

Sent: Wednesday, February 06, 2008 12:57 PM

Subject: Unitary update from Phil Norrey, Chief Executive, Devon County Council

Dear colleague,

We understand that there will be a Written Ministerial Statement later today announcing the terms of reference for a review of local government across Devon by the independent Boundary Committee for England. The Committee is a statutory committee of the Electoral Commission and is responsible for reviewing the structure, boundaries and electoral arrangements of local government in England.

Economic development

This is an important issue for Devon's business community since the capacity to provide strong leadership on economic development and leadership will be a critical test which any proposed new councils will have to meet. The Government will shortly begin consulting stakeholders on its proposals for sub-national economic development and it will be important that local government is well equipped to work with business to ensure continued economic prosperity.

The decision to invite the Boundary Committee to conduct a countywide review follows a decision by the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, Hazel Blears, to reject a proposal by Exeter City Council to create a new unitary authority based on Exeter's existing council boundaries. The Secretary of State judged that the City Council bid was unlikely to achieve the five key tests set by the Government and, in particular, considered there were a number of risks with the financial case.

It is thought that the Government will ask the Boundary Committee to investigate and advise on whether there could be alternative unitary proposals covering the whole or part of Devon which would meet the Government's five tests – affordability, a broad cross section of support, strategic leadership, neighbourhood empowerment and value for money services.

Town and Parish Councils

The County Council believes that whatever unitary proposals may emerge from this process the most local tier of local government – Devon's town and parish councils – will continue to play an important role serving the people and communities of Devon.

We would certainly want to see a strong role for town and parishes councils in the future, building on existing partnerships and good practice, and as part of our consultation on the best way forward we will be inviting colleagues in town and parish councils shortly to attend a programme of consultation meetings.

Plymouth and Torbay

We believe the Government will give the Boundary Committee the freedom to consider the viability of the original Exeter proposal or, if the Committee sees fit, to make an alternative proposal which is not covered in the Secretary of State's request for advice.

It is thought that the terms of reference for the Boundary Committee will also enable consideration of possible changed boundaries of the current Plymouth City and Torbay Borough unitary councils, but only if they are essential for an alternative proposal or proposals for unitary local government in the rest of Devon, and we understand that the Government will not be inviting ideas which would prompt major changes to these authorities.

Capacity and governance

In order to make alternative proposals the Committee will need to assess the capacity of unitary arrangements to achieve the outcomes set out in the five tests and that assessment will need to take account of not only the unitary structure itself but also what associated arrangements, for example

council executives, neighbourhood and community governance or partnerships are adopted.

We understand that the first stage of the Boundary Committee's procedures is to formulate a draft proposal. In deciding what steps it needs to take to do this the Committee, will undoubtedly seek a dialogue with potentially affected local authorities about possible unitary solutions.

Consultation with stakeholders

We do not believe there will be a general invitation to all potentially affected authorities to provide their own worked up proposals and related business case. It is certain that the Committee's process will not be limited to assessing and choosing proposals and ideas put forward by local authorities and any draft alternative proposal made by the Committee may be entirely different from anything that local authorities or other stakeholders have suggested or sought to promote.

It is anticipated that the review in Devon will follow the normal standards set by the Boundary Committee for an open and accountable process. That being the case, there will be a period of consultation with stakeholders on possible draft proposals for local government reorganisation in Devon and any representations must be taken into account followed by a further period of consultation in Westminster on any proposals the Government subsequently chooses to take forward.

We believe that the Boundary Committee will be asked to provide advice by the 31st of December 2008 in anticipation of implementing any new unitary structures in April 2010.

A healthy opportunity

Devon County Council welcomes this healthy opportunity to take part in an independent and serious public policy review. We look forward to the chance to work with the Boundary Committee and stakeholders to ensure that any future local government structure proposed for Devon is well thought through, financially viable and produces real benefits for public services and taxpayers.

The County Council will certainly want to consult widely with stakeholders and the communities we all serve and we will continue to keep you informed of developments as the process unfolds.

Best wishes,

Phil Norrey,

Chief Executive,

Devon County Council