



Northumberland County Council
Stakeholder views on local government reorganisation
Final Report

1. Introduction

Following the Government White Paper “Strong and Prosperous Communities”, which invited proposals for single unitary authorities in existing two-tier areas, two bids have been put forward to reorganise local government in Northumberland. Both aim to rationalise the existing two-tier system. The two bids are:

- A bid put forward by the existing County Council, which proposes a single unitary authority covering the whole county, and which replaces both the existing County Council and District Councils, and
- An alternative bid put forward by the existing District Councils, under which the areas covered by the existing District Councils would be aggregated into two unitary authorities, which together would cover the whole county. One of these would be predominantly urban and one predominantly rural.

Opinion Leader was commissioned to carry out research into the views of key stakeholders of Northumberland County Council to gauge their reactions to the proposed changes to local government structure.

2. Methodology

A total of 27 in-depth telephone interviews were carried out by Opinion Leader. These were drawn from a sample list of contacts: this was provided by Northumberland County Council to reflect and was not drawn independently. The sample covered a broad range of key stakeholders who would be affected by the proposed changes to local government structure in Northumberland, and who Northumberland provided as representatives of the stakeholders contacted by the Government (Government Office for the North East and DCLG) for their views on local government reform. These included representatives of the local business sector, regional organisations, other statutory bodies and members of the voluntary and community sector. Many of those interviewed had a working relationship with both the County Council and the District Councils, and several were engaged in preparing a submission to DCLG on their own behalf.

The interviews were all carried out in-house and recorded digitally. The transcripts were then analysed and a range of views were identified and linkages explored.

The research was qualitative in nature, and therefore no statistical conclusions can be drawn from the findings here presented. Qualitative research seeks to establish the range of views, and to explain and explore linkages. Quantitative research would be needed to achieve a statistical or numerical measure of these views. To avoid misrepresenting the data, we have therefore not given information about the extent or weighting of certain views among the sample.

3. Key findings so far

3.1 Extent and sources of knowledge about the bid

3.1.1 Extent of knowledge

Most stakeholders are fairly well informed about the two bids, and nearly all are able to give a headline description of each proposal. However, a few are under misapprehensions: for example, one respondent has not heard about the two unitary council bid, and another admits to not knowing a great deal about the two bids, assuming that the single unitary bid is maintaining the status quo.

"Pretty flimsily I have to say, that there are two opposing views, one which is very much more maintaining the status quo and one which is looking to change and there are two groups of protagonists that have got their views."

Perhaps unsurprisingly, those who are based locally, i.e. within the county, tend to know about the bids in more detail than those who are not (they also tend to have stronger views). Many respondents are in the middle of preparing a submission to DCLG about the two bids, and are hence very well informed.

3.1.2 Sources of knowledge

The following are all sources of information about the bids, with most respondents having more than one source of information:

- Letters from the County and District Councils – most respondents had received one from each. These were generally felt to be very thorough.

"We've had briefing documents, extensive briefing documents come through"

- A visit from the Chief Executive of Northumberland County Council, or from a representative of the District Councils – again, many have received at least one of these. Typically if they have only received visits from one, the other is scheduled to come in and see them

"We have had presentations by representatives of both the single unitary bid and the one Northumberland two Council bids, and our members have an opportunity to formally consider these presentations and the detail and helping in the consultation document issued by DCLG."

Tony Gates, Chief Executive, Northumberland National Park Authority

- Communication from the local District Council

As well as from direct communications, respondents get information about the bids from more general discussions going on in the county, for example:

- Discussions taking place within existing formal networks and forums
- Discussions and articles on the subject in the local press
- Discussions at meetings
- Mailouts to residents.

Some respondents appear to feel caught between the County and District Councils – they are aware of the importance of the issue for each. Some show mild frustration with the extent to which each “side” is trying to persuade them of their views.

"It's in the newspapers, we discuss it at meetings; my ear is bent by them both."

"We've been directly courted by both sides; we have also obviously been following the media, and as a resident of Northumberland I've had mail drops et cetera, in terms of direct communication as well."

3.2 Reactions to the overall concepts

Nearly all of those interviewed favour the single unitary bid, although there are also some who are:

- Strongly in favour of the two unitary bid
- Personally in favour of the single unitary bid although understanding of how those in rural areas might prefer the two unitary bid
- Ambivalent about both of the bids, feeling that they both have something to prove
- Reluctant to give an answer

Of those who favour the single unitary authority bid, many feel that the two unitary authority bid could also be made to work – they simply prefer the single unitary approach given the choice.

3.2.1 Need for change

Regardless of their preference, most respondents believe that the status quo cannot be maintained and that there needs to be reform in local government in Northumberland. The existing two-tier structure is felt to be too cumbersome and inefficient for the population size and in terms of service delivery, and to be confusing for the general public in terms of who delivers services.

"Well at its simplest, we do away with two tier local government and we go for single tier, integrate all the local government services into a single tier and the question is whether or not we have one or two."

"My initial reaction is I suppose is one of relief that we will get rid of two tiers and the complications and confusion that ordinary folk have with that, so life would be simpler, not necessarily better, but my first reaction is, oh thank goodness we haven't got to deal with seven authorities any longer... Either two or one. So that was, from my point of view, an improvement. That was my initial reaction."

Respondents also have particular issues about the size of some of the District Councils: they do not think they have the "critical mass" necessary to ensure effective service delivery.

"Well I think things have to change... I'm still rather unhappy with the running of (name of District Council) – it's too small."

3.2.2 Advantages of the single unitary authority bid

The advantages of the single unitary authority approach are felt to be as follows. Not all of these apply in all cases, as the balance of priorities varies between stakeholders.

- **Economies of scale**, something which is mentioned by many different stakeholders but which appears to be particularly attractive to business people. Respondents feel that a single authority will be able to reduce duplication by bringing together services that are currently offered across all the districts, and that this will save money. In contrast, it is felt that two unitary authorities would not only duplicate service delivery between themselves, but would also require twice as much in terms of infrastructure and administration costs: two town halls, two CEOs, two CEOs' PAs and so on.

"For a range of reasons (we support the single unitary bid). I mean, primarily efficiency and effectiveness, the leadership aspect and the potential for service improvement and efficiency and effectiveness gains."

*"To just deal with one council strikes me as being a much more efficient way of going forward."
Mike Parker, Non-Executive Chairman, Northumberland Tourism*

- A belief that the single unitary authority represents the **best use of available resources**: there have been no indications from central Government that extra funds will be made available, and therefore it is not thought that two unitary authorities are justified.
- It is thought that a single unitary council will be better able to **fight the county's corner** at a regional and national level. This is particularly felt to be the case if a city region based on Newcastle emerges. People refer to a single unitary authority being able to speak with "one voice",

which it is thought would give it more weight than two unitary authorities and enable it to get a fair hearing regionally, as it would compare well to other large authorities and would be more likely to be taken seriously. One respondent refers to this as the county being able to “take a seat at the big boys’ table”.

“It gives a stronger voice with regional organisations, that everything is moving to regional models and a stronger voice with government.”

“I think a single voice works far better. It gives you far more gravitas.”

- Some respondents point to the comparatively **low population levels** in Northumberland. At just over 300,000 residents, they do not feel that there are enough people in the county to warrant either maintaining the current two-tier system, or replacing it with two unitary authorities when there is an opportunity to replace it with one. They do not feel that there will be any advantage, given the size of the population base, in having two unitary authorities.
- A single unitary authority may be **simpler to deal with**, as it provides a single point of contact: for members of the public, businesses, and stakeholder organisations.

“One voice, one chain of command, one strategy and in a region where the public sector is very large, with many organisations let’s say with government office and the various public sector organisations, One North East and so on; anything that simplifies the relationship for business makes life easy.”

“One voice, one chain of command, one strategy”

- A single unitary authority will be more able to **attract and retain the best people at all levels** than will two. This is an argument which in some degree relates to the low population density: there is a limited pool of people to choose from within the county, or who will be willing to come to work in the county from outside. It is thought that a larger, single unitary organisation will be more of an attractive proposition for talented people both within and outside the county.

“It’s important that the new unitary in Northumberland... that they have the ability to attract and maintain the right calibre of individuals. And that’s just not chief executives and senior position post holders. It’s right through, and particularly when you’re talking about planners and various other roles. You... can’t afford for that local authority to be viewed as a backwater. And so for that reason we feel that the single unitary for the county gives a sense of scale and provides for the ambition of really talented officials to work within that.”

- It is felt that the **division into urban and rural may be arbitrary** as regards service needs: many are not convinced that the county is diverse enough to require two authorities, as long as the single unitary authority is mindful of any differences where they do exist. In any case, some respondents

point to an area such as Alnwick coming under an “urban” heading when it is rural, and some of the commuter suburbs of Newcastle being conversely classed as “rural”, when they are urban in outlook.

"I suppose you might argue that a rural district understands the needs of rural communities more than say Wansbeck, where the problems are perhaps a different set of problems — they are certainly different in scale in terms of population and so on. But I think really that you can actually handle that within a single unitary anyway, because beneath the overarching infrastructure, there are proposals about how you make things distinctive and able to respond."

- The **belonging communities** element of the single unitary proposal is felt to be very promising: it is felt to allow the single unitary authority to provide a good combination of a strategic overview for the county, and grassroots influence at a very local level. However, some would like to know more about how the belonging communities will work in practice. Respondents’ attitudes towards belonging communities are discussed further in Section 3.2.5.

"I think it is a very interesting and potentially very exciting model, the idea of having the kind of strategic overview at county level but a very locally driven agenda at the other end of the spectrum"

3.2.3 Advantages of the two unitary authorities bid

The two unitary proposal is favoured for the following reasons:

- More **local responsiveness** (this is strongly related to views on the “belonging communities”, with those strongly in favour of these feeling that in contrast, the single unitary proposal might offer *more* responsiveness. However, those in favour of the two unitary council proposal feel that the division into rural and urban areas would enable greater local responsiveness)

"Some areas might not (under the single unitary bid) have as strong a voice as they otherwise would have done if they had got with the twin approach."

- On a related point, it is felt by those in favour of the two unitary authority approach that there is more **intimate and specialised local knowledge** in the District Councils, which would carry through to a two unitary authority system but not to a single unitary authority. They believe that this local knowledge is naturally divided along urban and rural lines. However, those who acknowledge the differing needs of urban and rural communities but who favour a single unitary bid felt that these can still be met in a single unitary authority and do not necessitate separation.

"(Name of person from rural District) wouldn't have a clue about the legacy of the industrial South East Northumberland, he wouldn't have a clue about the implications on health, on

housing, on mortality rates, he wouldn't be able to tell you anything like that, because he hasn't got the experience of it and it's such a broad remit. (But he would) be able to tell the farmers... what the issues were around the rural economy."

- A guarantee, as far as possible, that **urban areas will not “swallow all the funding”** at the expense of rural authorities (although some of those in favour of the other bid feel that the two-unitary approach would mean rural areas lost funding, pointing to their lower population and hence council tax base, and the subsidies they currently get)

"One of the big worries... if it goes into one unit, right – one unitary authority, the huge worry that everybody has got is that the money would gravitate towards the urban areas and the rural areas will become more impoverished."

- It is also thought that the two unitary council approach is more **popular with people in rural areas** as more localised boundaries matter more to them: they are used to working at a village or parish level and so will be unlikely to favour a single authority for the whole county. Indeed, it is felt that strength of feeling on the proposals, among the general public, is much stronger in rural than in urban areas.

"There's an awful lot of the population of the rural area that born, brought up here and gave been for generations, and they are very parochial in their attitude to their districts and areas, they've got used to their areas. A lot of them know their local councillors in the district authorities; they don't want to lose that... I don't think it will be an easy move for them."

3.2.4 Those who are to some degree undecided

Respondents include people who are not totally opposed to the two unitary authorities. In these cases the view tends to be that the proposal for the two unitary authorities represents an economy of scale, but that it does not go as far as the single unitary authority proposal in offering this. Therefore, people are happy with the two unitary proposal as an improvement on the status quo, but feel that if this rather than the single unitary proposal went ahead, it would be a “*missed opportunity*” – as the logical reorganisation would be into a single authority.

The respondents who are ambivalent about which of the two proposals they prefer either feel that the single unitary proposal needs to demonstrate that it can work locally, while the two unitary council proposal needs to demonstrate that it can work strategically, or do not want to express a preference, reserving their comments instead to the ways in which their organisation will be affected by each bid.

"It's not so much in the detail of structure; it's more about how that structure has the potential need of (name of service) services. So what we have said both through our national

consultation but also through individual bid teams is sort of, we're not going to be expressing any kind of preference, so either the two council or the one council proposals. What we will do is try and talk to both teams about what it means for the (name of service) services."

3.2.5 Reactions to the belonging communities concept

Reactions to the belonging communities concept vary:

- Some respondents are very positive about the concept. They are excited about the possibility for local influence on the affairs of the county as a whole, and especially the way that a unitary council will be able to take a single strategic overview at the same time as ensuring this local influence

"There are huge advantages in having a single unitary and if that is combined with systems and methods to allow smaller communities to have their voices heard more effectively, which they claim that their bid would, through the belonging communities kind of agenda, then I think that would answer it basically. So you would have the advantages of scale and the advantages of locality and empowering small areas."

- Some are positive but have worries about how belonging communities will work in practice. These centre around
 - The perceived ability of Parish Councils to form the basis for the "belonging communities" as they were not set up for this purpose
 - The probability that local capacity over 26 communities will be variable
 - The number of belonging communities – one respondent says that 26 is too many, and that he would have preferred to see around 10
 - The resourcing that belonging communities will get: where will this come from, will it be enough to do the job, and will it be too costly
 - Concern over whether organisations would be expected to work directly with all of the belonging communities individually
 - The precise remit of the belonging communities and in particular where the limits to their power will be drawn

"I think it's quite difficult to see how it's going to work ... I agree with (it) but I think it's going to be quite difficult to work in practice. It's probably something he's got to try out and see what happens."

- Another respondent believes there will be ways in which the belonging communities will not work as well as they are intended to, but that this will not matter, as the urban population forms the democratic majority
- Some do not believe that the creation of belonging communities will ensure as much local representation as the alternative two-council proposal

- And some do not believe that the belonging communities concept as outlined in the single unitary proposal will work in practice: they feel it is vague about the way they will be engaged and therefore may run into problems. This view is propounded by those who are strongly in favour of the two unitary proposal

“The single unitary option that identifies these communities, it’s got nothing in it that says, these will be engaged in this way or that way or anything else. And, I have to say, that’s a major flaw in it because as someone who has been involved in community engagement for many years now, it is not a very easy job. It is very, very difficult, and focus groups and central meetings and encouraging people to take part is all very well, but it’s actually getting them to do it.”

3.3 Views on likely impact on wider roles of local government

3.3.1 Responsiveness and accountability to local communities

As described above in the reasons for favouring each bid, respondents are divided over whether the belonging communities within an overall single unitary authority would increase local responsiveness and accountability, or whether this would be best served by having two unitary authorities to separate out urban and rural issues. Respondents views on this are influenced by:

- How different they think rural and urban needs are and therefore whether they can be encompassed within a single authority and
- How positive they are about the belonging communities proposal and how well they think these will work in practice

3.3.2 Value for money of public services

Perceived value for money is one of the main reasons for respondents who favour the single unitary bid doing so. Respondents think that both the two unitary proposal and the single unitary proposal represent a saving on the status quo, but that this difference will be more marked and hence more savings made if the single unitary bid is implemented.

Respondents who are ambivalent or choose not to express a preference do not think one bid offers significant advantages over the other. They point out that both bids claim they can make savings.

“I don’t think there’s a clear distinction between them on that. I mean obviously both of them are costing around the same... They’re both saying that (transition costs) would be paid back over about the same period. So, in sort of financial outcome, they’re talking in a very similar way.”

However, a respondent who is very much in favour of the two unitary proposal believes that local people might *feel* that they were getting better value for money under this: he feels that services would be

closer to them, which would mean that they would see more people on the ground and hence be able to see what they are paying for.

3.3.3 Strategic leadership and economic development

Ability to negotiate on a regional basis

Those in favour of a single unitary authority believe that it will be better able to negotiate on a regional basis and secure more funding for the area, particularly as other local government changes in the North East are made.

"I think I've already mentioned a much more coherent approach across the whole county, and that county-wide approach. I think that we have to move in that direction when so many other bodies, such as Business Link, such as LSC, all becoming more regionally-based actually than even county wide, and the Northumberland Strategic Partnership, I think, has certainly been one of the most successful in the North-East.... Secondly I think that... there is a lot to talk about city regions on Tyneside, and it seems to me inevitable that we have to have a strong unitary fighter for Northumberland to make the case for Northumberland over against those very considerable pressures from that urban area."

Logical organisation on a county-wide basis

Strategic leadership and economic development are felt to be key areas where a single authority is far more logical than two. Respondents also think that a single unitary authority will be better able to take a county-wide overview in terms of strategy development, as is currently done by the County Council, and do not think the two unitary council bid will be as successful in doing this. Respondents are also keen to maintain the Local Strategic Partnership, which they say has a history of success.

"And if it were split presumably there would have to be two LSPs and I think that could be a problem.... they carry more muscle in terms of negotiating at a regional level and I think we've got a really successful strategic partnership that has obtained substantial funds from one North-East over the years and if that was threatened I think that wouldn't be good news for Northumberland."

"I think my view was that they were then looking at something which did produce duplication and however they much could divide it up and say well this is rural and this was in fact a city division, that it wasn't going to produce the single voice for Northumberland, which from our point of view in fact was going to be advantageous."

"The single model, all of the key elements that are important to business and in many businesses the key issues are characterised as transport and skill. They sit firmly with the county already and the appropriate level at which they should be planned is at the county. So our analysis is that if you look at the issues that affect Northumberland in the medium to long

term, they're already with the county. Issues... specifically around the economic development wellbeing of Northumberland is better to be taken as a whole."

It is felt that two unitary councils might drift apart, with the southern part of the county allying itself with other urban areas and the more rural part allying itself with Scotland.

Different needs of urban and rural areas

However, those in favour of the two unitary council bid feel that the needs of urban and rural areas are very different, and that the rural economy in particular could benefit from a very specialised approach. They point to the existence already of a separate rural economic strategy as evidence for the need for this.

"I would say that the rural council is in a better position to identify and implement and tackle particular issues affecting the rural community. (A single authority) won't hear about the grants that are coming from Europe and the farm subsidies etc., and people in the rural end know about those."

3.4 Views on likely impact on services and partnership working

Difficulty in assessing the likely impact

Respondents feel that the likely impact on services is to some degree unknowable before either proposal is put into practice. However, those in favour of the single unitary authority bid worry about service provision under two unitary authorities: whether it would be even across both unitary authorities under the two unitary authorities proposal, and whether there will be any issues with boundaries (e.g. crossing borders for education). There are felt to be certain key areas that benefit from a county-wide overview, such as road planning.

"Particularly from a planning perspective, one of the big issues for business is planning and economic development and so on, and again in this region we've got, just getting beyond Northumberland, you've got Tyne and Wear and Durham and so on, and there are duplicate planning activities, and in Northumberland itself you've got Tynedale and Castle Morpeth and so on and so forth. Anything that can help to consolidate the process would inevitably be slicker, could cost less, and would I am sure help people identify more with the bigger picture."

Safeguarding standards of delivery in rural areas

Those in favour of the two unitary authority bid feel that this would provide a safeguard for standards of service delivery in rural areas. They point to the lack of transport and other facilities, and feel that having a rural authority would be rural districts' best chance of securing funding to improve these.

"Let's face it, the rural areas have had their buses chopped, they've had their post offices chopped..., you know, they've seen diminution of services over many years and I think they're afraid of being just left out altogether now, and I think unless that worry is addressed, there will be as much furore about it as there was about the imposition of the poll tax."

Conversely, however, there are those who believe that a single unitary authority is likely to give rural areas more funding, as if two unitary authorities are founded then the rural one will have a very low population and hence financial base and fail to achieve the "critical mass" necessary to achieve effective service delivery. They believe that the rural districts are currently receiving extra funding which would disappear should the two unitary authority bid be implemented.

"There are some areas where they don't have the critical mass (to deliver services effectively). They are very small, Berwick for example, very small authority with a very low population and a lot of challenges and so I honestly feel that by getting everything together you can create the critical mass that helps the areas that need more help, that actually haven't got the population and the resource to do it on their own."

"I find it very difficult to believe that a split County would be able to provide the same level of particular education services, numbers of schools in the rural part of Northumberland. I just find it just difficult to envisage that with the population so concentrated in the South-East, at the moment the County Council is effectively (giving money to) the rural areas in order to maintain the school numbers. That would disappear presumably."

Another potential issue is felt to be differences in geography or population creating different service needs. Respondents are not sure how funding would be allocated fairly to meet these under the two unitary proposal.

"You already have an initial... one freeze in weather and their position basically is whose responsibility is to correct the road, is it the county or the district, and usually in our part of the region, the higher parts are likely to freeze quicker than the lower ones. So, again, the argument between who is resourcing what, etc, etc, who should run school places, the social services, if you've got one section of the community getting older much quicker than the other sector. the people with one authority in my view is far better."

Cross-border working

Many of those in favour of the single unitary proposal worry about cross-border working in certain areas such as education and housing. They feel that the proposals for joint working are unlikely to work in practice. The area it is most feared a two unitary approach will have an impact is education services: this is both from the point of view of accessibility (for example, whether people will be able to access schools across the border easily) and whether the rural councils will be able to afford to keep up the provision that currently exists.

"So if somebody wants to go from A to B from an educational point of view or housing transfer point of view whatever, would they have to then go through another bureaucracy within a bureaucracy?"

"I know they've got all kind of schemes for joint working, but I don't think they are sustainable quite honestly. So I think that there would be a reduction in key services, particularly small rural primary schools."

The difficulties of changes in service delivery

One respondent feels that a single unitary council is likely to struggle with delivering local services, as the district councils are known and trusted locally. However, he also feels that there might be difficulties implementing services currently delivered at County level within the two-unitary proposal, as some of the Districts are resistant to change.

"The County Council is received as a remote organisation and the services the districts provide are very much on the ground services... And the strength of the Districts is that we are very adept at dealing with people on a local level and the service delivery angle, they've worked very hard over the years so people have got a confidence in the Districts. The confidence in the County doesn't exist, and to put the idea of those delivering local services from a remote base, it isn't going to work."

Organisation of stakeholders

In terms of partnership working, several stakeholder organisations already organise themselves on a county-wide basis and therefore would prefer to deal with a single unitary authority organised in the same way.

"We are a countywide organisation, so it would be, what do we do, split ourselves in half?"

Some have made plans which they feel can only go ahead in their current form under a single unitary authority.

"If we have a single unitary, we continue pretty much as planned and our plans in terms of service development, rationalisation, reform and so on... are pretty much unaffected, full steam ahead."

However, most stakeholder organisations say that they would make the partnership(s) work whichever proposal goes ahead. Those in favour of the two unitary authority bid, on the other hand, feel that the strength of feeling amongst many of the general public against a single unitary authority might impede partnership working in the future.

4. Conclusions

Although the respondents we interviewed are largely in favour of the single unitary bid, they are keen to ensure a smooth transition whichever proposal is eventually implemented. Some indicate a degree of frustration with the current situation and express hopes that a quick decision will be made and that all parties will then abide by this and work together.

“But whichever one of those is chosen, there will be winners and losers, so there’ll be fallout in terms of the sort of local politics around making sure that the new structure beds in and we get the right sort of stakeholder tie-in and public engagement. So whichever route we take, we’re going to have consequences that will need to be handled sensitively and carefully, so that’s one problem.”

There is acceptance that transition inevitably brings with it some degree of upheaval. However, respondents hope that this will be measured in weeks or months, rather than years, as their experience has been that transition tends to have a paralysing effect in terms of decisions being made and actions taken within local authorities.

Respondents are keen for what both of the bids promise: better local government in Northumberland. Although they may differ on the best way for this to be achieved, key stakeholders express a commitment to delivery going forward and, whether or not their preferred bid goes through, they expect all parties to work with them to ensure this.