

25 July 2007

Chief Executive
Somerset 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 on 24 January 2007 a proposal for future unitary structures. 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 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 council's proposal.

P Rowsell
Deputy Director Local Democracy
Department for Communities and Local Government
5/E8 Eland House
Bressenden Place
London
SW1E 5DU

Tel

Strong, Effective and Accountable Strategic Leadership

She considers that the proposal for a strong countywide local strategic partnership linked through to continuing LSP's in each of the current district areas, together with a proposed corporate structure focussed on area-based working, would provide strong strategic leadership for the county. She also recognises the potential for increased remoteness between councillors and electors but considers that the proposals for area working and the role of the unitary councillor mitigates this potential risk. Accordingly, she concluded that there was a reasonable likelihood of the proposal achieving the outcomes specified by this criterion.

Neighbourhood Flexibility and Empowerment

She considers that the proposal that eventually all services will be managed and delivered in 4 local areas under the direction of 4 "Area Committees", together with delegated community funding for frontline councillors, would give local people the opportunity to influence service delivery. She also recognises concerns that proposals for devolution of powers and budgets beyond these Area Committees are not clear and that the absence of meaningful devolution could be a step backwards from the current successful local working practices in some parts of the county. She recognised, however, that clarity and devolution could readily be introduced. On balance therefore she concluded that there was a reasonable likelihood of the proposal achieving the outcomes specified by this criterion.

Value for Money and Equity on Public Services

She recognises that the economies of scale that could be achieved by a single authority, together with a single management structure and the efficiency savings that could be achieved with an integrated back office system, mean that local people would benefit from more efficient and effective local services. She also recognises that concerns to ensure service delivery does not follow a "one size fits all approach" and reflects differing needs across the county are likely to be alleviated by the area working structure. Accordingly, she concluded that there was a reasonable likelihood of the proposal achieving the outcomes specified by this criterion.

Affordability

She considers that, if implemented, the financial case looks reasonably robust and there is little risk that the proposal would be unaffordable. She also recognises questions about the realism of the on-going savings projected in the proposal and the projected transition cost figures, which arguably understate the impact of contract novation. Overall, however, she concluded that there was a reasonable likelihood of the proposal achieving the outcomes specified by this criterion.

Supported by a Cross Section of Partners and Stakeholders

She considers that whilst the bid does command some support, representations from a range of stakeholders, both public and private sector, as well as the majority of views expressed by the general public, indicate that the proposal would not command a sufficient broad cross-section of support from a range of stakeholders. She notes that whilst the climate in which the polls were conducted suggests that the results should be viewed with some caution, there was a high turnout and a very high percentage of voters opposed to the proposal. Accordingly, she concluded that there was not a reasonable likelihood of the proposal achieving the outcomes specified by this criterion.

Conclusion

If you have any queries about the substance of the decision you should write in the first instance to Terry Willows at terry.willows@communities.gsi.gov.uk .

Yours sincerely,

P Rowsell