

Your Nottinghamshire Your Future



Initial views on possible local government reorganisation

What is the purpose of this document?

This document provides background and context to Nottinghamshire County Council's public engagement about the structure of local government in the County. It explains the County Council's current thinking and invites your views from 21st September until 19th October if you live or work anywhere in Nottinghamshire.

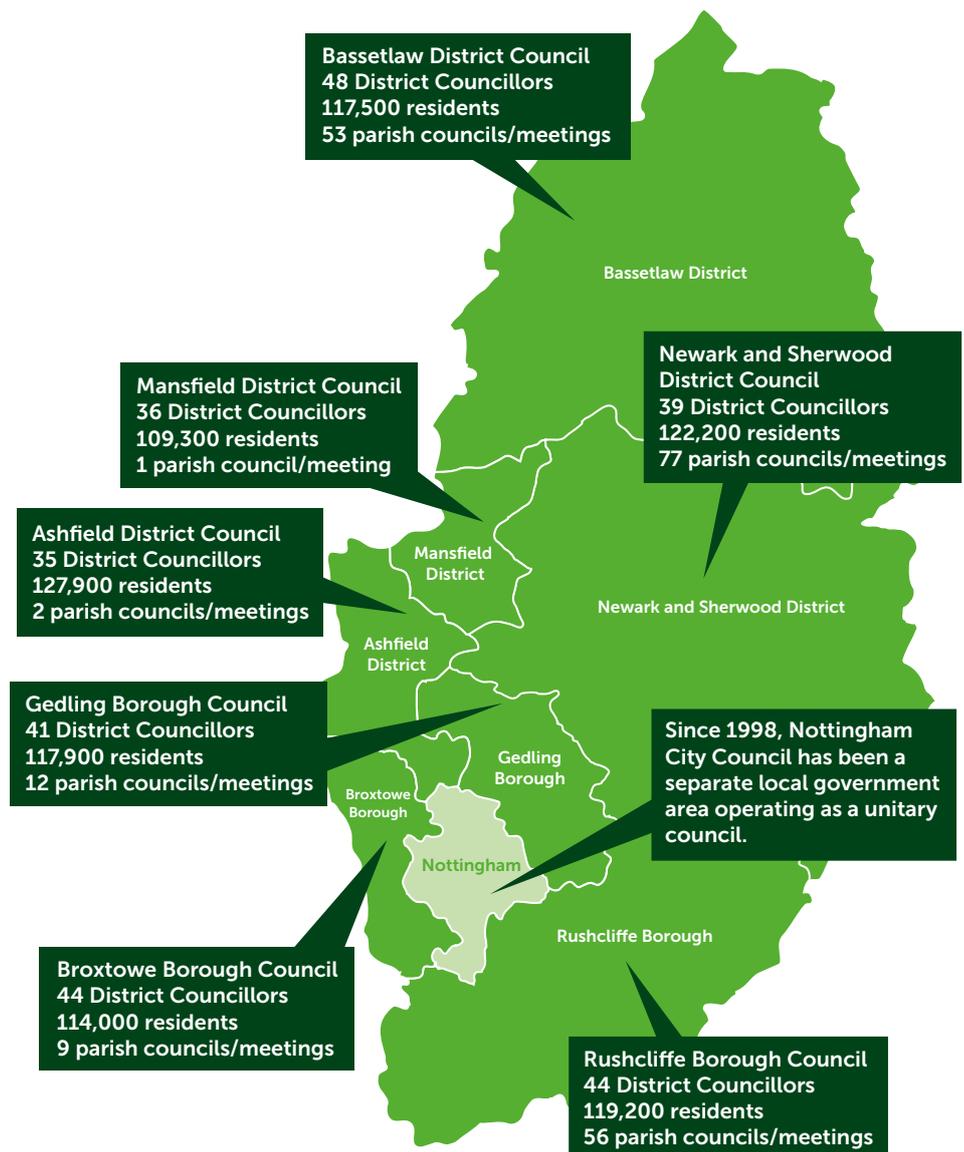
The Council is currently reviewing the case for the different options for local government in Nottinghamshire. Your opinions will help inform the Council's choice of its preferred option. If the County Council then decides to make firm proposals for any new, preferred option there will be further public consultation.

This document can be made available in alternative formats and languages upon request, please contact future.notts@nottsc.gov.uk



Details of current Nottinghamshire councils

Nottinghamshire County Council spends 89% of the local government funding available for the area on delivering countywide services including: education, special educational needs and disability support, social care for children and adults, public health, road maintenance and transport services, cultural and leisure services including libraries, waste recycling and disposal, trading standards, planning issues and registration services.



Total population of Nottinghamshire County Council administrative area (excluding Nottingham City): 828,000.

The seven district & borough Councils spend 11% of local government funding delivering services including: council tax collection, council housing, waste collection, environmental health, local planning applications, parks and some leisure services.

Town and Parish Councils: there are 152 parish councils and 10 town councils which are independently elected, and 48 smaller areas without an elected third tier of local government operating parish meetings. They deliver some local services, such as maintenance of parks, churchyards and allotments.

The eight councils in Nottinghamshire are **currently organised in a two-tier structure**. This is **where services are divided between the County Council and the seven borough or district Councils**.

What are we doing?

The County Council is looking at options to establish whether there is a better way of delivering local government services in the County than the current two-tier structure. Within the two-tier structure, responsibility for local services is split between Nottinghamshire County Council and seven District and Borough Councils. Broadly the same services are delivered by all seven different District and Borough Councils.

We will not look at options that include the **administrative area of Nottingham City Council, where a single-tier system is already in place.**

In 2018 the County Council considered a range of options to replace the eight councils in the current two-tier system with a unitary council system, where just one level of local government is responsible for all local services in an area. This included initial engagement with residents and stakeholders to understand the views of local people.

It is anticipated that having a unitary system of local government would:

- Reduce overhead costs (for example fewer senior management posts and council headquarters) and realise economies of scale;
- Make it simpler for residents and partners to access Council services;
- Improve services through closer collaboration; and
- Make it easier to work strategically with regional partners.

At the time our [Outline Case for Change](#) concluded that a single unitary authority for the whole county was the option that had the most benefits for residents and was the most cost-effective. Further development of the Case for Change was subsequently paused to allow leaders of all councils more time to consider and discuss the options.

Since that time there have been several developments which mean that it is important to look again at the case for developing unitary structures. We are now revisiting the options we explored in 2018 to review whether the findings still stand and establish which is the best option for Nottinghamshire.

The necessary steps for this work are:

Any proposal to change local government in Nottinghamshire would be submitted to the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government for consideration and would be subject to Government approval. Our timescales will depend on the Government, but we would hope to be able to submit proposals on a preferred option before the end of 2020.

Step 1	Engagement, options analysis and development of proposals.
Step 2	Report to County Council on the identified preferred option including findings from engagement phase.
Step 3	Proposals submitted to the Secretary of State if approved by Council.
Step 4	If proposals are acceptable, the Secretary of State undertakes formal consultation.
Step 5	The Secretary of State makes a final decision on the future structure of local government for Nottinghamshire.

Why are we doing it?

There are three main reasons for looking again at the structure of local government in Nottinghamshire:

Financial pressures facing all tiers of local government in Nottinghamshire, particularly due to COVID-19

Even prior to the COVID-19 crisis, all tiers of local government faced significant financial challenges. This is due to long-term changes in government funding and increasing demand for council services. As with all councils, the impact of COVID-19 on the County Council's finances has been significant and will place pressure on budgets for 2021/22 and beyond. Similar pressures are being felt across Nottinghamshire's District and Borough Councils.

We anticipate that the financial shock of the COVID-19 pandemic on public finances will be felt for a generation. This means that local government is likely to be under continuing pressure to deliver services for less cost. Increasing demand for all services, especially for vulnerable adults and children, means that we must also consider the increasing cost of meeting the future needs of our residents. Given the savings and efficiencies already made over recent years, further savings will be hard to identify and deliver, and there is a real risk of further reductions to highly valued and vital services across local government.

In other counties where unitary local government has been established, substantial savings have been made, helping to protect important services and providing better value for money to council tax payers. All councils in Nottinghamshire will be facing significant budget shortfalls over the coming years and the County Council wants to explore what savings could be made by restructuring, as an alternative to reducing valued front-line services.

Opportunities for devolution of powers and funding from central government

The Government has announced its intention to publish a White Paper - *'Devolution and Local Recovery'* that will set out plans to devolve powers and investment to the English regions for things like infrastructure, skills, transport and housing. This devolution is expected happen through combined authorities, which are groups of councils that formally join together to collaborate and make joint decisions. It is expected that only unitary authorities will be able to be part of a combined authority. This means that areas with two-tier local government could be at a disadvantage and unable to access large scale government investment and influence over regional decision making, which will be especially important as the region recovers from COVID-19.

The complexity of local government in the County

Apart from Nottingham City Council, there are eight councils in Nottinghamshire – the County Council and a total of seven District and Borough Councils. The councils provide different, sometimes overlapping services and broadly the same services are delivered by all seven different District and Borough Councils. Residents and local businesses often find the current two-tier system confusing and are not clear about which council does what, which councillor has responsibility for County or District/Borough services, and who to contact with their questions.

The two-tiers of local government in Nottinghamshire (County and Borough/District) can be a barrier to strategic planning, delivering services efficiently and effectively, and lobbying to Government. This has been apparent during the COVID-19 crisis. While all tiers of local government worked well together to deliver a response which has protected Nottinghamshire's vulnerable residents, the pandemic has highlighted opportunities to do things better and more efficiently by simplifying structures and bringing services together.

Faced with these challenges we need to think about how we can best safeguard the future of the local government services which many local people rely on. We also need to consider how we can make the most of the opportunities that Nottinghamshire has, particularly for working more closely with regional partners and securing investment for the region.

In response, we are exploring options for local government in Nottinghamshire that we believe could:

- **deliver more cost effective services** and offer better value for money with lower running costs (for instance, by pooling expertise and removing duplication);
- **improve services and make sure they meet the specific needs of local communities**, ensuring provision of good services across the County, regardless of where you live;
- **simplify local government for the public and partners**, ensuring people always know who to turn to in their local area for help and advice;
- **help voters** to be clear on who their local councillor is and their responsibilities;
- **improve planning** for education, housing and infrastructure to achieve **economic growth**
- **have a stronger united voice** to speak up for and **champion Nottinghamshire, and to lobby for major new investment** from business and Government;
- **enable Nottinghamshire to benefit from a devolution deal** as part of a combined authority.

What changes are we considering?

We are therefore considering a range of options that could develop a better system of local government for Nottinghamshire by replacing the eight councils in the two-tier system with a unitary system providing all local government services.

The various options include:

- One unitary council for the whole of Nottinghamshire (excluding Nottingham City);
- OR**
- More than one unitary council within Nottinghamshire (excluding Nottingham City). This could involve a number of possible combinations of existing District/Borough Council areas;
- OR**
- Any other feasible option that emerges during the engagement process.
 - We will also consider the option of retaining the current two-tier structure of eight councils, but are concerned that the financial pressures described above would lead to impacts on frontline services, and leave the area unable to access large scale government investment and influence over regional decision making.

None of the options would change the existing status of Nottingham City Council.

What criteria does the Government use to assess proposals?

In examining whether changes are needed, we will take account of **Government criteria and advice** which states that any proposal for changing local government should:

- Improve local government and service delivery:
 - Give greater value for money
 - Achieve significant cost savings
 - Provide stronger strategic and local leadership
 - Deliver a more sustainable structure
 - Provide better outcomes for local people
- Be based on a credible geography (with a population substantially in excess of 300,000 but no known defined upper limit)
- Command a good deal of local support

Government legislation also states that proposals for a single tier of local government should consist of whole council areas, i.e. proposals cannot break up parts of the existing District/ Borough geographical areas.

Possible implications of the options

Preserving the current two-tier structure

This option would not disrupt current structures. However, Nottinghamshire councils are facing significant financial pressures, which have been worsened by the COVID-19 crisis, and savings will need to be found over the coming years. If the structure of local government in Nottinghamshire remains two-tier as it is now, savings will need to be found elsewhere, most likely from reducing front-line services. It is also anticipated that two-tier areas will not be able to join a combined authority and participate in a devolution deal to secure long term strategic investment from Government in Nottinghamshire.

Creating a single unitary council

When we developed our Outline Case for Change in 2018, our financial modelling estimated that a single unitary council could achieve annual savings of £27million. This figure is being checked as we update our proposals for 2020, but other two-tier areas that have moved to single unitary status, such as Wiltshire, Northumberland and Cornwall, have achieved similar amounts. This is supported by recently published national [research by PriceWaterhouseCoopers \(PWC\)](#) which showed that establishing a single unitary council could save on average £126m over five years for a medium sized local authority area.

Common concerns with a possible change from a two-tier structure to a unitary system are the possible loss of local identity associated with district and borough areas, and anxiety that decisions affecting local communities may be taken centrally rather than locally. To address these concerns, other areas have put arrangements in place, such as an enhanced role for town and parish councils, and new community engagement models, to protect local identities and allow communities to influence decisions that affect them.

Creating more than one unitary council

When we developed our Outline Case for Change in 2018, our financial modelling estimated that a two unitary council arrangement in Nottinghamshire could achieve annual savings of £16million, compared with the current two- tier arrangement. This figure is being checked as we update our proposals for 2020. The [PWC report](#) offers evidence that the greater the number of unitary authorities that are created, the smaller the financial benefit. This report also addresses the issue that when more than one unitary authority to cover a county area is created, services that are currently delivered at a county wide level, such as education, highways (delivered by Via, the Council's highways company), libraries (delivered by Inspire Learning), children's services and adult social care, would need to be broken up and re-established. We are concerned that this risks disruption for service users and residents. It would also reduce the savings that could be achieved by moving to a unitary system.

However, creating more than one unitary authority to cover the county area, while reducing the savings that could be made, may address some concerns around local decision making as the area overseen by each Council is smaller.

Sharing your views and getting involved

Share your views and thoughts by filling-in the open questionnaire on-line at <https://future.nottinghamshire.gov.uk> between Monday 21st September – Monday 19th October 2020. Paper versions of the questionnaire are also available at all Nottinghamshire County Council libraries.

This 'listening and engagement' stage is being conducted by an independent and specialist social research company, Opinion Research Services (ORS).

Your views will help to inform our thinking about local government in Nottinghamshire and will be carefully considered as we develop proposals for our preferred option.

We will also be talking to local stakeholders, from businesses and voluntary organisations to Parish and Town Councils, to gain their views and thoughts.

FAQs

What is a unitary authority?

Nottinghamshire currently operates on a two-tier structure. A two-tier structure is where some local authority services are provided by the county council and other services by the borough or district councils within the same area. If Nottinghamshire changed to a system of unitary local government it would have a simpler single-tier structure, where there is just one local council responsible for all local government services in the area it covers. All local authorities in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland operate as unitary councils, as do some 55 authorities in England, such as Cornwall, Northumberland and Wiltshire County Councils.

How much would it save?

When the Council's Outline Case for Change was developed in 2018, changing to a unitary system of local government in Nottinghamshire was projected to annually save up to £27m. This figure is being checked as we update our proposals for 2020, but other two-tier areas that have moved to a unitary system, such as Wiltshire, Northumberland and Cornwall, have achieved similar amounts.

Will the proposals for Nottinghamshire affect Nottingham City Council?

No, the proposals would not affect the City Council's administrative area.

Who decides whether any change may happen?

If any proposals are submitted, the Government will make any final decision. The Government tests any proposals for unitary local government by checking that the changes create councils that will be the right size, have got local support and will make local government better.

Who is writing the proposals for the unitary authority?

The proposals are being written by County Council officers. They are taking into consideration wider research that has been done on the case for unitary authorities and talking to other key stakeholders, such as businesses and health partners. An independent accountancy firm will verify the financial information in the proposals.

Why are you using consultants?

We have commissioned an independent social research company (ORS) to undertake all the engagement activities to provide an independent analysis of the findings. We will also commission an independent company to confirm that any financial information in the case for change is accurate.

How will my views be listened to?

As an independent social research company, ORS will be responsible for analysing and presenting the feedback from the engagement exercise to the County Council – to inform the councillors' consideration of the proposals for the preferred option. ORS has extensive experience of important consultations across the public sector including with NHS, Police and Fire and Rescue Services, as well as major local government reorganisation consultations across Dorset, Buckinghamshire, Oxfordshire and Northamptonshire. They are a Market Research Society Company Partner and Partner of the Consultation Institute.

What will you do with my response?

Any information provided to ORS (via the questionnaire and/or by any submissions) will be processed in accordance with latest Data Protection regulations. Personal information will be kept for no more than 1 year after any decisions have been finalised. For further information, please see www.nottinghamshire.gov.uk/privacy and www.ors.org.uk/privacy. No members of the public will be identified in any ORS consultation reports; but where feedback is submitted by a representative on behalf of an organisation, or by an elected representative or someone acting in their official capacity, this may be attributed.