

Unitary Authorities and Cumbria.

Report by Michael Hanley.

We are currently going through a process of a major change in local democracy and representation in Cumbria. This has been ordered by Robert Jenrick, Secretary of State for Communities. Last year he approached Cumbria along with North Yorkshire and Somerset to launch the current change. Originally Lincolnshire and Surrey were to be included but they were left out. The process was justified as being a prerequisite for devolution, although a recent statement from Mr Jenrick made no mention of this.

History of Unitary Authorities

Unitary Authorities were set up after the Local Government Act of 1992 with the purpose of forming a single tier of local government. There was a two tier system in Scotland and Wales until 1996 when a single tier was introduced. The single tier form of government was introduced to Northern Ireland in 1973, a year after the Northern Irish Parliament, Stormont, was abolished. In the England there are now 25 county councils, 188 district councils and 56 unitary authorities (not counting London and metropolitan boroughs). In Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland all councils are unitary authorities.

Current Situation

There are four district, two borough councils and one county council in Cumbria: Eden, Allerdale, Copeland, South Lakes, Barrow, Carlisle and the Cumbria County Council . All of these councils were required to respond to Mr Jenrick's letter by early December 2020. This resulted in four different proposals.

1. Cumbria County Council: This council proposes a single unitary authority known as "One Cumbria".
2. Allerdale and Copeland Councils propose a West Cumbria Unitary Authority including Carlisle, Copland and Allerdale in the west and an East Cumbria Authority with Eden, Barrow, and South Lakeland.
3. Barrow and South Lakeland want to team up with Lancaster City to form "The Bay Unitary Authority" with Allerdale, Copeland, Eden and Carlisle forming a North Cumbria Unitary Authority.
4. Carlisle and Eden favour a North Cumbrian Authority with Allerdale, Eden and Carlisle and a South Cumbria Unitary Authority with Barrow, Copeland and South Lakeland.

Eden District Council's View

Leaders of Carlisle and Eden councils have said that their proposals will improve local

1. Significant savings in local government organisation. It does not specify this, but there will probably be far fewer councillors. It predicts the eventual savings will be between 19 and 31 million pounds per year, after the initial set-up costs of 17-23 million.
2. Improved efficiency of services. I presume this is where they employ the one company or in-house service over three areas thus gaining economies of scale.
3. Representation: the document says this will continue effectively. As I said before, there is no mention that I can see of fewer councillors but I suspect this will happen with possibly less representation for areas such as Alston Moor (maybe one representative instead of three). The document says that the current system causes confusion about representation. With the change there will only be one organisation to contact. There are currently 84 county councillors and 246 district councillors in Cumbria. The document says that the number of councillors will be a matter for future councils, but the change will remove a level of local representation.

Current Residents Views and Levels of Satisfaction.

The organisation Action with Communities recently carried out a survey and found that 75% of Cumbrian residents wanted decisions made at the most local level. 89% wanted services to stay in their local area and 68% wanted local services to be improved. There is no comment on this in the document. My impression is that residents are not enthusiastic about this change which is being forced on us by the current government. Residents were positive about waste collection, recycling, educational and social services. They were less happy about public transport, planning and affordable housing.

Timeline

The government required all councils to submit their preferred options by early December 2020. In February 2021 the public consultation started and in June Robert Jenrick (Secretary of State) will decide on which option to go with. In August 2021, parliament will be asked to approve the changes. Shadow authorities will be established in April 2022 and elections to the new unitary authorities are planned for March 2023.