**Agenda item 5 (ii): Unitary Authority Consultation (Devolution Proposals)**

**Report on Parishes’ briefing session on Local Government Reorganisation on Wednesday, 16September 2020 at 6.30pm, attended by Richard Neale**

1. Meeting was organised by Craven DC and led by the Council Leader.
2. Current government proposed plans are based around two unitary authorities for North Yorkshire, one for York City and one for all other districts and parishes.
3. There was detailed criticism of this, because it would lead to one unitary authority for York City of under 200,000 people and one for the rest, with over 600,000 people. This conflicts with the government’s own declared optimum number of residents of around 400,000 people per authority.
4. Craven are leading a counter proposal for an Eastern unitary authority including the larger towns and city (Whitby, Scarborough, York); and a Western authority including the rural dales and Richmond and Harrogate. East and West would both have around 400,000 residents and were perceived by the meeting to be both more sensible and more manageable.
5. Both alternatives would envisage only one elected Mayor with authority over both areas.
6. Several attendees commented that they had found the present North Yorkshire CC not very responsive and voiced the fear that the present proposed change would simply lead to a ‘North Yorkshire Plus’, based in its present offices with most of its present staff and not much would change (other than that it could become even more remote).
7. The point was clearly made that the change is being driven not by the government declared desire for devolving power, but by the cost savings of an estimated £25m p.a., in each authority, from amalgamation of activities and avoidance of perceived duplication.
8. The main differences for parish councils, such as Draughton, would be that local actions necessary to meet local needs could be funded from central authority resources, provided a strong case was made and driven hard by the parish council concerned. The experiences of a member of a parish council from the South West who had gone through the type of transition envisaged described how they had changed and learned how to cope with the new arrangements. It took them about seven years, but at the end they felt it had been worthwhile and they could do more for their parishes/districts than they could before – but it was a period of some turmoil.

I came away convinced of the merits of two authorities of approximately equal size, but apprehensive about the short term costs of the transition and the accompanying chaos at a time when the country and every parish needs to give priority to the current pandemic and the collapse of local economies. This is the right move but at the wrong time and it appears to be being rushed through for the wrong reasons.

**Richard Neale**

**4th November 2020**