

Response to Consultation on a Unitary Authority for Shropshire

Report of the Chief Fire Officer

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1 Purpose of Report

This report outlines the possible impact upon the Fire Authority of the proposals for the move to unitary status of local government within Shropshire and recommends a response to the current consultation process.

2 Recommendations

The Fire Authority is asked to:

- a) Discuss the contents of the report;
- b) Agree that the comment section should form the basis for the response to the consultation; and
- c) Task Officers with exploring any unclear areas with bidding authorities as necessary.

3 Background

In October 2006 the Government, through Communities and Local Government (CLG), invited councils in England to make proposals for future unitary structures or to pioneer, as pathfinders, new two-tier models of governance. It was wholly at the discretion of a council whether or not it responded to this invitation.

The Government did this because it has concluded that local government in two-tier areas faces additional challenges that can make it harder to achieve the strong leadership and clear accountability, which communities need. They also cited risks of confusion, duplication and inefficiency between tiers, and particular challenges of capacity for small districts.



The Government also recognised that in a small number of areas, where there is a broad cross section of support, the current reforms should move to unitary government control; whereas in the majority of county areas the reforms should move towards the development of innovative models of two-tier working.

Any proposals for governance change, whether involving two-tier models or unitary structures, should, in the Government's view:

- a) Enhance strategic leadership, neighbourhood empowerment, accountability, value for money and equity;
- b) Command a broad cross section of support; and
- c) Be affordable, representing value for money and meeting any costs of change from councils' existing resources.

The Government also expected all councils in continuing two-tier areas, even if they did not seek governance change, to pursue new arrangements to achieve the same level of improvement and efficiency gains that the new unitary and pathfinders will be achieving. It would appear, therefore, that there was little choice from two-tier areas across the country but to bid to be part of the first tranche of unitary or pathfinder organisations.

Shropshire County Council has been exploring and implementing a raft of innovative efficiency policies for many years and is seen as a high performer in many areas, including partnership working. Because of this, the County decided that it could only bid to be part of the move to unitary government.

The Government is clear that, to be successful, any future local government structure must:

- Provide strong, effective and accountable strategic leadership but with devolution of power to local communities;
- Deliver genuine opportunities for neighbourhood flexibility and empowerment by, amongst other things, shortening the distance between governors and the governed; and
- Deliver value for money and equity on public services.

Bidders, including Shropshire County Council in partnership with Oswestry Borough Council and South Shropshire District Council, were asked to produce a business plan as part of the process, which would include:

- A full description of the proposed government structure;
- The strategic aim of the proposal;
- Main benefits of the proposal;
- Timings of benefits; and
- Financial case.

Following the Shropshire bid, which was one of 26 similar proposals, the Government announced which of the proposals it judged met the criteria and hence should go forward for consultation. The consultation is open to all to



comment on the proposals. As a key stakeholder we have been requested to respond to the proposals by 22 June 2007.

As key partners with the Council and all boroughs and districts across Shropshire, officers are keen to support continued improvements in the way services are delivered through partnership, especially where these improvements result in increased safety of our communities from fire and other emergencies. Although officers are aware of the need to demonstrate value for money in any change to government locally, we recommend that our consultation response concentrates on whether we believe that the bid will:

- Provide strong, effective and accountable strategic leadership but with devolution of power to local communities;
- Deliver genuine opportunities for neighbourhood flexibility and empowerment by, amongst other things, shortening the distance between governors and the governed; and
- Deliver equity on public services

and, in so doing, support Shropshire and Wrekin Fire Authority in its statutory duties.

4 Key Points of the Business Plan

The full detail of the '**onecouncil for Shropshire**' business case can be found at:

<http://www.shropshire.gov.uk/onecouncil.nsf>

but the key points, as they relate to the Fire Authority, are set out below.

The vision that the bid sees for services in Shropshire proposes a new way of running services in Shropshire that will:

- Put the customer and citizen at the centre of what unitary services will do;
- Ensure that work is continued with partners to create a single point of access to services for residents that are responsive and efficient;
- Transform access to services with online and telephone 'one stop shops';
- Provide on demand and always available services for the modern 24/7 world; and
- Give local people a voice in decisions in their village or town and influence over the resources that will make a difference in practical ways to their street, their neighbourhood and their community.

To achieve this the business case proposes to give people the kind of leadership they want, that is one council that cuts away the confusion and tangle of bureaucracy caused by having six councils. They propose to challenge and lead all public services in the area, holding them all to account and scrutinising the way they deliver services.



The new unitary authority would have 96 councillors, 29 of whom would have leading member roles. Shortly after unitary status they propose to review the electoral division with a view to creating structures that reflect the distinct communities of interest, ensuring clear accountability of councillors to the electorate.

They also suggest a new Area Agreement with central government, setting out a clear cross sector vision for Shropshire, which would lead to better organised actions across local services, and making each public service provider accountable to deliver against the vision. They would ensure that citizens have the power to call on the Leader, Chief Executive and service heads to attend village meetings to listen to concerns or explain decisions and to ensure standards are met.

Structurally all of this would be delivered through 27 local area committees, close to the people and representing the 152 parish and town councils. Partners, such as the Police Divisional Commander, could regularly attend meetings of Council, Cabinet and Scrutiny. It also suggests that councillors are appointed to the Local Policing Board.

Strategically the new unitary authority would:

- Set a clear vision, based on evidenced local needs;
- Determine financial issues to deliver the vision;
- Resolve conflicts between competing priorities;
- Lead local strategic partnerships and Local Area Agreements (LAAs);
- Act on behalf of the local community in holding all public services to account, requiring them to attend Local Area Committees, who will scrutinise their service delivery, and also ensuring that local community needs are reflected in all public service plans;
- Set County wide service standards; and
- Devolve / share decision making with local communities.

In strategic delivery terms the new unitary authority would continue with the direction of the main blocks of the current Local strategic Partnership but specifically:

- Affordable housing;
- Economic development;
- Children and young people;
- The environment;
- Services for older people; and
- One door access to services.

Financially the bid identifies significant efficiencies in the move to unitary status. Most importantly, the council tax rises would be held to between 0% and 3.5% over the initial 4 year term of the new unitary (2008-2012).



5 Comment for Reply to Consultation

Your officers have not been involved in any discussions with the bidding authorities, so can only comment on the information presented in the business case and how this might impact on the Fire Authority. It is hoped that officers would become involved, should the bid for unitary status be successful, in order to discuss the underlying impacts arising from the broad statements made in the business case. At such time a further report would, of course, be brought to the Fire Authority.

For many years Shropshire and Wrekin Fire Authority and Shropshire Fire and Rescue Service have worked with partners across the geographical area of Shropshire delivering our statutory objectives and we have had numerous successes in achieving our corporate aims. We have very positive experiences of working with a unitary authority in Telford & Wrekin and perhaps most of our success has been achieved through this local single-tier Authority.

We have also, however, been very successful in delivering our local service through District and Borough Community Safety Partnerships. Shrewsbury and Atcham Borough Council was one of the first authorities in the area to see the need for community fire safety and, working alongside us, has reduced fire risk considerably across its area. Bridgnorth District Council also (one of the smallest) has been an able partner and has supported many of our corporate objectives to the benefit of its communities.

We have had slightly less success in engagement at Shropshire Partnership level and, although we sit at Board level and Group level on many structures across the County, we have had little success in obtaining support for fire safety across the piece. This may, perhaps, be because there is such a large number of competing 'priorities' from the many players, who also sit on Partnership and Block committees.

We can surmise, therefore, that it may not be the structure that defines how effective our partners are in supporting fire death and injury prevention but rather the vision of the organisation, its willingness to engage with partners and its clarity in priorities for action. The vision, set out in the business plan, 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 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 vision matches very many of our own:

- 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.



There is nothing, however, on the business case that suggests that we will be a significant player at a strategic level. This is very disappointing, as we have much to bring to the table to help the unitary in delivering its vision. 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 will 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.

We would, however, need to move forward with our plans to up-skill our Retained Duty junior officers to enable them to represent the Fire and Rescue Service at each of these committees. We would also need to increase our pay budgets slightly to enable them to attend and take an active part at this important local level of governance.

One significant area of the proposal that would need to be discussed with the bidding authorities and the Executive of the new unitary authority, if it is created, is that of scrutiny and direction. Throughout the business plan the direction is clearly that the new unitary authority will direct and scrutinise all local services, it will '*challenge and lead all services*' and '*hold all local services to account*' etc. Clearly Shropshire and Wrekin Fire Authority already has very good processes for local accountability, communication and a national system for audit. We await with interest the proposals put forward for the methods of challenge, leadership and scrutiny of the Fire Authority in support of the new auditing regimes coming out of the experiences of CPA and the move to Comprehensive Area Assessments. As always, we will be open to any detailed suggestions to support our continuing drive for performance improvement.

6 Other Comment

The new unitary authority would have increased capacity in back office functions that they are already proposing to share with the Primary Care Trust. The Fire Authority may wish to explore these further should the unitary bid succeed.

Members will need to discuss the impact the move to unitary status would have in the short and medium term upon themselves. It is not clear what the longer term political structure may be and its impact on Members.

7 Summary

Shropshire Fire and Rescue Service has been very successful in engaging with the Telford & Wrekin unitary authority and through partnership and locality working has succeeded in delivering our corporate objectives in this area. Similarly we have had success in small local boroughs and districts. Although we are not convinced that structure will always be a major factor in success, we do fully support the visions of the new '**onecouncil for Shropshire**'.



We can see how its strategy and structure could support us in our wish to see a safer Shropshire for all its citizens and how we in turn could support the new unitary authority in achieving its vision of truly sustainable communities. We hope that, should the new unitary authority become a reality, we can work with it as well as we do currently with Telford & Wrekin in delivering safety in partnership.

8 Financial Implications

There are no direct financial implications arising from this report, although more detailed analysis of the unitary structure would be required, if it becomes a reality.

9 Legal Comment

There are no direct legal implications arising out of this report, however, legal advice will be provided on an ongoing basis. Should a unitary authority be formed, legal advice will be given regarding the status of the new unitary authority and the implications of this status on the Fire Authority.

10 Equality Impact Assessment

This report is purely a response to a proposal for unitary status for the County of Shropshire. No equality impact assessment has been provided with the business case. We would expect to see an impact assessment before the final decision to move to unitary is made.

11 Appendices

There are no appendices attached to this report.

12 Background Papers

All background papers to this report are available on the 'onecouncil for Shropshire' website at:

<http://www.shropshire.gov.uk/onecouncil.nsf>



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	*

