

NOTE FOR BERKHAMSTED TOWN COUNCIL MEETING 7TH SEPTEMBER 2020

SUBJECT: Proposal by Herts CC for establishment of a single Unitary Authority – response by Town Council

Introduction

The County has tabled a proposal, and its preference, for a single Unitary Council for Hertfordshire. This paper highlights a number of key issues and recommends;

- Council responds to the request from HAPTC for our views
- Council sends a letter to the leader and Chairpersons at HCC and Dacorum BC with our views

Context

It appears that behind the scene and in anticipation of a Government paper due in the autumn, PWC has conducted a wide ranging review on a number of County Councils leading to the recent publication of these proposals. The report for HCC is dated February 2020. This examines the merits of a single unitary or the option of two unitary authorities. This would dissolve the 10 Districts and purports to model operational cost savings of £34m or £24m respectively. Embarking on ambitious transformational changes are forecast to bring further savings of £98m or £70m in a 2 Unitary structure. [The document hedges the forecasts, the numbers here are to illustrate the order of magnitude that is driving the re structure].

Hertfordshire has a population of c 1.2m, spread across the county, but concentrated predominantly in well defined urban areas. It comes as no surprise to find the 10 Districts are resisting the proposal and have commissioned a separate study to establish whether alternative structures may better serve residents across the County.

The last occasion Councils were ‘invited’ to adopt Unitary authority status, all eleven councils unanimously resisted and said they would increase collaborative working to achieve the same level of savings. That option is unlikely to be acceptable to Government on this occasion.

As the Government has indicated a preference for unitaries of scale viz serving populations of 1/2m or more, it is probable that no more than 2 will be the resulting structure.

Faced with ‘Hobson’s Choice’ it would be prudent for Councillors to identify a way forward that best serves our residents and communities.

Proposal for content of the letter:

Council’s position on Unitary structure:

- 1 While this Council is not opposed to the adoption of a Unitary structure Council will reserve its support until there is a better understanding of the scope of a Unitary Authority’s powers, the scale of the body and its democratic accountability: allied with this is the need to have assurance of sound resident- facing services in reasonable proximity to residents.
- 2 Residents already find it difficult to access services and individuals who work for their local District or Borough Councils. We remain unconvinced that a large single Unitary,

which operates from a distance [as HCC does currently], can be responsive to the needs of a local resident who would need to be served by an officer with intimate knowledge of the locality and issues. This will remain a key determinant of success irrespective of the structure that is adopted.

- 3 Parish and Town Councils are statutory consultees in the planning application process. Residents and Councillors would not wish to lose their ability to comment [and oppose where necessary] on planning matters that impact their locality. We invite clarification on how this will be preserved.
- 4 With the promise of greater devolution of powers and services from Whitehall and the Unitary, First Tier councils should be positively encouraged and perhaps entitled to take on greater responsibilities provided they demonstrate they have the capacity so to do.

Due regard should be made with adoption of 'Special Expenses' so residents are not unfairly penalised.
- 5 We are concerned that there will be a reduction in the numbers of Councillors who represent local interests. With the demise of the District level, residents will have lost 2 [or 3] Ward Councillors: the County is proposing to adopt 2 members as Division representatives changing the ratio from 1:6 in Berkhamsted to 2:0. The single Unitary would have c 142 Councillors which will make it an unwieldy body to represent the entire population of Hertfordshire.
- 6 Voter turnout at local elections is commonly regarded as abysmal as too often with First Past the Post elections the result is a foregone conclusion. While adopting a proposed Unitary Authority, Council would encourage government also to introduce a change, such as operating in the devolved administrations, viz. STV or Proportional Representation so that the outcome better reflects the expressed wishes of the electorate.

Cllr G Stevens
1st Sept 2020