RIPON CIVIC SOCIETY

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Governance Reform and Democracy
Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government
2 Marsham Street
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12 April 2021

Dear Sirs

Consultation on proposals for locally-led reorganisation of local government in North Yorkshire

"Ripon Civic Society is a charitable organisation of local people which has worked for over fifty years to become a leading voice in the development and prosperity of the city and the surrounding area. We welcome this opportunity to contribute our views on the options submitted for unitary local government in North Yorkshire. This is the official response by the Society.

We have had regard to the six questions set out in the consultation. Our response comes from the particular perspective and experience of a civic society. We have not attempted to enquire of our members personal views on local government service delivery but rely upon the Government's assessment that this is a suitable time for unitary council proposals to be invited and assessed.

The front line services with which we have most frequent contact are town and country planning, highways, environmental, green space and cultural. These are delivered at both current county and district councils. Our 'place', the City of Ripon and its hinterland, will be served more effectively by a unitary council in both strategic and local terms as the downside of two-tier local government is more than apparent to us.

The key is identity. It will be essential that the selected option offers effective communication and access. Given digital capability geographical proximity is perhaps less important today. North Yorkshire is geographically extensive and has a population at the upper end of council size. The addition of York may be seen as a further challenge to capability, yet we accept that scale is also an opportunity. We will return to this.

We are supporting the unitary county proposal of North Yorkshire County Council (NYCC). This is for the following reasons.

We identify with Ripon. We identify with the wonderful variety and environmental components of North Yorkshire; its National Parks. coast, market towns and York itself. This is a credible geography compared with the arbitrary collection of districts of the two-unitary council proposal submitted by Craven, Harrogate, Richmondshire, Ryedale, Scarborough and Selby Councils

The scale of the county unitary could be a concern if it was not that NYCC has offered its 'double-devolution' approach. North Yorkshire is a rural county with an established network of 'parished' market towns. The two large towns, Harrogate and Scarborough, are together around only a quarter of the county population. It will be important for the market towns to take the opportunity to provide 'lower-tier' services and we consider that NYCC is best placed to encourage and support this in an equitable manner. The proposal for the appointment of Area Coordinators is immediate and practicable as are area committees based on parliamentary constituencies.

The scale of the rural county has a further benefit. Yorkshire in a provincial sense, includes the extensive metropolitan and urban areas of the west and south, along with the cities of York and Kingston upon Hull. The unitary county provides a sound and secure voice for the rural economy, communities and environment at not only regional level but also at national level. This would be dissipated by the two-unitary proposal.

Civic societies are particularly interested in, if not dependent upon, the specialist services that serve the historic environment and archives. Concentration of these in single county unitary should be more effective and efficient enabling skills to be better sustained and developed. We understand that re-organisation is expected to offer greater value for money. this we believe should be achieved by the single unitary option. We are less than enthusiastic about cost saving because the services upon which we rely have been reduced already to unacceptable levels. This is an unpalatable risk but one which the two-unitary option would merely increase.

We believe that it is more effective to choose the unitary county which is responsible already for 80% of local government expenditure in the county and its major services that it would be wasteful to attempt to disperse these into two new councils. We consider as well that it will be easier to assimilate current district council services into a single unitary council. The outcome should be that this creates a unitary county that is not only capable of providing strategic leadership but also fits well with the health sector and emergency services.

We trust this is helpful.

Yours faithfully,

Christopher Hughes

Chairman, Ripon Civic Society