

VIA email

18th January 2019

Governance Reform and Democracy
Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government
2 Marsham Street
London
SW1P 4DF

Healthwatch Northamptonshire's Response to the Consultation on Local Government Reorganisation in Northamptonshire

Please find below the response of Healthwatch Northamptonshire (HWN) to the above consultation. It is based on views and comments submitted to HWN by our volunteers and members of the public, both individually and from a special consultation meeting held with HWN Board members, staff and volunteers on 8th January 2019.

There are different views among our volunteers and in the wider community about the structure which is proposed, with some significant concerns that the larger towns, especially Northampton, could lose their historic identity and sense of place. Given the diversity of views, and the impossibility of predicting how any new structure will work out, we have decided not to comment on the specific boundary proposals and the specific questions, recognising that leadership and relationships are ultimately more important for partnership working than structures. It is far more relevant to local people to be assured that, whatever the structures, councils will have the resources and organisational capacity to work together with local people to improve services.

The following principles should guide the process of restructuring for the reasons set out below:

1. The structure of local government is less important than the qualities of leadership displayed and the commitment to close partnership working between public bodies involved in health and wellbeing, which is essential;
2. Some form of county-wide structures is essential to ensure effective joint-working between local councils, and the health economy and emergency services which are organised on a countywide basis;
3. Whilst there is a need to be responsive to local needs and priorities, there is an equally strong need to demonstrate equity of access to essential health and wellbeing services across the county and nationally.

Opportunities

Healthwatch Northamptonshire recognises that there have been problems in the relationships between the different public bodies in the county over several years which have had an adverse impact on the quality of health and social care provision. We acknowledge the opportunity that the reorganisation of local government presents to develop services that are more responsive to local variations in identities and needs.

The proposed new structure opens up potential for town and parish councils to play a greater role in promoting good health and wellbeing for the population of Northamptonshire, which is clearly essential to ensure local representation.

We hope that the new structures will build on the recently improved co-ordination and collaboration between the local authority and local NHS bodies, and that these emerging positive relationships will not be lost or break down in the process of reorganisation. At the same time, we hope that resources will not be wasted through a duplication of services or structures. It is important to remember that, for people who live on the borders of the county, who may use health services in a neighbouring area, cross-border working is vital.

Concerns

Alongside this optimism for potential future opportunities, we would like to express our concern that some of the issues that currently exist in Northamptonshire and impact adversely on the local population are not exacerbated by a change in structures. In particular, we are aware of acute staff shortages in health and social care settings (both adults and children's services) that need to be addressed. The reorganisation of government needs to emphasise an optimistic, fresh start that attracts well-qualified staff to work and live in Northamptonshire. We welcome the joint work on recruitment in the health and care sectors which is getting underway and which needs to be sustained.

A strong commitment to universal services and early intervention for children and families is of paramount importance so as to prevent the escalation of needs that requires more resource-intensive, crisis-driven responses. Safeguarding structures and procedures need to be robust and to integrate smoothly with other public services that work at a county-wide level, such as police and the Northamptonshire Health and Care Partnership (NHCP). We hope that the positive achievements as a result of integrating mental health services across the county will be maintained. It is crucial that vulnerable adults and children do not slip through the cracks and the needs of carers and the voluntary sector are not overlooked at the time of reorganising services.

The health service, working through the Clinical Commissioning Groups (CCGs) is effectively structured on a countywide basis, as are the police and fire services. It would be costly and retrograde to create duplicate structures for co-operation in each of the unitary authorities to replace the single countywide structures which currently exist. We recognise that the new authorities, if created, will wish to develop a sense of locality and to respond to differing local priorities, but we also draw attention to the importance of countywide co-ordination where appropriate.

There are currently grave concerns throughout the county that the voluntary sector is already inadequately funded and has seen year on year cuts to grants and resources. If people and communities are to assume greater responsibility for their own health and wellbeing, the role of the voluntary sector becomes even more important, for example in delivering social prescribing, and therefore needs financial support.

Local Healthwatch

In response to question 5 (Do you have any other comments with regards to the proposed reorganisation of local government in Northamptonshire?) Healthwatch Northamptonshire has developed over the last 6 years to be a strong consumer voice, with substantial local knowledge and extensive networks. We have a vital role to play as a key resource to inform the design and delivery of new services so that they are accessible and responsive to local needs. We continue to emphasise our preference for a single, grant funded Healthwatch organisation to work across both of the new unitary authorities, and that Healthwatch is adequately funded to ensure that we can play as full a role as possible ensuring the voice of the public is heard during this complex transition.

Yours faithfully,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'D. Jones', written over a horizontal line.

Dr David N. Jones
Chair
Healthwatch Northamptonshire