



BAGNALL PARISH COUNCIL

Public Meeting

Local Government Reorganisation in the Staffordshire Moorlands

Tuesday 28th October 2025 commencing at 7:30pm

held at Bagnall Village Hall

Councillors in attendance - Les Knowles, Sybil Ralphs, Steve Horton
Cllr Flunder

Residents in attendance – 50+

Parish Council Meeting: Discussion on Government Reorganisation Plans

Introduction

Councillor Knowles commenced the meeting by warmly welcoming all attending Councillors and expressing gratitude to the members of the public who joined the session. The primary objective of the meeting was to discuss the Government's proposed reorganisation plans, which hold significant implications for the local area.

Potential Impact of Reorganisation

Cllr Knowles highlighted the potential consequences if the Government's proposals were to proceed. He emphasised that such changes would have a substantial impact on the green belt within the Parish. Additionally, there is a real risk that both the Moorlands and its current boundaries could be lost because of the reorganisation.

Background and Previous Meeting

This meeting served as a follow-up to the earlier session held on 12 August 2024. At that prior meeting, the final vote revealed that there was only one attendee in support of the reorganisation proposals, indicating limited backing from those present.

Concerns and Questions Raised

During a separate meeting, Cllr Knowles posed several important questions about issues affecting the Parish. However, he reported that many of these questions were not directly addressed. Cllr Knowles expressed hope that Cllr Flunder might be able to provide further updates and clarity regarding the situation.

Overview of Proposals

Cllr Knowles provided a summary of the proposals introduced by Andrew Stokes CEO Staffordshire Moorlands DC, and Labour Group Leader of Staffordshire Moorlands District Council. The core aim of their proposals is to incorporate the Moorlands area into Stoke-on-Trent. He clarified that there is no objection to the residents of Stoke-on-Trent themselves; rather, the concerns centre on the manner in which Stoke-on-Trent Council is managed and its considerable levels of debt.

Parish Council's Position

At present, the Parish Council is firmly opposed to all reorganisation proposals. The Council believes that the proposed changes would not bring any benefit to the local community. In conclusion, Cllr Knowles informed attendees that a vote on the matter would take place at the end of the meeting.

Presentation from Councillor Ralphs: Opposition to the Proposed Unitary Authority

Introduction

Councillor Ralphs addressed the meeting to present a compelling case for rejecting the proposed plan that would see Staffordshire become a unitary authority, with Stoke-on-Trent taking a leading role. She emphasised that, in her experience, there was a significant lack of local support for these plans, including from residents in Stoke-on-Trent itself.

The Government Mandate and Its Impact

According to Councillor Ralphs, the government has issued a mandate requiring the formation of a unitary authority, with Stoke-on-Trent at the forefront. This move is intended to contribute to the creation of a "Greater Stoke." She expressed deep concern that such a change would have a profound impact on the lives of people in the Moorlands, arguing that it would bring about the end of local government for local people. While assurances have been given that parish councils would remain, Councillor Ralphs doubted this outcome, suggesting instead that parish councils could vanish overnight, further eroding local representation.

Local Choice and National Context

Councillor Ralphs acknowledged that there are areas in the UK where councils want to join and supported their right to do so. However, she insisted that the decision should rest with the local council, not be imposed from above. She referenced a statement from the leader of Stoke-on-Trent Council, who had

described those opposed to the merger as "daft." While expressing respect for the leader and the council, Councillor Ralphs firmly disagreed with their position.

Financial Concerns

A major part of Councillor Ralphs' opposition centred on financial issues. She highlighted that in 2024 Stoke-on-Trent Council faced an overspend of £43.416 million and had to go to the Government for an emergency financial support package. In the Spring of this year, they once again had to ask the government for an emergency loan of £16.8million which must be repaid.

In addition, we are told that this year's budget is facing an overspend of around £14,000,000. million.

Planning, Greenbelt, and Village Boundaries

Councillor Ralphs raised additional concerns regarding planning and the risk to greenbelt land and village boundaries. In her view, Stoke-on-Trent is seeking to acquire land in the Staffordshire Moorlands, which could lead to the disappearance of villages and the loss of breaks between communities such as Stoke-on-Trent and Leek.

Observations from Stoke-on-Trent

During a recent tour of Stoke-on-Trent, Councillor Ralphs found the area to be neglected and dispiriting. She recalled that Hanley, once a vibrant town, had lost its vitality. She pointed out that out of 317 cities in the UK classified as deprived, Stoke-on-Trent ranks 13th, illustrating the extent of its decline.

Concerns Over Political Control and Annexation

Councillor Ralphs claimed that Stoke-on-Trent is keen to assume the lead in the new arrangement, with intentions to annex surrounding areas and introduce a Mayor with political control. She noted that similar attempts had been made in the past but had failed.

Comparative Size and Demographics

She compared the two areas, stating that Stoke-on-Trent covers only thirty-six square miles and has a population of 258,037, whereas the Moorlands spans 220 square miles with approximately 100,000 residents. The Moorlands is described as a "green gateway" between other regions, and she warned that if current building plans continue, the area risks becoming merely an extension of greater Stoke-on-Trent.

Crime and Social Concerns

Councillor Ralphs also referenced a report from the Police Data Organisation, which described Stoke-on-Trent as the new "crime capital of the Midlands," surpassing Birmingham. She claimed that, in terms of crime, Stoke-on-Trent is now considered the most dangerous place to live in the Midlands, particularly regarding offences such as rape, burglary, and murder.

Loss of Representation and Local Identity

She warned that under the proposed changes, parish councils would disappear, and local representation would be lost. She envisaged large wards of 6,000 people, making it increasingly difficult for residents to have their voices heard and for their interests to be represented effectively. Councillor Ralphs argued that while the plan might suit some councils, it is not right for the Moorlands and would not benefit local taxpayers.

Increased Costs and Impact on Residents

She highlighted that Stoke-on-Trent is proposing a 4.9% increase in Council Tax and emphasised the importance of preserving the quality of life for residents, particularly those living in areas of natural beauty. Councillor Ralphs criticised the government for failing to fully account for the costs involved, estimating that reorganising Staffordshire could cost between £25 million and £100 million. She warned that pensioners and vulnerable groups would face hardship as a result.

Conclusion

In closing, Councillor Ralphs appealed to those present to oppose the proposal, insisting that it would be detrimental to the Moorlands. She urged the community to send a clear message to the Secretary of State, reiterating that the people of these islands have never been forced into unwanted arrangements. She concluded with a passionate call to reject the plan, stating, "Thank you very much. We do not want it, we do not need it, we should not have it," which was met with resounding applause.

Overview and Process Update

Introduction

Cllr Flunder expressed his gratitude to everyone for attending. He explained that he has been nominated as a Champion to lead and guide people through the current process. He emphasised that he is acting in an a-political capacity.

Upcoming Meeting

Cllr Flunder informed attendees that there would be a meeting on 8th November in Brown Edge and Endon.

Consultation and Feedback

He noted that the consultation period had closed on 12th October. However, members of the public can still provide their comments. They can do so by emailing Cllr Flunder directly or collecting a leaflet distributed at the meeting.

Political Context

Cllr Flunder highlighted that, politically, the Conservatives intend to write to the Secretary of State to express their view that the current process should not proceed. Their concerns include a lack of public will, insufficient consultation, limited time for consideration, and the process being perceived as ill thought out.

Despite this, he encouraged everyone to take the opportunity to write to the District Council with their views before the deadline of 28th November.

Process Stages

Cllr Flunder outlined the three stages of the process. He explained that this is the first stage, which has come as a shock to many. People have been given the chance to propose ideas. Currently, there are ten submissions in total, with SMDC being just one. Nine additional submissions have been made in the south, with Newcastle-under-Lyme submitting several options.

During the second stage, the government will review these submissions in the spring of next year and decide which options will move forward for public consultation by the end of the summer. The government will then announce which option they will pursue, which will subsequently be legislated and presented to Parliament. Elections will be held for a shadow council as part of this process.

Cllr Flunder remarked that there is some positive news, as Surrey's plans have already been delayed. He also noted that Staffordshire is classified within tier three.

Project Scale and Financial Implications

He described the project as enormous and costly, expressing his belief that it will not be self-funding and will require significant expenditure.

Cllr Flunder urged attendees not to become complacent and thanked everyone who had responded to the SMDC consultations.

Final Stage and Future Planning

The third stage involves drafting and finalising plans, which must be submitted before 3rd March 2028. It is hoped that town and parish councils will be able to develop strong ideas regarding their future direction over the coming years.

Government Responses

Cllr Knowles reported that he had received government responses to several questions raised. The government had indicated that local plans will no longer be valid and that areas will need to create new plans moving forward. Cllr Flunder estimated the process would take between two and three years.

Referendum and Democratic Representation

Proposal for a Referendum

Cllr Ralphs proposed that a referendum should be held concerning the future structure of local governance. This reflects the importance of ensuring that significant changes are subject to public approval and democratic process.

Changes to Council Structure

Councillor Flunder explained that, as part of democratic planning, councils customarily address matters brought forward by their communities. These issues are then escalated first to the district council, and subsequently to the county council for further consideration. However, under the current reorganisation proposals, there is an intention to abolish both district and county councils, replacing them with larger governing bodies. This would result in a substantial reduction in representation, with the number of representatives being cut by two-thirds.

Impact on Parish Councils

Councillor Ralphs highlighted that there are presently forty-two parish councils actively involved in local affairs. Under the proposed changes, all parish councils would be dissolved, removing this important layer of local representation and community engagement.

Support for a Referendum

Considering these significant changes, it was agreed that it is essential to write formally in support of holding a referendum. This would ensure that residents have the opportunity to express their views on the reorganisation and its impact on local democracy.

Public Question & Answers

Q: When the best proposal is presented next March, will the decision be made by the cabinet or will there be public consultation?

A: The public will be consulted; however, only a limited number of options will be available. A formal consultation process will take place, and it is imperative that all individuals participate. Councillor Flunder is tasked with promoting broader engagement. In response to Councillor Ralphs' query regarding an extension clause for those opposed to any modifications, no exemption currently exists; Councillor Flunder intends to address this topic at the parish assembly. During the consultation, all viewpoints may be expressed without restriction.

Q: How will information be communicated to the public?

A: Councillor Flunder acknowledged previous shortcomings in communication and is committed to ensuring prompt dissemination of information given time constraints. He will pass on feedback received and indicated that updates will be accessible online via LGR, enabling residents to remain informed on developments.

Q: Considering the significance of this meeting, a parishioner questioned the absence of Councillor Edwards.

A: Councillor Flunder assured the parishioner that these concerns would be communicated to Councillor Edwards. Councillor Knowles recommended that the parishioner address this matter directly with Councillor Edwards.

Q: A parishioner queried exemptions and whether penalties would apply.

A: The district council was not mandated to submit a plan; however, the Labour council deemed it necessary to do so. Numerous councils have faced challenges throughout this process.

Public Comment: Comment: Should any questions arise in relation to the ongoing proposals or actions discussed by the council, it is essential that these queries are submitted in writing to Karen Bradley. Upon receipt, Karen Bradley will function as the point of correspondence with the Secretary of State, ensuring that responses are sought through the appropriate governmental channels. This process has been established to maintain clarity and accountability in addressing public concerns.

Comment: It was noted that the United Kingdom stands out in Europe for taking this approach. In contrast, other European countries are moving in alternative directions. These differing approaches are influenced by ongoing reorganisations within key sectors such as the health service and police. These changes further highlight the need to strengthen democratic processes and to provide support wherever necessary during this period.

Councillor Knowles proposed several initiatives to enhance the parish council's communication with the public. These include establishing a Facebook page. In addition, he recommended the preparation and publication of materials on the website, specifically aimed at addressing questions raised with the

government. These steps are intended to make information more accessible and to ensure that the community remains well-informed about the council's actions and decisions.

Meeting Outcomes: Devolution Proposals

Voting on Devolution Proposals

The meeting included a formal vote regarding the proposals to combine with Stoke-on-Trent or pursue any other devolution plan suggested by Staffordshire Moorlands District Council (SMDC). The results were as follows:

- In Favour: None
- Against: All attendees

Referendum on the Devolution Issue

A subsequent vote was held to determine support for enforcing a referendum on the entire issue of devolution. The results were unanimous:

- In Favour: All attendees
- Against: None

Actions and Closing Remarks

Councillor Flunder requested that a letter be sent to SMDC, reflecting the outcome of the vote.

Councillor Knowles expressed gratitude to everyone present for attending and pledged to keep everyone updated as matters progress.