

Appendix 3

MLAs fail to agree on reduction of councils

By Noel McAdam

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Stormont Executive ministers broke up last night without a deal on the future direction for Northern Ireland's councils.

The second-longest Executive meeting since devolution was restored failed to find a formula to allow elections to go ahead to 11 new fully-functioning councils next May, culled from the present 26.

But ministers also agreed to hold a special Executive meeting on Monday to attempt again to finalise a deal including funding the £118m estimated 'start-up' costs for the already long-delayed shake-up.

A Stormont spokesman said intensive discussions between the parties would continue over the weekend — but, without agreement, the current 26 authorities will be given a four or five-year extension.

DUP and Sinn Fein ministers also held a series of bilateral negotiations yesterday following a four-hour Executive session including, it was reported, a one-to-one between First Minister Peter Robinson and his Deputy Martin McGuinness.

Other sticking points, including whether Dunmurry goes into a new Belfast council or remains as part of Lisburn, which will tie up with Castlereagh, also remain.

But one senior source said the fact that ministers were prepared to return on Monday was an indication they believe the project — designed to result in £428m savings to the public purse over the next 25 years — can still go ahead.

An announcement by DUP minister Edwin Poots, who oversees local government, had been provisionally pencilled in for the Assembly on Monday, partly because the Northern Ireland Office, which is responsible for elections, had regarded yesterday as the "absolute final deadline" for agreement.

John Mathews, the president of the councils' umbrella group, the NI Local Government Association (NILGA), said: "I am more optimistic than pessimistic, although it did look at one stage they were not going to be able to reach agreement."

The executive of NILGA is due to hold a special meeting today following its own talks with Ian Maye, the most senior civil servant involved in the revamp.