

Our Ref: RT/tw
Your Ref:

Date: 10th September 2007

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Dear Jane

Proposals for Unitary Local Government

As you are aware, our authority in common with other authorities in Wiltshire is considering the DCLG consultation paper "Councils' proposals for Unitary Local Government – an approach to implementation".

North Wiltshire District Council's formal response on the key issues will be made following the Executive Meeting on 20th September 2007. However, we had an extremely well attended Members' Policy Day on 6th September 2007 at which there was an interesting debate on the consultation paper. As a result of that debate and the common ground between the two main political groups we have decided to write to you regarding a number of our concerns. At the outset, I should point out that the key source of our concerns stems from initial assurances given that the Wiltshire Unitary Authority would be a new authority placing great emphasis on cultural change and transformation of the way that services are provided to our customers supported by innovative community engagement arrangements. It has repeatedly been stated by you that there would be no take over. Our concern is that by a number of initial actions, that assurance has been weakened:

1. Whilst we understand that Wiltshire County Council will be a transitional authority we do not feel that Wiltshire County Council members should outnumber District Council members on the proposed transition cabinet. We believe that current proposals are for five County Council members and four District Council members. In addition, how will political balance, as suggested in the consultation paper, be achieved?
2. Emphasis is made within the consultation paper that the unitary authority will be a new authority. Our staff are encouraged by this brief and want to be part of and involved in the new authority's inception. It is thus with some disappointment that we note that the Lead Officer positions of the four main workstreams and that of the Joint Implementation Board have all gone to Wiltshire County Council Officers without any formal process which would allow District Council staff the opportunity to take on such roles.
3. Staff are undoubtedly concerned about figures of 10-20% redundancies given in the consultation paper.. As stated, it is important that District Council staff feel that they have an equal opportunity to take on positions during the transition which in turn will put them in a good position when posts are made available in the new authority. It is made clear in the consultation paper that there will be uncertainty amongst staff which could have implications for recruitment and retention. We would ask you to confirm that you will do all that you can to reassure District Council staff that they are being treated equally and also to confirm what moves are being made to attempt to retain staff generally and key staff by way of golden handcuffs and other devices in an attempt to achieve consistency across the various organisations.
4. We note that Overview and Scrutiny arrangements have not yet been finalised. We urge that the Chairman of such arrangements be a District not a County Councillor.
5. Although it is likely that we will support elections in May 2009 with a Vesting Day in April 2009 as this will enable proper democratic arrangements to be made by the Boundary Commission, we do

have some concern that this will exacerbate the uncertainty for staff, increase the likelihood of staff departures with resultant agency staff increases and of course, will mean the new Councillors and the new Chief Executive and his/her management team will not have been instrumental in the shaping of the new authority.

6. The financial plan prepared does include substantial costs associated with redundancies. When the District Councils budget is set for 2008/9 we will not know the extent of these. We intend to set the budget assuming that the extraordinary costs associated with both redundancies and golden handcuffs will be accounted for by the new authority.

We would welcome your views and reassurances with regard to the above points but would also reassure you that, provided the outcome of the judicial review does not overturn the decision, you have our support in making the new authority one which will be a source of pride to our customers throughout Wiltshire.

Yours sincerely

Mr R Tonge
Leader of the Council

Mrs S Doubell
Leader of Liberal Democratic Group