

25 July 2007

Chief Executive
Bedfordshire County Council

Our Ref:
Your Ref:

BY EMAIL

Dear Chief Executive,

PROPOSALS FOR FUTURE UNITARY STRUCTURES

In response to the Invitation to councils in England issued by the Secretary of State on 26 October 2006, your council submitted a proposal for future unitary structures before our 25 January deadline. I wrote to you on 8 February 2007 informing you that your council's proposal conformed to the terms of the Invitation and on 27 March 2007 informing you that your proposal, together with the further information that you provided to explain and clarify it, would be proceeding to stakeholder consultation.

I am now writing to inform you that, in the Secretary of State's judgement, there is a reasonable likelihood that, if implemented, the proposal would meet the outcomes specified by each of the criteria set out in the Invitation. However, the Secretary of State judges that the proposal from Bedford Borough Council would deliver to a greater extent the long-term outcomes specified by the criteria around strategic leadership, neighbourhood empowerment and value for money and equity on public services, provided that there is a unitary solution for the remainder of the county area. Consequently, she is minded not to implement your proposal but instead to implement the two-unitary proposal if and when the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Bill is enacted.

These decisions were reached having regard to your council's proposal, the further information that you have submitted, the responses to the stakeholder consultation and all other relevant information available. In relation to each of the five criteria, the Secretary of State reached the following views on your proposal.

Strong, Effective and Accountable Strategic Leadership

The Secretary of State, considers that the simplified partnership structure linking strategic planning and delivery, together with the role of the leader and executive on those partnerships, means that there is reasonable likelihood of your proposal achieving the outcomes specified by the criterion.

Neighbourhood Flexibility and Empowerment

The Secretary of State considers that the proposed greater responsibility for frontline councillors with delegated budgets and the focus on parishes is likely to deliver neighbourhood empowerment and that the proposals which build on existing arrangements and with locality forums with chairs reporting back to the executive will ensure that 'place-based' issues in the area are raised properly. However, she considers that these arrangements involve little real delegation. Overall however, she concluded that there is a reasonable likelihood of your proposal achieving the outcomes specified by the criterion.

Value for Money and Equity on Public Services

The Secretary of State considers that the 'hub and spoke' model of service delivery is well thought through and the potential for business process re-engineering of all services, means that there is reasonable likelihood of your proposal achieving the outcomes specified by the criterion.

Affordability

The Secretary of State considers that the financial case looks reasonably robust, although the projected savings figures appear very high and there is a risk that they could only be achieved if service levels were cut. Even if projected savings were unrealisable, however, there is a reasonable likelihood that the proposal would be likely to be affordable and could be funded. On this basis, she concluded that there is reasonable likelihood of your proposal achieving the outcomes specified by the criterion.

Supported by a Cross Section of Partners and Stakeholders

The Secretary of State acknowledges that most stakeholders who responded from the public, private and third sector support this proposal. She concluded that there is reasonable likelihood of your proposal achieving the outcomes specified by the criterion.

Conclusion

In judging between the two proposals for Bedfordshire, the Secretary of State considered which of the proposals were likely to deliver to the greater extent the outcomes on leadership, neighbourhood empowerment and public services. She takes the view that the neighbourhood arrangements in your proposal would involve little delegation to communities and hence would be less able to provide effective neighbourhood empowerment. She also takes the view that your proposal is less able to provide effective strategic leadership.

As you are aware, Bedford Borough's proposal for a unitary Bedford, was based on the proposal that the rest of Bedfordshire should also become unitary. Since there is no acceptable, substantive proposal for the rest of Bedfordshire, the Secretary of State intends to invite your council, along with the district councils of South and Mid-Bedfordshire to submit proposals for a unitary solution for two the remainder of the Bedfordshire county area.

If you have any queries about the substance of the decision you should write in the first instance to Mark Barnett at mark.barnett@communities.gsi.gov.uk.

Yours sincerely,

P Rowsell