

New Staffordshire councils: what residents need to know about the upcoming changes



Work to create two new Staffordshire councils to replace 10 existing authorities is underway – and cllrs have been given details of what will be taking place over the next 20 months.

The Government announced its proposals for the new unitary authority system last month, which will see the current county, district and borough councils in Staffordshire replaced with northern and southern councils.

The new northern Staffordshire council will provide services to more than 490,000 people living in Stoke-on-Trent, Newcastle Borough and Staffordshire Moorlands.

And the new council in the south of the county cover Stafford Borough, East Staffordshire Borough, Cannock Chase District, Lichfield District, South Staffordshire District and South Staffordshire District, which have a combined population of more than 680,000 people.

Members of Staffordshire County Council's Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee were given an update on the current position of local government reorganisation at their latest meeting.

Committee members raised concerns about the proposed timescale and impact on residents and council staff.

Council leader Martin Murray said: "Our focus now is to work constructively across the area to support implementation and ensure new agreements are delivered safely and effectively.

"Essentially, services will continue to be delivered while transition work takes place in parallel, so there is nothing to worry about for any residents or businesses at all.

"Officers have already done a significant amount of work preparation.

"This includes establishing programme governance, creating a joint way of working across Staffordshire and Stoke City councils.

"The next phase will be about readiness and implementation following the decision to agree joint working agreements with partners across Staffordshire and Stoke-on-Trent, including setting up of voluntary joint committees.

"These are temporary cross-council bodies that oversee the development of the joint implementation plan to set up the joint implementation team, who are officers responsible for doing the detailed work needed to make sure the councils are ready to operate from day one."

The meeting was told a Structural Change Order (SCO) will set out the formal legal framework for local government reorganisation.

Elections to the new authorities will take place in May 2027 and they will operate as "shadow councils", replacing joint committees and acting as temporary governing bodies for the new unitary councils.

The shadow councils will also develop the initial budget, constitution, senior staffing structures and key policies ahead of "vesting day", which is scheduled for April 1 2028.

The county, district and borough councils will continue to operate fully until vesting day, when the new authorities will take over the running of services.

Cllr Bob Egginton asked: "Does everybody think we can meet the timescales on this?"

"There's an awful lot of work and I wonder, if we do run over, what would the cost be?"

"I'm questioning why six or seven other councils have initiated a judicial review.

"Should a judicial review be launched against the Government's LGR statutory change order?"

Cllr Murray responded: "The ones that have, like Hampshire and Essex, were given numbers that were not in the original White Paper, nor in the guidance given, i.e. numbers of 250,000 (residents) and thereabouts per unitary.

"The one that has been given to Staffordshire does fall within the original remit given, which limits the argument for judicial review.

"Also, the judicial review doesn't necessarily mean the Government has to adhere to them.

Everything we do from now on isn't an endorsement, but we have to do the work – whether we are engaged or not, this continues with or without us, and the whole point is we must be part of this.

"The timescale, frankly, looks a little insane.

"It's important we must get on with this work; failure to do so can actually put people at risk, vulnerable people and vital services that we in local government have to deliver."

Cllr Alex Farrell said: "As we look around the county, my biggest concern with LGR is that Staffordshire will effectively stagnate for the next few years because councils are winding up their big projects and not embarking on anything new for residents, so we're just doing business as usual.

"The first couple of years of the council will be frantically trying to set up a brand new council, not thinking ahead to big, important projects for our residents.

"You have got a guarantee from me that this is not a political situation at all.

"We are in agreement that it's not a good situation we find ourselves in as a county. "I am concerned we are going to be putting our officers – not just in the county council but in the districts and boroughs – under undue stress to get this ready in time."