

Wiltshire councils under threat



January 2007

Unitary bid seen as “major distraction”

Our view

West Wiltshire District Council is concerned that too much attention is being given to the idea of one or more new unitary councils for Wiltshire. We see no need for this. We see it as a potential disruption to services and a major distraction.

- We are committed to delivering very cost effective services and creating improvements for West Wiltshire.
- We want to be able to concentrate on this work without distraction, without the politics of reorganisation and all the bureaucracy that goes with it.

West Wiltshire District Council has a resolution that makes clear its view that reorganisation of local government in this area would be a major distraction.

The invitation

The Local Government White Paper published in October contained an invitation to all councils to bid for unitary status – new multi purpose councils.

- West Wiltshire and most other districts have no plans to bid for unitary status on their own, or in partnership with others.

The Government says that reorganisation will potentially be ‘a major distraction’ in most places. There is nothing in the invitation to suggest that Wiltshire would be a special case.

- Wiltshire County Council is actively considering the invitation.
- You may be asked for your views.
- We want you to be aware of our concerns and the reasons for them.



The County Council is actively considering the case for a unitary authority. This is already starting to have an adverse affect on some of our partnership working.

The criteria for change

The criteria for a case for change are:

- Affordability – changes must be paid for locally and therefore pay for themselves – the risks rest with local council tax payers.
- Broad cross-section of support – partners, stakeholders, service users and citizens must be supportive – the Government will follow up with their own consultation after 25 January.
- Better leadership, neighbourhood flexibility and empowerment, value for money and equity.

The invitation says the Government will be “unlikely to be able to implement more than eight proposals” in the whole of England.



Previous reviews have suggested that the case is only strong in urban areas where there is a concentration of services and population.

The timetable for change

The Government has set an outline timetable for the places that may see change. The key dates are:

- 25 January 2007 - submit proposals.
- March 2007 - Government announces preliminary views.
- June 2007 - Stakeholder consultation closes.
- July 2007 - Government makes final decisions.
- March 2008 - Elections to new unitary councils.
- April 2009 - New unitary councils operational.

In this context it is interesting to note the conclusions of the former Chairman of the Local Government Commission, Sir John Banham, who was responsible for setting up new unitary councils in the mid 1990s:

“Reorganisation always takes longer, costs more and delivers less than ever envisaged.”

The costs

You will probably hear all sorts of figures about potential costs and savings.

National research* suggests costs of over £1 billion to convert the existing 34 county councils into unitary county councils. That would mean an average cost to set up a new unitary county of at least £30 million.

Those costs are consultancy, changes to offices, relocations of staff, redundancies, and pension costs plus reconfiguring IT systems and networks.

Any ongoing savings from combining the districts and county, to form one large unitary council, are likely to be small or non-existent. National research** suggests a figure of up to £1.5 million - less than 1% of local government expenditure in Wiltshire.

(Continued on page 3)

*Cambridge University — Emeritus Professor Michael Chisholm

** PriceWaterHouseCoopers research for DCLG - “costs of being in business”

Possible advantages and disadvantages of new unitary councils

The claimed benefits are:

- Economies of scale – bigger is better – combining management and administration.
- More joined up – fewer tiers of local government – means less scope for disagreement or differing policies.
- Better leadership – one council to represent the whole area – where there is a strong identity the council can represent that identity – especially in cities.
- Simplicity – easier to know who does what.

On the other hand there is always the risk of:

- Major disruption to services - possibly for several years.
- More bureaucracy – bigger is not always better.
- More ‘silos’ – large departments that do not work well together.
- Democratic deficit – we have the lowest ratio of councillors to citizens in Western Europe – unitaries mean more than half our elected councillors are removed.
- More remote – larger authorities, working on their own, find it hard to keep in touch with and respond to local communities - Wiltshire has Salisbury Plain in the middle.
- Council tax increases - if the costs of change cannot be met from predicted savings.

The tiers of government work well together in West Wiltshire. Customer services are increasingly joined up. In partnership, we are tackling key issues like regeneration. We work together on our purchasing and run some of our administrative services together.

There will always be scope for improvement and there is already effective co-operation to make that happen. The last thing we need is a major distraction.

The costs *(continued from page 2)*

- *Each year local government across Wiltshire is already achieving efficiency gains of about 2.5%*
- *What is the cost of the potential disruption and delay caused by reorganisation?*

Much depends on the quality of leadership and management. Much depends on the policies adopted.

It is easy to envisage the costs of change taking more than ten years to pay back or never being paid back.

The Electoral Commission concluded, based on their work in 2004 in the North East and West, that there are:

“considerable doubts over the accuracy and viability of any costing model”.

As a result they were not prepared to recommend solutions based on cost savings. A similar model is being used locally by the County Council.

There is another way

We increasingly design everything we do around the needs of customers, citizens and communities.

There is an obvious way forward. Continue to improve our services. Continue to improve our partnerships. Ensure we remain local and accessible. Don't become too big and remote. Be ambitious for our local communities.

If it ain't broke, don't fix it!

Here are some examples of effective partnerships between West Wiltshire district and the county.

- Customers First - shared customer

information, shared use of IT systems, shared procurement.

- Wiltshire Improvement - looking at how we can work together more effectively through partnerships.
- Waste Partnership - achieving higher levels of recycling and lower levels of waste to landfill. Recycling has increased from 9% to over 40% in just over two years.
- Regeneration - combined approaches and projects to improve our market towns - many at a key stage .
- Neighbourhood policing project– links to our priority for safer and cleaner streets.

We aim to make these partnerships even more effective.

West Wiltshire District Council - what you should know

- Population 125,000, area covered 517km².
- Second lowest spending of all the 238 district councils in England.
- Good quality services with 42% in the top quartile (best 25% of all district councils).
- Effective private sector contracts for half of what we do - we already work creatively to deliver economies.

We have well advanced projects to deliver better customer service, more affordable housing, recycling and regeneration in our market towns.

Services are generally improving. Our Corporate Plan can be found on our website at www.westwiltshire.gov.uk

Being in touch with local communities is important and there is an increasing role for our ward members.

We believe our relatively small size is a strength.

We believe our effective joint working with the five towns and the surrounding parishes is made easier because we are the right size.

Your views

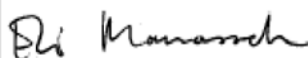
You may be asked for your views by the County Council. If they submit a bid for unitary status in January, you may be contacted by the Government.

Please take this information into account and look at experiences elsewhere when responding. If you want to write to us now, we will be happy to pass on your views to both the County Council and Government.

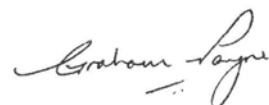
Thank you for reading this leaflet and giving your time to an important issue.



Cllr Sarah Content
Leader of the Council



Cllr Eli Manasseh
Labour Group Leader



Cllr Graham Payne
Conservative Group Leader