

Response to OneCouncil Business Case Consultation

Report of the Chief Fire Officer

For further information about this report please contact Alan Taylor, Chief Fire Officer, on 01743 260201 or Paul Raymond, Deputy Chief Fire Officer, on 01743 260205.

1 Purpose of Report

This report presents the response to the OneCouncil consultation by Communities and Local Government (attached at Appendix A). It reflects the discussions at the last Fire Authority meeting and includes changes agreed by the Chair, Chief Fire Officer and Deputy Chief Fire Officer following their discussions with the Chief Executive of Shropshire County Council.

2 Recommendations

The Fire Authority is asked to note the form of response to Communities and Local Government, as set out at Appendix A to this report.

3 Latest Developments

Since the response was sent a letter has been received from Councillor Nutting, Leader of Shrewsbury & Atcham Borough Council, maintaining that the County bid for unitary status should be opposed. A copy of that letter is attached at Appendix B to this report.

4 Financial Implications

There are no financial implications arising from this consultation response.

5 Legal Comment

There are no legal comments arising directly from this report.



6 Equality Impact Assessment

This report is purely an update on response to a consultation paper. If any changes come about from this, then Equality Impact Assessments will be completed accordingly.

7 Appendices

Appendix A

Letter to Communities and Local Government, dated 17 May 2007, in response to OneCouncil Business Case Consultation

Appendix B

Letter from Councillor Nutting, Leader of Shrewsbury & Atcham Borough Council, dated 29 May 2007

8 Background Papers

Shropshire and Wrekin Fire Authority

25 April 2007 Report 16 - Response to Consultation on a Unitary Authority for Shropshire

Implications of all of the following have been considered and, where they are significant (i.e. marked with an asterisk), the implications are detailed within the report itself.

Balanced Score Card		Integrated Risk Management Planning	
Business Continuity Planning		Legal	
Capacity		Member Involvement	*
Civil Contingencies Act		National Framework	
Comprehensive Performance Assessment		Operational Assurance	
Efficiency Savings		Retained	
Environmental		Risk and Insurance	
Financial		Staff	
Fire Control/Fire Link		Strategic Planning	
Information Communications and Technology		West Midlands Regional Management Board	
Freedom of Information / Data Protection / Environmental Information		Equality Impact Assessment	*



Unitary Structures Consultation Team
Zone 5/E8
Eland House
Bressendan Place
LONDON
SW1E 5DU

17th May 2007

Dear Sirs,

Thank you for allowing Shropshire and Wrekin Fire Authority (SWFA) the opportunity to comment on the OneCouncil for Shropshire bid for unitary status. Having studied the business case, all relevant documents, and after discussions with the Chief Executive of Shropshire County Council, we have the following comments to make in relation to the bid.

For many years S&WFA and Shropshire Fire & Rescue Service (SFRS) have worked with many partners across the geographical area of Shropshire delivering our statutory duties. We have had many successes in achieving our corporate aims to the benefit of all communities in Shropshire. We already have very positive experiences of working with a unitary authority in the Borough of Telford & Wrekin, and perhaps most of our success has been achieved through working closely with this existing local single tier authority.

We have, however, also been very successful in delivering our local service through District and Borough Community Safety Partnerships. Size has not been a defining characteristic of effective partnerships as we have had many successes in partnership with both small district councils and large unitary authorities.

Up until very recently we have had slightly less success in engagement at Shropshire Partnership level. Although we now sit at both board and group level on many structures across the County and are seen as valuable partners, we have had only minimum success in getting support for fire safety across the area. This is mainly because there are so many competing 'priorities' from the numerous players who also sit on partnership and block committees. The situation has improved recently but we still feel that there are too many players competing to have 'their' objectives included. We agree with the OneCouncil business case that if unitary status is achieved we would sit on a partnership that could concentrate on the major risks to the whole of the area.

We can summarise our experiences therefore that it is perhaps not structure that defines how effective partnership working is in supporting fire death and injury prevention but in the vision of the organisation, its willingness to engage with partners and its clarity in priorities for action. The vision, set out in the OneCouncil business case, suggests that the form of the new unitary authority will follow function.



The unitary vision and business plan seeks to deliver the broad aims of the Government's White Paper on the future of local government, issued in October last year. It clearly sets out how the unitary authority will build on the good work undertaken by the Shropshire Partnership in developing sustainable communities. The clearly ambitious but achievable vision matches very many of our corporate aims:

“Putting the customer first; working with partners to deliver efficient and effective services; getting services closer to the people; and giving local people a voice in what services they need.”

It is indeed a vision that we can sign up to and look forward to supporting in partnership with the OneCouncil for Shropshire.

Key to our success in supporting the vision will be our level of engagement with the Authority and the Local Strategic Partnership (LSP). We will continue to be engaged partners and hope that the simplified and streamlined single unitary structure will allow increased joining up of inputs and subsequent outcomes to the benefit of the community.

Structurally we have been successful in creating the capacity to service the partnership needs of our current two tier structure in Shropshire. The proposed new unitary is likely to create 27 Area Committees (in addition to the central committees) in support of service delivery. We support this proposal to get decision making closer to the citizen. To achieve this we will need to upskill many of our local Retained Duty Officers (part-time firefighters) so they can represent the Fire Authority at these essential local groups. To achieve this we will need to find efficiencies elsewhere to fund this work.

Throughout the business plan the direction is clearly that the new unitary authority will direct and scrutinise all local services through the LSP and LAA structures, it will *'challenge and lead all services'*; *'hold all local services to account'* etc. As always, we will be open to any detailed suggestions to support our continuing drive for performance improvement and look forward to detail from Government as to how Comprehensive Area Assessments will support this important local scrutiny and accountability.

The Fire Authority already shares many 'back office' functions with the unitary authority of the Borough of Telford & Wrekin and with Shropshire County Council. We are committed to seeking efficiencies and look forward to further opportunities for streamlining services which the new unitary structure promises.

SWFA has been very successful in engaging with the existing unitary authority of the Borough of Telford & Wrekin and through partnership and locality working has succeeded in delivering our corporate objectives in this area. Similarly we have had many successes in the small local boroughs and districts which make up the remainder of Shropshire. We are not convinced that structure will always be a major factor in success, however, we do fully support the visions of the new **'OneCouncil for Shropshire'** and can see how its vision, strategy and structure can support us in



our wish to see a safer Shropshire for all its citizens and how we can support the new unitary in achieving its vision of truly sustainable communities.

We hope that should the new unitary become a reality that we can work as well with it as we currently do in delivering safety in partnership with the existing unitary authority of the Borough of Telford & Wrekin.

Yours faithfully

Cllr Nigel Hartin
Chair
Shropshire and Wrekin Fire Authority





**Shrewsbury & Atcham
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29 May 2007

Mr Alan Taylor
Shropshire Fire & Rescue Service
Brigade Headquarters
St Michael's Street
Shrewsbury SY1 2HJ

Dear Mr Taylor

STRUCTURE OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT IN SHROPSHIRE

As a key stakeholder in local government you may be aware that the Government are currently consulting on the structure of local government in Shropshire. Shropshire County Council has put together a bid for a new form of 'Unitary' council covering the whole of Shropshire which has the effect of scrapping all current district and county councils in the county and replacing them with a single council. As the Leader of Shrewsbury and Atcham Borough Council, I am concerned that Shropshire County Council has written to key stakeholders asking for support but has only given limited details of the case for retaining the present structure.

Shrewsbury and Atcham Borough Council maintains that the county bid for unitary status should be opposed on the following grounds:

1. The bid lacks public support and local polls have shown a substantial percentage of electors want the present system to be retained.
2. The financial case for change is not proven and has been undermined by reports from Capita and Professor Michael Chisholm of Cambridge University. Indeed changes to the bid include upgrading the capital costs from a net £3 million to £9.8 million and these changes have not been clearly explained to the public.
3. Shropshire is too large geographically to be governed by a single council as the needs and local identity of different areas of the county vary so much.
4. The proposed system of 27 area committees duplicates the work of parish and town councils and it is not clear that the finance to administer the system is available.

I would be most grateful if, before responding to the Government consultation, you would consider the above points. I am also available to discuss the whole matter should you so wish.

Alternatively, if you wish to retain the current system of local government for Shropshire, I welcome letters of support which can either be sent to myself at:

Councillor Peter Nutting
Shrewsbury and Atcham Borough Council
The Guildhall
Frankwell Quay
Shrewsbury SY3 8HQ

or to:

Department of Communities and Local Government
Eland House
Bressenden Place
London SW1E 5DU

With very best wishes

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'P. Nutting', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Leader of Shrewsbury and Atcham Borough Council