

25 July 2007

Chief Executive
Northumberland 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 the 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. Consequently, she is minded to implement your proposal if and when the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Bill is enacted.

This decision was 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 council's proposal:

Strong, Effective and Accountable Strategic Leadership

The Secretary of State considers that a single unitary authority will ensure an effective voice for Northumberland at regional and sub-regional level and will best safeguard the interests of rural Northumberland. Although Northumberland is large geographically, it is fairly small in population terms. Moreover, the Secretary of State considers your council's proposals involving simplifying and streamlining the governance and partnership arrangements for the area will enable effective strategic leadership to be provided. She therefore concludes that there is a reasonable likelihood of the proposal achieving the outcomes specified by the criterion.

Neighbourhood Flexibility and Empowerment

The Secretary of State considers that although large geographically, the innovative neighbourhood arrangements based around significant delegation to three area committees and effective community engagement in 26 community areas, will help ensure that the authority is not seen as being too remote and will enable local communities to influence local service delivery. She considers these arrangements will have the capacity to achieve effective neighbourhood empowerment. Accordingly she concluded that there is a reasonable likelihood of the proposal achieving the outcomes specified by the criterion.

Value for Money and Equity on Public Services

The Secretary of State notes that your proposal would provide the potential for significant improvements in service delivery. As well as retaining the existing pattern of county services, the new authority would be able to exploit the synergies that exist between some county and district services. In addition, she notes that a single authority for Northumberland would be able to exploit potential economies of scale with substantial revenue savings per annum. Accordingly she concluded that there is a reasonable likelihood of your proposal achieving the outcomes specified by the criterion.

Affordability

The Secretary of State notes that the financial case looks reasonably robust and there is little risk that the proposal would be unaffordable. Accordingly she concluded that there is a 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 considers that there appears to be at least a reasonable level of support for the proposals. She notes that key stakeholders, including the Chief Constable and North East Chamber of Commerce, are strongly supportive. She also recognises that whilst the Districts rely heavily on the 2004 referendum, which produced a majority against the single unitary option, it is significant that in that referendum the single unitary option nevertheless had significant support – over 40%. On balance therefore, she concluded that there is a reasonable likelihood of your proposal achieving the outcomes specified by the criterion.

Conclusion

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