Norton Parish Council

Response to Government consultation on proposals for Local Government Reorganisation in Gloucestershire

1. Introduction

Norton Parish Council is a small semi-rural parish located midway between Gloucester and Tewkesbury in the county of Gloucester. The Parish Council welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Government's consultation on proposals for local government reorganisation in Gloucestershire.

In common with most parish and town councils in the county, we support the establishment of a single unitary authority for Gloucestershire as the most coherent and recognisable structure at a county level.

However, local government reorganisation is not solely a question of structural configuration. The effectiveness of any new system will ultimately be determined by how well it reflects and responds to the needs of individual communities across Gloucestershire. Those needs are understood most clearly at the neighbourhood level and are already addressed, day to day, by parish councils as the closest tier of government to residents.

This response therefore focuses not only on the overall structure, but on the principles, governance arrangements and relationships that will be required to ensure that any new unitary authority, particularly a single countywide model, works effectively in practice. In doing so, it sets out how parish councils must be recognised, engaged and enabled as core partners in delivering local outcomes and sustaining strong, connected communities.

2. How this response aligns with the consultation criteria

This response is structured to align with the key themes and assessment criteria set out in the consultation. Rather than respond to each question in isolation, we want to address the underlying considerations across the following areas:

- geography and place (Q1)
- delivery, scale and sustainability (Q2–Q4)
- local voice and engagement (Q5 and Q7)
- devolution and future governance (Q6)
- boundary considerations, including the Gloucester-specific proposal.

3. The Strategic Role of Parish Councils

Parish councils are not simply stakeholders within the system - they are the existing neighbourhood tier of government.

Across Gloucestershire, parish councils already:

- provide democratic representation at the most local level

- deliver services and manage community assets
- convene partners across public, voluntary and community sectors, and
- respond directly to local needs and priorities.

Their contribution extends beyond governance into health, wellbeing, and economic resilience.

Parish councils play a critical role in:

- reducing social isolation and supporting ageing populations
- enabling preventative approaches that reduce pressure on NHS and social care services
- supporting local economies, high streets, and community infrastructure, and
- strengthening social cohesion and community resilience.

In a county like Gloucestershire, with a growing and ageing population, this role is increasingly important. Investment in the first tier of local government is not only democratic, it is economically and socially preventative, and reduces demand on more costly public services.

Any future structure, particularly within a single unitary authority model, must therefore:

- recognise parish and town councils as core delivery partners
- build on this existing infrastructure, and
- strengthen, not dilute, their role within neighbourhood governance

(a) Geography and Place (Q1)

A single countywide geography broadly aligns with how residents currently experience Gloucestershire. However, parish councils have a uniquely detailed understanding of the places they serve and this hyperlocal knowledge must be central to determining what constitutes “sensible geographies”.

Sensible geographies should:

- reflect real communities and lived experience, not administrative convenience
- align with how residents access services such as health, education, transport and employment
- recognise the distinct characteristics of urban, peri-urban and rural areas, and
- maintain coherent community identities, avoiding fragmentation.

There is strong concern within the sector that:

- artificial or imposed boundaries risk disconnecting communities from services and decision-making
- rural areas may be grouped in ways that do not reflect geography, and infrastructure or economic relationships.

This principle applies equally to:

- unitary authority boundaries, and
- neighbourhood partnership arrangements

Parish councils should be extensively and meaningfully consulted in shaping both. Without this, there is a significant risk that the new structures will fail to reflect how communities actually function.

(b) Delivery, Scale and Sustainability (Q2, Q3, Q4)

A single unitary provides the clearest opportunity for consistency and efficiency, if the delivery of outcomes are based on financial sustainability, capacity and realistic transition planning.

Financial sustainability

In common with other local councils in Gloucestershire, Norton Parish Council believes there is no mandate for unfunded devolution, and that any additional responsibilities must be accompanied by long-term, sustainable funding.

Parish councils like ours rely primarily on the precept, and do not receive revenue support grant or equivalent funding streams available to principal authorities.

Transferring services without funding would:

- place unsustainable pressure on parish councils
- lead to increased precepts for residents, and
- risk creating inequity and double taxation.

Any devolution of services or assets must therefore be:

- fully funded, not reliant on local taxation
- supported by clear financial frameworks, and
- sustainable beyond the transition period.

Capacity and workforce

There is significant variation across the local council sector. While larger parish and town councils may have the staffing and infrastructure necessary to expand, many smaller parish councils like Norton's operate with limited capacity, with their only employee being a part-time clerk. Therefore we couldn't take on any additional responsibilities without substantial support.

Any model must:

- recognise this diversity
- avoid a one-size-fits-all approach, and
- provide appropriate support, training and resourcing.

Transition and delivery realism

Reorganisation presents risks to:

- planning and enforcement
- highways and infrastructure services, and
- local responsiveness and access to officers.

There is concern that:

- over-centralisation may reduce accessibility and responsiveness
- institutional knowledge may be lost during transition, and
- services most valued locally may be weakened.

Delivery success will depend on:

- retaining local knowledge and expertise
- maintaining accessible local service delivery, and
- ensuring continuity and clarity during transition.

(c) Local Voice and Engagement (Q5 & Q7)

The risks associated with a single unitary authority, particularly the increased distance from decision-making, make strong neighbourhood governance essential. Parish councils are already the democratic infrastructure at neighbourhood level and reorganisation must strengthen, not duplicate or dilute, this role.

Consultation and local input

There are concerns across local councils in Gloucestershire that:

- engagement to date has been limited
- timescales have restricted meaningful participation, and
- there is insufficient clarity on how local views will influence outcomes.

This creates a risk that:

- proposals are not fully informed by local knowledge, and
- communities feel disconnected from decision-making.

Neighbourhood arrangements

Proposals for neighbourhood groupings raise important issues, namely:

- potential dilution of local representation
- lack of clarity on governance, accountability and decision-making, and
- risk of creating structures that duplicate or compete with existing parish councils.

Neighbourhood governance must therefore:

- be built on the existing parish and town council network
- ensure each community retains a clear and independent voice, and
- avoid creating additional layers that weaken accountability

Critically, parish councils must have:

- a defined and meaningful role in decision-making, not solely advisory status
- representation within neighbourhood structures that reflects their democratic mandate, and
- clear mechanisms for influencing local priorities, service delivery and resource allocation.

Without this, neighbourhood empowerment will remain aspirational rather than operational.

(d) Devolution and Future Governance (Q6)

A single unitary authority provides the most coherent platform for devolution. Parish councils are central to this, providing:

- local leadership and democratic accountability
- community engagement and insight, and
- delivery capacity at neighbourhood level.

For devolution to succeed, it must be underpinned by clear governance structures and partnership arrangements.

Structured partnership and representation

There must be formal recognition of the role of parish councils within governance arrangements, with a formal mechanism for ongoing engagement between the unitary authority and parish councils.

Consequently, consideration should be given to establishing a Devolution Committee or Board, with representation from the unitary authority and parish and town councils. This body should oversee neighbourhood arrangements, devolution of services, and partnership working.

Governance frameworks

A clearly-designed framework should set out:

- roles and responsibilities
- decision-making processes, and
- expectations for engagement and collaboration.

This should include:

- a locally-agreed charter between the unitary authority and parish and town councils
- clarity on service delivery, asset transfer, and funding arrangements, and
- mechanisms for accountability and dispute resolution.

Dedicated support and infrastructure

Effective partnership requires:

- a dedicated officer function to support engagement with parish and town councils
- structured and regular engagement at both strategic and operational levels, and
- investment in training, capacity building and sector development.

Without these structures, there is a significant risk that devolution remains fragmented or inconsistent, and local engagement is reduced rather than strengthened.

(e) Boundary Change Considerations (the Greater Gloucester proposal)

Any boundary changes within a unitary model must be supported by clear and robust justification. Boundary changes must therefore:

- demonstrate clear benefits for public service delivery and financial sustainability
- avoid unnecessary fragmentation of communities, and
- reflect existing community identities, service patterns and local connections.

We are particular concerned that boundary changes might:

- divide established communities
- create complexity in service delivery, and
- weaken local representation.

Any such changes must therefore be:

- evidence-based
- clearly communicated, and
- shaped through engagement with affected communities and parish councils.

4. Conclusion

Parish councils, like Norton, are already delivering at neighbourhood level as democratically elected, place-based institutions with deep community insight. They provide an existing and functioning foundation for local governance which should be built upon, not replaced or marginalised.

Local government reorganisation presents a significant opportunity to strengthen local democracy, improve service delivery, and support community wellbeing. But this opportunity will only be realised if parish councils are fully integrated into governance arrangements, supported by clear frameworks, sustainable funding and genuine influence over decisions that affect their communities.

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