

**REPORT TO:** Executive Board

**DATE:** 7<sup>th</sup> June 2007

**REPORTING OFFICER:** Strategic Director – Corporate and Policy

**SUBJECT:** Proposals for Future Unitary Structures in Cheshire

**WARDS:** Borough-wide

## **1.0 PURPOSE OF THE REPORT**

1.1 To bring to Executive Board members' attention the current consultation exercise being undertaken by the Department for Communities and Local Government in relation to proposals for new Unitary structures in England. In particular to seek the Board's views on the Department's proposals for Cheshire.

## **2.0 RECOMMENDED that:**

- (1) the Council supports the move to Unitary status in Cheshire on the basis of the clear benefits it has brought to Halton since 1998; and**
- (2) the Council supports the two Unitary option, given that it will enhance sub-regional working arrangements in the Liverpool City Region and the North West.**

## **3.0 SUPPORTING INFORMATION**

3.1 In January 2007 the Government received 26 proposals from Councils wishing to move to a single tier of local government. All proposals were assessed against a number of criteria that Government set out when it invited Local Authorities to submit proposals. These criteria were:

- (a) the change to the future unitary local government structures must be:
  - (i) affordable, i.e. that the change itself both represents value for money and can be met from councils' existing resource envelope; and
  - (ii) supported by a broad cross section of partners and stakeholders; and
- (b) the future unitary local government structures must:

- (i) provide strong, effective and accountable strategic leadership;
- (ii) deliver genuine opportunities for neighbourhood flexibility and empowerment; and
- (iii) deliver value for money and equity on public services.

3.2 As a result of considering those proposals, the Secretary of State decided that 16 of them should proceed to consultation. Two of those proposals affect neighbouring Cheshire. The Secretary of State is consulting stakeholders on the following two unitary structures for Cheshire:

- a single Unitary Council based on the boundary of the existing County Council;
- two Unitary Authorities made up from the existing district boundaries, as follows:
  - Chester, Ellesmere Port & Neston and Vale Royal
  - Macclesfield, Congleton and Crewe

3.3 The single unitary option is supported by the County Council. Chester, Ellesmere Port & Neston, Vale Royal and Macclesfield are supporting the two Unitary option. Crewe & Nantwich and Congleton Councils are supporting neither Unitary proposal, wishing instead to see improvements in the existing two-tier arrangements.

3.4 The issue for Halton is how it should respond to the stakeholder consultation initiated by the Government, and whether it should express a preference as to the options on offer.

3.5 The first point to cover is the fact that the granting of Unitary status for Halton in 1996 has had a major positive impact on the Borough. Evidence includes:

- A four star, improving Council;
- A significant player in the North West;
- Successful lobbying activity, e.g. Daresbury Science Park, Mersey Crossing;
- Improving customer satisfaction ratings;
- Greater focus and prioritisation on Halton's needs;

- Greater clarity over who does what;
  - Clear community leadership provided by one local Council;
  - Simplified partnership arrangements.
- 3.6 It is felt that the first comment that the Council should make is one supporting the move to Unitary local government in Cheshire for the reasons outlined above.
- 3.7 The second issue is then about which of the options put forward the Council wishes to support, and how it might determine which is the option which would have the most beneficial impact for Halton.
- 3.8 The answer must lie with the impact either of the proposed changes have on the sub-regional and regional structures in the North West. The growing importance of the role of City Regions would suggest that the two Unitary option would be preferable. The Liverpool City Region business case recognises the role played in that City Region by Chester and Ellesmere Port and, whilst not formal signatories to that document, the submission recognises that those areas could become involved at a future date. The two Unitary option would provide for the new City of Chester & West Cheshire Council to work with and within the Liverpool City Region, with the Cheshire East Council looking towards the Manchester City Region. A single Unitary Cheshire County would not provide that focus.
- 3.9 The move to two Unitary Councils would provide for a clear fresh start to local government in Cheshire, with two new Authorities. Halton would look forward to working with those new Councils and would be prepared to examine the shared service opportunities the formation of two new Authorities would bring.
- 3.10 The proposals would create two large Authorities of significant capacity and influence, but with the capability of relating to local needs.

#### **4.0 POLICY IMPLICATIONS**

- 4.1 There are clear policy implications in relation to the development of the City Regional agenda which are described in the report.

#### **5.0 RISK ANALYSIS**

- 5.1 There are no direct risks to Halton Borough Council.

#### **6.0 EQUALITY AND DIVERSITY ISSUES**

- 6.1 There are no equality and diversity implications associated with this report.

**7.0 LIST OF BACKGROUND PAPERS UNDER SECTION 100D  
OF THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT ACT 1972**

<b>Document</b>	<b>Place of Inspection</b>	<b>Contact Officer</b>
Proposals for Future Unitary Structures: Stakeholders Consultation	I. Leivesley's Office, 6th Floor, Municipal Building, Widnes	I. Leivesley