



Ministry of Housing,
Communities &
Local Government

Andrew Smith
Chairman, Buckinghamshire Thames Valley
Local Enterprise Partnership
West Wing, University Campus,
Queen Alexandra Road,
High Wycombe,
HP11 2JZ
info@buckstvllep.co.uk

The Rt Hon James Brokenshire MP
*Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and
Local Government*

**Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local
Government**
4th Floor, Fry Building
2 Marsham Street
London SW1P 4DF

Tel: 0303 444 3450
Email:
james.brokenshire@communities.gsi.gov.uk

www.gov.uk/mhclg

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Dear Andrew,

LOCAL GOVERNMENT IN BUCKINGHAMSHIRE

On 12 March 2018, my predecessor as Secretary of State, the Rt Hon. Sajid Javid MP, announced that he was minded to implement the proposal for a single Buckinghamshire council and that he was not minded to implement the alternative proposal for establishing two councils. He invited representations to be made to him by 25 May 2018.

I am writing to let you know that I have today announced, subject to Parliamentary approval, that I have decided to implement the proposal to create a single Buckinghamshire Council for the whole of the county. Consequently, I have also decided not to implement the two unitary proposal. I enclose a copy of my Written Ministerial Statement.

I have received over 3,000 representations, which I have carefully considered along with all other relevant information available to me. I am clear that there is broad support for change to local government in Buckinghamshire. I am mindful that both proposals made it clear that retaining the status quo is not an option. The proposal for a single unitary, submitted by the county council, stated: '*Traditional approaches are not sustainable*', whilst the two unitary proposal, submitted by the four district councils, said: '*There is no dispute about the need for change.*'

Having carefully considered both proposals afresh against our publicly announced criteria for assessing unitary proposals, together with the over 3,000 representations I have received and all other relevant information, I consider that there is a compelling case for implementing the proposed single unitary council and that there is no such compelling case for implementing the two unitary proposal. As I explain in my statement, I have concluded that the single unitary proposal meets all three of our publicly announced criteria, "improving local government", "credible geography" and "local support"; whilst the two unitary proposal would meet the "local support" criterion, I do not consider it meets either of the other two criteria.

In short, I consider that there is an overwhelming case for change and that the proposal for a single unitary is the only proposal that I have received which I consider meets all the criteria. I am also of the view that in any event, of the two proposals for change, it is the single unitary proposal that better meets the criteria. I have therefore decided to implement, subject to Parliamentary approval, the single unitary proposal and not to implement the two unitary proposal.

I now propose to seek Parliamentary approval for the necessary secondary legislation providing for the new unitary council to be established on 1 April 2020, for the first elections to be held on Thursday 7 May 2020, and for the necessary transitional arrangements involving a shadow authority. In early January I intend to lay drafts of the secondary legislation before Parliament.

As I made clear in my statement, I also expect the new unitary council, and in the meantime the existing councils, to actively engage with their local communities about the appropriate arrangements for civic representation for towns and parishes. I similarly expect the councils to promote and help support the development of neighbourhood plans, as I consider that these can be key building blocks for the successful implementation of change in Buckinghamshire.

Statute enables me to implement a proposal I receive with any modification I consider appropriate. There is one modification I am considering. Whilst the number of members for the new council will ultimately be determined by the Local Government Boundary Commission for England when it undertakes its electoral review, the implementing secondary legislation must set out the number of members which will apply until the Commission has undertaken its review. The single unitary proposal envisaged 98 members. However, I recognise that some have questioned whether such a structure might weaken local democratic engagement at the most local level. I would therefore like to understand whether it might be beneficial to make a modification to enable providing for three-member electoral wards, based on the current county council divisions. I am seeking the views of council leaders on this as soon as practicable.

I am also considering whether to make an order to postpone the May 2019 elections in all four district councils – Aylesbury Vale, Chiltern, South Bucks and Wycombe – to May 2020. This will avoid members being elected for only one year, if Parliament approves the legislation establishing the new unitary council. Such an order would need to be made in the coming weeks before preparations for the May 2019 elections begin, and I have asked the council leaders for urgent comments on this.

From March 2019 the sunset clause means that the consent provisions in the process we are currently using for reorganisations fall away. In future, any proposal considered under the Cities and Local Government Devolution Act process will require unanimous consent from all councils. The Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act process for reorganisations remains available. Alternatively, I may issue a formal invitation for proposals, and the specific circumstances in which I would do so will be set out in due course.

I am writing in similar terms to the other Buckinghamshire MPs, the Lord Lieutenant, the Chairs of the Buckinghamshire Thames Valley and South East Midlands Local Enterprise Partnerships, and the Chairman of the Local Government Association. I am also writing to the leaders of the Buckinghamshire councils.



RT HON JAMES BROKESHIRE