

The Unitary response

The Government announced on September 25th that Wiltshire was to become a Unitary authority. The Government produced a 40 page commentary (September 2007) *Councils' Proposals for Unitary Local Government; An Approach to Implementation*. The aim is to have the new unitary authorities up and running by April 1 2009, or earlier, if that is possible (page 11).

The advice on finance (pages 29-33) is that, "the numbers informing the budgets (for 2009-10) would need to be resolved in the period September to September 2008". This implies that the Council's budget process, which will take place this autumn, should retain its three year timeframe, so that the successor authority has a basis for an early preparation of the 2009-10 and later years' budgets.

Turning to this year, 2007-08, there are two issues:

1 Preparing for Unitary status and keeping the show on the road.

- There will be new work that was not envisaged when the 2007-08 budget was set, for example, support to the Joint Implementation Team (JIT) by staff with subsequent back-filling costs, or the collation of information on a uniform basis, for example, a list of assets.
- There will also be additional costs in maintaining service delivery, either to replace key staff who have left (eg Chief Internal Auditor), to retain existing staff, or to fund the cost of staff who take early retirement.

These costs could be significant and by their very nature, will not become immediately evident. The prudent approach is to capture any savings, to be able to afford these unforeseen and/or additional costs.

2 Re-appraising existing plans, and a change of focus.

- Some service initiatives, planned for implementation in 2007-09 should be delayed to allow a countywide approach. The most obvious examples, which amount to £232k, are:
 - IT projects that will be superseded by County systems (say £80k),
 - a Building Surveyor Post to work on asset maintenance (£47k),
 - Alternative Weekly Collections (£60k), and,
 - a Transport Officer (£45k).

It is recommended that the budgets for these projects be transferred, initially, to a central fund to meet the costs of preparation and cover outlined at 1 above.