated, this will create a pattern of reform that is more costly, less stable and less effective than the current two-tier system'*.

The letter was endorsed by cross party members of CCN's management committee. All county councils and the CCN unitary member, North Lincolnshire, impacted by the March decisions and those due be decided on in July, were invited to sign the letter based on their local circumstances. In total, 16 out of those councils signed the letter.

The councils argue that the creation of smaller, fragmented unitary authorities will increase severe financial pressures, jeopardise the delivery of essential adult and children's services and require 'hundreds of millions of central government funding to support transition'. As a result, they warn that some services may not be functioning on day one of these new councils coming into inception in April 2028:

*... ‘the scale of fragmentation, combined with complex boundary changes and an enormously ambitious timetable for delivery are causing serious concerns from our senior staff about the capacity of the system to deliver safe and legal services to the timetable proposed.’*

*‘...These are not abstract concerns. They represent a direct threat to vulnerable residents, to the sustainability of new councils, and to the deliverability of the government’s welcome reforms to children’s services and special educational needs and disabilities in large swathes of the country.’*

The letter argues that the March decisions were a marked shift from the government’s own criteria, published last year, on the size of new councils, sustainability, and service resilience. It says that ministers have not provided sufficient supporting evidence:

*‘Despite requests, the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government is unwilling to disclose departmental analysis to justify how ministers reached the conclusion that they were ‘satisfied’ proposals can be delivered on a sustainable financial basis.’*

*...the decisions in March to create 15 new unitary councils across four areas have set in train an experimental approach to reorganisation that bears all the hallmarks of a set of short-term political choices, not a coherent or consistent application of the government’s own framework.’*

Without sufficient evidence to justify why the government has veered from its own criteria, the signatories say they should have access to the evidence ‘necessary to assess the integrity of decisions’.

In calling for greater transparency and evidence, the letter outlines the magnitude of decisions that have both been taken and are due later this summer. It outlines that following the splitting of Essex, Norfolk, Suffolk and Hampshire there are now *‘significant risks this programme of reform now poses to the delivery of essential services to our residents and most vulnerable communities.’*

The letter urges the government to ‘seriously engage the sector on the integrity of the decision-making process’, alongside the feasibility of delivery within the government’s timescales. It says that proceeding with further decisions at pace, and on the basis of an approach that ‘is increasingly perceived as inconsistent and politically driven risks embedding significant long-term consequences’.

### **Notes to editor**

- The County Councils Network (CCN) is the national voice for England’s county and unitary councils. It represents 39 councils: 21 county councils and 18 unitary authorities. Collectively, they represent 27 million people, or 47% of the country’s population. Read more [here](#).
- Read the letter here. A full list of all the signatories is at the bottom of the letter.