



# DELIVERING A STRONGER STAFFORDSHIRE

## A CASE FOR CHANGE

NOVEMBER 2025

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Submitted by

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Cannock Chase District Council, East Staffordshire  
Borough Council and Stafford Borough Council

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## Overview

This document presents a comprehensive case for local government in Staffordshire via the creation of two new unitary councils: North Staffordshire and Southern & Mid Staffordshire.

It unashamedly approaches Local Government Reorganisation (LGR) as a **once-in-a-generation opportunity to restructure Staffordshire's councils in a way that unlocks growth, brings financial stability, and provides for more effective and efficient services.**

But, as the Government's criteria make clear, this can only happen if the revised structures match the economic, demographic and cultural realities "on-the-ground" – reflecting the way people live and work, now and in the future. Local government exists to serve the people it represents and the key test is whether reorganisation enables us to do that better.

This document assesses various models proposed by councils across Staffordshire against the Government's criteria. It demonstrates how the North/Southern & Mid two-unitary split is clearly the best fit with both the letter of these criteria, and their spirit – best positioning all parts of the county for stability and economic growth.

**“Staffordshire's current governance arrangements are no longer fit for purpose”**

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## Why change is needed

Staffordshire's current governance arrangements are no longer fit for purpose. The current two-tier system creates inefficiencies, hampers strategic planning and limits the ability to deliver integrated services.

Our largest cities should function as economic drivers and job creators – yet the current arrangements constrain potential growth in the City of Stoke-on-Trent and limit cross-border co-operation. They exacerbate acute financial pressure driven by high levels of deprivation and demand for front-line support services.

And the current system doesn't do any favours for Southern & Mid Staffordshire either. As a sub region, Southern & Mid Staffordshire needs a critical mass to generate economies of scale, public service innovation and to do serious business with its key economic neighbours, particularly the West Midlands conurbation.

**Detailed public engagement shows people across Staffordshire want local government that delivers reliable, high-quality local services at lower cost, while protecting and enhancing local identities and links. Reorganisation must be shaped in a way that is most likely to achieve lasting results if it is to win long-term public support.**

Both North and Southern & Mid Staffordshire benefit from diverse and growing local economies, but the county's current status as a 'devolution desert' is undermining expansion and local coordination. Staffordshire desperately needs a governance model which can wield devolved powers and funding to sustain economic growth, improve skills, regenerate town centres and better meet the needs of almost 1.2 million residents.

## The core proposal

This proposal recommends replacing Staffordshire's existing county council, unitary city council and eight district and borough councils with two new unitary authorities:

- North Staffordshire Unitary Council – covering Newcastle-under-Lyme borough, the City of Stoke-on-Trent and Staffordshire Moorlands district; a recognised geographic city region with a current, and growing, population of almost 495,000.
- Southern & Mid Staffordshire Unitary Council – covering the districts of Cannock Chase, South Staffordshire and Lichfield and the boroughs of Stafford, East Staffordshire and Tamworth; a distinct geographical area with a population of almost 657,000.

**Both areas are readily identifiable sub-regions with distinct identities and functioning economic markets. They reflect commuter patterns, transport networks and public service operational footprints.**

North Staffordshire has been a defined cultural geography since medieval times, a status cemented by the area's role in the Industrial Revolution and its rise to prominence as a world capital of ceramics production.

North Staffordshire is home to the county's only conurbation (known globally as The Potteries), which is the key driver of economic and employment growth in all three of the constituent councils. Rural parts of Newcastle-under-Lyme and Staffordshire Moorlands provide a vital balance to the urban core and a more rounded lifestyle offer to residents and visitors. The area functions as an organic whole – reflected in patterns of travel for work and leisure.

Southern & Mid Staffordshire benefits from close economic ties to larger neighbouring economies in Birmingham and the Black Country, as well as the East Midlands and Shropshire, with many residents travelling to work in adjoining cities and districts.

## The options for LGR in Staffordshire

Having discounted options that are obviously non-compliant with the Government's set criteria (see Appendix 1), the following options have been considered:

**Option A** – two unitaries: North Staffordshire and Southern & Mid Staffordshire.

**Option B** – three unitaries: North Staffordshire, South West Staffordshire and South East Staffordshire.

**Option C** – two unitaries: North Staffordshire and Southern & Mid Staffordshire, but with amended boundaries.

**Option D** – two unitaries: East Staffordshire and West Staffordshire.

**Independent analysis in this document clearly demonstrates Option A provides the best balance between financial sustainability, economic benefit, fit with local identity, and public service geographies, and deliverability.**

It would:

- Align closely with the Government's criteria for population thresholds and balance.
- Represent the most sensible geographies, including functioning economic market areas and strong, distinct local identities.
- Present the least complexity, cost and risk of service disruption during the implementation phases and transition to the new unitary arrangements.

- Deliver a model of local government that aligns most closely with public priorities and is supported by other Staffordshire councils (eight out of ten support the establishment of a North Staffordshire Unitary Council).

**Option B** does not align as closely with the Government's criteria, as two of the populations would be too small for the councils to achieve economies of scale; it is sub-optimal in terms of economic planning and weight, and it achieves lower financial savings and less ability to withstand financial shock.

**Option C** has merits in terms of financial balance and economic alignment, but would involve disputed boundary changes which are likely to delay and complicate the implementation and transition process, reducing efficiencies and potentially undermining cooperation around establishing an effective Strategic Authority. The proposal is not actively supported by other councils.

**Option D** represents the least suitable reorganisation option. The creation of an East and West Staffordshire is not supported by any other councils, and would:

- Be based on fundamentally flawed and mis-aligned geographies which do not reflect economic market areas, local cultural identities or public service footprints.
- Divide the county's only conurbation in two, undermining economic growth.
- Create impractical over-extended operational footprints (East Staffordshire would stretch more than 50 miles from Warwickshire to Cheshire).

## The socio-economic case

In North Staffordshire there is a particular need to ensure that reorganisation helps unlock greater economic prosperity and tackle complex problems linked to deprivation, poverty and inequality. It is these problems which have driven up demand for state funded social care and other frontline services, and contributed to Stoke-on-Trent City Council's reliance on Exceptional Financial Support. The North and Southern & Mid Staffordshire option would:

- Provide a stronger basis for tackling concentrations of socio-economic inequalities in North Staffordshire and other pockets of the county.
- Place local government on a sustainable financial footing by rebalancing financial resources and liabilities, as well as local need levels.
- Strengthen strategic leadership - including planning and coordination of major economic infrastructure, transport and regeneration projects, and enabling factors such as education and skills.
- Facilitate the delivery of new housing and commercial space, streamlining planning and land use to achieve housing targets and economic growth, aligned with Government priorities.
- Deliver enhanced community engagement and neighbourhood empowerment through a commitment to co-designed and localised decision-making mechanisms.

## The financial case

Option A delivers a good balance between cost, risk, and savings. The ability to build a new unitary council out from an existing unitary council in North Staffordshire, combined with the reduced need for disaggregation of council services in Southern & Mid Staffordshire, makes this proposal cost effective. This model of reorganisation would:

- Create financial balance between the two unitary councils across key indicators.
- Strengthen financial resilience through economies of scale, asset rationalisation and streamlined service delivery, as well as demographic and economic rebalancing.
- Require the lowest one-off transition costs.
- Generate a relatively high level of savings, delivered quicker by facilitating transformation and integration, while minimising risk, disruption and complexity.
- Mirror existing public sector operational footprints, thereby facilitating public service reform.
- Create strong financial foundations for future devolution arrangements.

## The public case

**Engagement with Staffordshire’s residents and businesses has shown clearly that they want high-quality, efficient local services, a stronger economy, better infrastructure planning and investment and the preservation of strong local identities.** They want governance which reflects local needs and decision-making and is accountable to residents. Our main stakeholders want to see simpler governance structures, better cross-border coordination of service planning and delivery and more effective partnership working.

**“Our proposal respects the past, takes the best of the present and is ambitious for the future of our great county”**

One thing we have tried to avoid in our proposal is demographic engineering. It is very easy to choose a range of demographic indicators, reflecting need and capacity, and then define a geographical configuration that seeks to balance that need. But if that configuration bears no relationship to how places and communities work in practice, then it is a very poor platform for delivering public services. It is for example of little practical benefit to someone who then has to travel hours on public transport simply to access the service they need, or finds it impossible to join up public services because they are working on a completely different configuration. Our proposal seeks to work with the grain of how people in Staffordshire identify themselves and live their lives. Staffordshire has deep historic roots and important traditions. Our proposal respects the past, takes the best of the present and is ambitious for the future of our great county.

## Democracy and governance

Working with our partner districts, and liaising as much as possible with other councils, the City Council has developed deliverable proposals for the governance and administration of the new North Staffordshire Unitary Council. We have clear plans as to how to protect key civic status and assets. **We are fully committed to double devolution through the development of neighbourhood governance across the two geographic areas,** using both existing models such as town and parish councils, and neighbourhood area committees where they present the preferred approach of local people.

## Implementation and delivery

An implementation framework has already been fully developed with indicative plans for both our North and Southern & Mid Staffordshire Unitary Councils designed to ensure compliance and readiness on day one of the new authorities. The plans have been tested against specific services including children's and adults' social care, environmental services and corporate services such as finance and ICT. We have also considered areas for early spread of existing public service innovation across the geography including Government missions and local priority areas such as early years development, regeneration of high streets, neighbourhood health and care, decent homes and tackling urban and rural poverty.



## Conclusion

Our final ranking of the four main options against the Government’s criteria, drawing on all the sources of data and analysis is as follows:

**Table 1 - Scoring of options against the Government’s criteria**

Government Criterion	Option Ranking				Summary
	A	B	C	D	
1. A proposal should seek to achieve for the whole of the area concerned the establishment of a single tier of local government.	1 <sup>st</sup>	1 <sup>st</sup>	1 <sup>st</sup>	1 <sup>st</sup>	All options achieve this basic criterion.
2. Unitary local government must be the right size to achieve efficiencies, improve capacity and withstand financial shocks.	2 <sup>nd</sup>	4 <sup>th</sup>	1 <sup>st</sup>	2 <sup>nd</sup>	The evidence shows that the marginally leading option here is Option C - the proposal to create a north-south two unitary solution with changes to district boundaries. However, options A and D are both demonstrably financially sustainable solutions with different strengths and weaknesses, and avoid the main disadvantages of Option C with respect to complexity of implementation and transition.
3. Unitary structures must prioritise the delivery of high quality and sustainable public services to citizens.	1 <sup>st</sup>	3 <sup>rd</sup>	2 <sup>nd</sup>	3 <sup>rd</sup>	Option D would be dogged by the inherent illogicality of the proposed geographies as a service footprint, including lack of alignment with transport infrastructure and other public service geographies. Option B would generate lower economies of scale and will be less productive as a result of sub-optimal size of two of the authorities. And Option C would be slower to deliver benefits because of the complexity of implementation and transition.
4. Proposals should show how councils in the area have sought to work together in coming to a view that meets local needs and is informed by local views.	1 <sup>st</sup>	1 <sup>st</sup>	2 <sup>nd</sup>	4 <sup>th</sup>	8 of the 10 councils support a north : south model of unitary local government. Option C is significantly opposed by Stafford and East Staffordshire District Councils which could impact on implementation given the inherent complexity. Only the county council support an East : West model. The proposers of Options A-C all undertook extensive work to understand the public’s views and these have been reflected in the development of proposals.
5. New unitary structures must support devolution arrangements.	1 <sup>st</sup>	3 <sup>rd</sup>	1 <sup>st</sup>	4 <sup>th</sup>	By a significant distance, the evidence demonstrates that a two unitary structure based on a north-south division that matches the existing economic sub-regions would provide the best building blocks for devolution.
6. New unitary structures should enable stronger community engagement and deliver genuine opportunity for neighbourhood empowerment.	2 <sup>nd</sup>	1 <sup>st</sup>	2 <sup>nd</sup>	4 <sup>th</sup>	The three unitary structure was popular with the public and would overall best reflect local identity. However, this has to be balanced against the significant downsides of lower financial sustainability and resilience, lower savings and more complex implementation and transition. Options A and C are a better fit with existing community structures and relationships than Option D.
<b>OVERALL</b>	<b>1<sup>st</sup></b>	<b>3<sup>rd</sup></b>	<b>2<sup>nd</sup></b>	<b>4<sup>th</sup></b>	

## Preferred option: Option A

A two unitary solution split between North and Southern & Mid Staffordshire, based on existing district boundaries, presents the most cost-effective, logical and pragmatic approach to maximising the benefits from the generational opportunity presented by Local Government Reorganisation.

The model reflects natural economic market areas, avoids disruptive boundary changes, and is supported by the majority of councils. It is the best model to truly unlock the power of devolution, enabling community empowerment and improving outcomes for residents across Staffordshire, whilst ensuring financially sustainable local government delivering great public services with local partners.



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