

Implementation Executive

4 April 2008



Unitary reorganisation launch events

Report of Report of Kevin Edworthy, Durham County Council and Mike Lavender, District of Easington, Co-Leads of the Communications Workstream

Purpose of the Report

- 1 This report advises Members about the unitary reorganisation launch events held at the beginning of March 2008.

Background

- 2 At its meeting of 4 January 2008, the G8 Member Group agreed that we should develop a '*small number of high-level, large scale communication events held across the county*' to launch the implementation programme. The events were to be organised before the election period commenced on 27 March 2008.
- 3 Three events were subsequently organised on 10, 11 and 12 March at Lumley Castle Hotel near Chester-le-Street, Auckland Castle, Bishop Auckland and Shotton Hall, near Peterlee.
- 4 Overall, approximately 700 invitations were issued to business organisations, local strategic partnerships, town and parish councils, voluntary and community sector organisations, faith groups and major stakeholders.
- 5 In total, 257 people attended the events including representatives from all of the stakeholder groups initially targeted. The Lumley Castle and Auckland Castle events were oversubscribed with 114 and 101 attendees respectively and the Shotton Hall event attracted 52 attendees, including people who could not be accommodated at or make the other two events.

Format

- 6 Councillors Nugent and Betton welcomed attendees to the event and then John Richardson, Acting Chief Executive of Durham County Council and Brian Dinsdale, Interim Programme Director gave presentations on the unitary reorganisation proposal, the structural change order, the reorganisation programme and the approach to consultation and stakeholder engagement. Question and answers sessions then followed.

Questions and issues raised

- 7 Attendees took the opportunity to ask a number of questions at each event. A summary of the questions asked is attached as Appendix 2.
- 8 The most frequently asked questions related to:
- the development of Area Action Partnerships, locality arrangements and the relationship with existing Local Strategic Partnerships;
 - devolution to town and parish councils and the relationship between them and the unitary council;
 - local community engagement and local access to services;
 - the engagement of voluntary and community sector organisations.
- 9 In many respects, the key issues raised relate to how the new unitary council will engage with people and organisations on a local basis across the county. This is a major issue which is being addressed through the Areas and Participation workstream and a major consultation on these very issues is planned for later in the year, after the May elections.
- 10 Attendees were also invited to complete and return evaluation forms so that we could assess how well the events met their initial objectives. Overall, comments on the organisation and the venues were generally positive, but some accessibility issues were identified with the design of the presentation slides and the facilities at Lumley Castle and Auckland Castle. Accessible facilities were in fact available at both venues, but were not very visible and the slide design issues are being addressed for future presentations. That said, overall the presentations and programme content were positively received and appear to have been pitched at the right level for the audiences. Attendees were generally satisfied with the information provided and welcomed the briefings as the start of an ongoing dialogue.

Conclusion

- 11 Overall, the three events appear to have been well-received and fulfilled their initial objective of increasing understanding amongst stakeholders about the transition process.

Background Papers

Reports to G8 Member Group, 4 January 2008 and 1 February 2008.

'Launch events' report to Implementation Executive, 7 March 2008.

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Appendix 1: Implications

Local Government Reorganisation (Does the decision impact upon a future Unitary Council)

No decision required.

Finance

The final bills are still to be received, but the total cost including postage is expected to be in the region of £7,700, which is within the original cost estimate of £8,000.

Staffing

Equality and Diversity

Accommodation

Crime and Disorder

Sustainability

Human Rights

Localities and Rurality

Young People

Consultation

Health

Appendix 2: Questions and issues raised at the launch events

Lumley Castle – 10 March 2008

- Will existing (county and district) council policies and procedures stay the same during the transition period?
- How will the Cabinet be selected following the election?
- How will Local Strategic Partnership (LSPs) and Area Action Partnership (AAP) boundaries be developed over time? Concern that where town and parish councils do not currently exist, a steer will be required from the new council to ensure that influence (and developed alignment of geography) is maintained.
- How will the new council engage with community partnerships?
- Are equality and diversity issues and obligations being considered through this process? (Access is a major issue at this venue - no induction loop for deaf people, slides poor from a visual accessibility point of view, disabled access challenging - does not bode well for new council's future approach.)
- Will there be any concerted consultation with / clarity for LSPs around their futures? Many are currently considering the need for an exit strategy in light of the AAP proposals.
- Where the bid proposes devolution of services to town and parish councils (T&PCs), will that not simply transfer the costs of those services to the parish tier? If so, T&PCs would simply come off much worse.
- Will the existing 'free' support available to T&PCs continue?
- How will the large council communicate effectively with communities and individuals with service queries? Concern around the council contracting to one large 'foreign' call centre.
- Some smaller T&PCs do not want to take on more services and are quite happy with the status quo. What reassurances can you provide around this position being respected?
- Will T&PCs still be able to precept for additional funds under the unitary model?
- Will devolution of services to T&PCs be solely linked to attaining quality status? - Concern around the County Council solely liaising with the T&PC sector through the Association of Local Councils. Will the council also liaise with the larger town and parishes as a group? - Will the

unitary cover the costs of parish planning? They will help provide a major plus for the new council through the Comprehensive Area Assessments process, so it would be in the unitary council's interests.

- Is the decision making structure for the programme robust, or will there be a gap between the Joint Implementation Team and the new management team of the council?
- Concern regarding the lack of County Council expertise around housing. How will this service be developed robustly?
- Concern regarding the position of older people as a priority for the new council.

Auckland Castle – 11 March 2008

- Will new council honour existing commitments ('Durham coalfields')
- How will delegated decision making be made within Area Action Partnerships (AAPs) – decisions made through delegated powers
- Volunteers already give up a lot of time. How can they become involved? How do we get real and meaningful contribution from all areas of Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS)?
- Strategic planning – how to ensure financial inclusion throughout the County.
- How to get input from business – some already work for council – want to continue to be involved.
- Will current compact re VCS be honoured or renegotiated?
- AAPs – Wear Valley already have Area Members Panel – Neighbourhood Renewal Fund – local service partnership, will this include agencies devolving powers and budgets.
- 12 village network – levels of deprivation – need to ensure these areas don't become excluded; those at the bottom of the triangle are the most important and needy.
- Transport issues, already secondary school transport real issue in dales - rural communities disadvantaged through environmental issues.
- Councillors salaried positions – has this been incorporated within proposals financial case?

Shotton Hall – 12 March 2008

- Concern expressed about staff transfers from district councils to county unitary authority. Comment that staff transfers in the reorganisation of the primary care trusts have taken over a year and the new organisations is not yet up to full complement. Staff transfers can be unsettling and will have an impact on staff morale and services.
- If there is confusion about the service responsibilities of the county council and district councils, then there will be more confusion if services are devolved to parish councils. Parish councils replacing the district councils is confusing.
- How do you convince people that this isn't a county council 'mark two' as opposed to a brand new authority? How can you maintain services locally with local access as opposed to everything being transferred back to Durham?
- Voluntary sector and charities want to know what projects they can develop. What can their role be and how can they develop?
- How can you save £20 million when the budget hasn't been set?
- Can we have an assurance to the business community that the current level of support given to EDDA ('East Durham Development Agency') will be maintained when the unitary takes over?
- Do you envisage using community centres to provide access for any of your services?
- How will the area partnerships develop? Will it be an organic process and how many will there be? When do you see them starting and how will they fit in with LSPs? What will their role be and how does it all fit together?
- How will a 'huge' local authority provide local engagement down to street level? Reflection on primary care trust that now that decision-making has gone back to the centre, local engagement is not as great as it was. Can we have an assurance that we won't have a repeat of that?
- With regard to the area action partnerships, how will LSPs be involved in the architectural process you are going through? LSPs are not just vehicles for consultation, but vehicles to shape strategies and service delivery. At what stage will localities get involved in shaping the new area arrangements?
- Comment about community-led definition of areas and what services should be provided.

- Comment about May election and appointment of new chief executive and senior officers. At what point will the new organisation be in a position to make real decisions?