

25 July 2007

Chief Executive
Alnwick District Council
Blyth Valley District Council
Berwick-upon-Tweed District Council
Castle Morpeth District Council
Tynedale District Council
Wansbeck District 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, the Northumberland District councils submitted a proposal for future unitary structures by the 25 January deadline. I wrote to you on 8 February 2007 informing you that your councils' 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 not a reasonable likelihood that, if implemented, the proposal would meet the outcomes specified by all the criteria set out in the invitation. Consequently, she is minded not to implement your proposal.

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 proposal.

P Rowsell
Deputy Director Local Democracy
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Strong, Effective and Accountable Strategic Leadership

The Secretary of State recognises doubts that the split between rural Northumberland and the urban SE is as obvious as claimed. She notes that there are significant interactions and commuter flows between the two which mean that a high degree of strategic co-ordination and coherence is needed. She is also of the view that there is a real risk that two authorities would be unable to “punch their weight” at regional and sub-regional level; and that the authorities would lose out in relation to the large unitary authorities, such as Newcastle and Gateshead. Accordingly she concluded that there is not a reasonable likelihood of your proposal achieving the outcomes specified by the criterion.

Neighbourhood Flexibility and Empowerment

The Secretary of State considers that, whilst there are risks that the proposed area and community boards will lack capacity to take-on any meaningful delegation of services/decisions, the basic structure proposed by SE and Rural Northumberland is workable and that the risks are probably manageable. Accordingly she concluded that there is reasonable likelihood of your proposal achieving the outcomes specified by the criterion.

Value for Money and Equity on Public Services

The Secretary of State believes that the proposals will remove the confusion that currently exists about which tier of local government delivers which service. However, she is of the view that the two unitaries would in all their circumstances suffer from capacity and resource constraints that would threaten the delivery of specialist services and the ability of the authorities to react to change. She also considers there is a real risk to services – particularly the delivery of county services; children’s services, adult social care – as a result of the complex joint arrangements proposed in the two unitaries model. She is also of the view that the proposals – if implemented would have cost implications for other public sector bodies – Fire, Police and Health, who would have to carry out some internal reorganisation to

adapt to the new arrangements. Accordingly she concluded that there is not a 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 and there is little risk that the proposal would be unaffordable. Accordingly 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, whilst there is support for this proposal from a broad range of stakeholders, the proposals lack support from any key public sector stakeholders. Accordingly she concluded that there is not 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