

Report to: Extraordinary District Council of Easington

Date: 25th April 2007

Report of: Chief Executive

Subject : Proposals for Future Unitary Structures in County Durham

Ward : All

Purpose of the Report

To note the announcement from the Secretary of State for the Department of Communities and Local Government (CLG) with regard to the results of the stage one assessment and short listing proposals for potential future unitary structures.

The report also sets out details of the consultation process announced by the Government and sets out arrangements for the District of Easington Council to undertake consultation with its' stakeholders prior to submission of its' formal response on or before 22 June 2007.

Consultation

Throughout the preparation of the Districts bid and following the announcement of the Government's 'preferred' bid for County Durham the Council has consulted widely with residents and stakeholders on proposals to reorganise local government in County Durham. Members, staff and Trades Unions have also been heavily engaged in discussion.

This report proposes further action to ensure that the people of Easington are aware of the proposed reorganisation and have their views heard.

The Council's Monitoring Officer has been consulted on this report.

Background

The Local Government White Paper contained within it an invitation for local authorities in Shire areas to make proposals for Unitary Local Government, or to establish partnerships of a County and all District Councils in the County area to pioneer as pathfinders new models of two tier working.

Two bids were subsequently submitted by the deadline date of 25 January 2007 covering the County Durham area – one bid from 6 of the Durham Districts proposing a Pathfinder to Unitary approach and the other bid from the County Council for a single unitary authority. These, together with another 24 bids, have been subject to a "stage one" evaluation by CLG and assessed in terms of their likelihood to deliver improvements against 5 specified criteria. Following this assessment, 16 bids have been short listed to go forward to a period of stakeholder consultation.

Members will be aware that the proposal put forward by Durham County Council has been put forward to “stage 2”, the stakeholder consultation stage. The Government rejected this Council’s call for both County Durham bids to be put forward for consultation. The District bid has not, therefore, been short-listed.

Position Statement and Option Appraisal

Details of the Stakeholder Consultation process was released on 27th March and clearly charges local authorities in an area affected by the proposals with raising awareness of the consultation. Further clarification released on 19th April advises that councils are able to seek the views of local people on the proposals that affect them and lists a range of appropriate means which a council is free to use in order to solicit views and aid consultation.

In relation to those being consulted directly by CLG, members will note that a Stakeholder list has been released which does not include the public but focuses on organisations, bodies and partners, many national and some local. The Government does not intend holding any referendum or vote on the proposals.

The deadline for submission of responses to the Stakeholder Consultation process is 22 June 2007.

The proposed reorganisation of local government in County Durham will affect the services of almost half a million people, with anecdotal evidence suggesting few are aware of the prospect of, what amounts to, imminent change.

In this context it is essential that the Council raises awareness of the consultation with the public and key local stakeholders and makes it easy for them to have their views known in this process. This needs to happen expeditiously in order to feed-in effectively within the tight timescale of the consultation period.

Financial Implications

There will be a need to incur expenditure in undertaking surveys and consultation events with stakeholders. The Council will be working closely with the other Durham districts. The proposed survey of opinion will involve the engagement of contractors as a matter of urgency. Careful consideration will be given to the guidance contained within the Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity to ensure that the Council does not breach its powers in this regard. The Council’s Monitoring Officer will work closely with the team tasked with preparing the Council’s response to ensure that the Code of Practice is adhered to and thereby mitigate any potential risks.

Costs will be met from efficiencies already identified in the elections budget.

Recommendations

That the Chief Executive leads a team of officers in preparing a formal response to the proposals for County Durham in accordance with the timetable set out in the Stakeholder Consultation document published by the CLG.

That delegated authority be given to the Chief Executive, in consultation with the Leader and in accordance with the provisions set out in the constitution, to incur appropriate expenditure in the collation of stakeholder views on the proposals.

The Council is recommended to agree to waive Standing Order 4 (A)(ii) to permit contractors to be appointed without obtaining quotations in view of the urgency of commencing the exercise.

Background Papers/Documents Referred to in the Preparation of this Report

Durham County Council Single Unitary Authority Submission
Durham Districts Pathfinder to Unitary Submission
Stakeholder Consultation Process
Letter from CLG 19 April 2007