

Six of the District/Borough councils in County Durham choose 'Pathfinder' option for Local Government reform in the County

Six of the district councils in County Durham have opted to pioneer an innovative two tier model for future local governance in County Durham.

They are to submit a bid for 'Pathfinder' status in response to the Government's White Paper proposals for local government changes in shire counties. The bid will have a clear and deliverable set of development stages and improvement initiatives leading eventually to unitary(s) status.

Leaders of the six district/borough councils rejected Durham County Council's proposal to opt for a single unitary council for the County expressing concerns that a centralised single unitary council based on the County model will not maximise the opportunity to create a really responsive vision of local government for the County that the White Paper demands.

People who want to help shape local governance for their neighbourhoods could find it difficult to get their views, ideas and concerns heard in a single unitary structure.

There are fears too about major disruption to services and the overall cost of wholesale change in local government arrangements across the County.

Chairman of the Durham Districts' Forum and Leader of Sedgfield Borough Council, Cllr Bob Fleming, commenting on behalf of six of the County Durham District/Borough councils, said:

"It is disappointing that Durham County Council has rejected the option of working with the Districts to make sustainable improvements to governance across the County. They remain wedded to the same model of a single countywide unitary authority that has been rejected by large sections of our communities over the last 15 years – a model that would mean the abolition of all councils in the County.

"The Government White Paper encourages service improvement and partnership working to meet local needs and residents' expectations. This is what the district and borough councils are best at – providing efficient, value-for-money local services and engaging with local people and partners at neighbourhood level.

"The County would find it a huge challenge to take on the additional services currently delivered by the district/borough councils and the quality of local service delivery to residents could suffer.

"But this isn't about County versus District. We are already embracing many of the White Paper ideals and there are excellent examples of joint working and shared service provision – some of these in partnership with the County Council. These can provide better, more efficient services like countywide concessionary fares, joint management of some environmental services and cross district care for the most vulnerable in our communities etc.

"And these genuine district level service improvements are being achieved within budgets that also deliver low council tax increases.

"My council Leader colleagues, senior local council officers and our partners in the community see a better way of meeting residents' needs.

“At the District councils’ recent major consultation event, community partners from all over the County called for radical change. They want:

- simple, efficient and cost effective delivery of local council services
- value for money service delivery
- more power so that people can influence change and improvement in their communities and have more say in local council services design, delivery and scrutiny
- overall efficiency savings.

“Making it easier for people to talk to local council officers responsible for services will give them the opportunity to shape these in a way they would find difficult if they had to do so via a remote, centralised County unitary local government.

“The White Paper gives us the opportunity to inject fresh thinking and new ideas into local services delivery and our partners are welcome to work with us on our innovative plans that could bring welcome change without the huge cost and disruption that large scale re-organisation will inevitably bring”

Ends

The ‘Pathfinder’ option

The Government has included in its White Paper options, the opportunity for councils in two tier areas to pioneer new models of two-tier working as pathfinders.

The ‘Pathfinder’ option demands a radical overhaul of services and encourages pursuit of excellence through partnership working.

Six of the district/borough councils in County Durham (Durham City has yet to announce its intentions) are exploring new and radical approaches to local governance which aim to make a real difference to service delivery and citizen engagement. A proposal for a new two tier model that will meet the Government’s pathfinder criteria is now in preparation.

The proposal will detail plans for the delivery of new ways of governing the whole County and build on the Government’s vision which calls for:

- unified service delivery so service users need relate to only a single provider
- strong leadership on shaping the places where people live and work
- clear accountability so people know who is responsible for what decisions
- shared management functions and service delivery arrangements.

Adopting a pathfinder two-tier model will allow all of the councils in the County to determine a form of governance for County Durham that will be a ‘best fit’ solution for residents and provide an opportunity to bring together all best practice working processes and service delivery ideas from within County Durham and beyond.

The ‘Pathfinder’ bid must be submitted on or before 25 January 2007.

The Government will decide by the end of March which pathfinder proposals it intends to work with.

Pathfinders will be subject to independent long term evaluation of the various governance models to be adopted.

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