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Dr Keith Robinson
Wiltshire County Council
County Hall
Trowbridge Wilts BA14 7JN

DATE: 10 January 2007

OUR REF: DC JK

YOUR REF:

Dear Keith

One Council for Wiltshire

Thank you for the copy of your report to the meeting of your council on the 16 January 2007 and for the invitation contained therein for the Chief Executives of the four district councils to be given the opportunity for their views to be appended to it.

This letter is a joint response from three of the districts, Kennet, Salisbury and West Wiltshire and has been prepared in consultation with the leaders of each of the three councils. It sets out the common ground between those authorities.

Evidence

May I open by expressing surprise that, having been told repeatedly by you and the County Council Leader, that the decision to make a bid to become a unitary would depend on the evidence, there is so little of it in your report. In fact, in a report consisting of 104 paragraphs, only para 25 contains hard evidence. The rest of the report relies on opinion, supposition and selective quotations. Clearly, the report's paucity of evidence demonstrates the County Council's difficulty in preparing the basis for such a bid in a short timescale, but it is wholly insufficient to warrant the risks for the people of Wiltshire inherent in a unitary bid, nor does it augur well for the ability of the county to complete the unitary exercise in the ambitious timescale set out in your report.

Distraction

The process to create a unitary council described in your report is predicted to be completed in 2012. For five years, all councils in Wiltshire would be distracted from progress on community planning, joint working and improved governance in return for miniscule financial savings (which cannot be guaranteed). May I suggest that the risks outweigh the uncertain benefits and, with the greatest of respect, the County Council with its financial challenges stands at greatest risk in this respect.

Affordability

The brief description of affordability set out at para 25 and at para 7 of the executive summary indicates annual savings of £15m. When compared to the £555m of annual joint expenditure this represents only 2.7% of local government spending in Wiltshire. Your report admits that the business case will need further development.



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Given the tiny margin of savings, I would query whether the undoubted upheaval is justified. Just as importantly, with such a tiny margin in savings, it is all too easy to foresee that these hypothetical savings will be transformed into actual deficits, particularly given that the financial argument is not yet fully developed. I do not understand how the County Council could proceed on this basis. Furthermore, the PWC model's cost predictions were ignored by the Electoral Commission in 2004 when it considered creating unitary councils in the north of England.

Our belief is that there is no evidence of any local government re-organisation having taken place which has generated a surplus. The widely held view in both central and local government is to the contrary; that costs always outstrip savings.

Partnership and shared savings

I note with disappointment your dismissal of our joint efforts to improve services, by damning them with faint praise. From our perspective, partnership working has been a resounding success. May I remind you that your Beacon status would not have been possible without the enthusiastic support of your district council partners and our recent success in changing the Regional Spatial Strategy relied heavily on input from, and co-operation with, district councils.

We regard the development of shared services via Customer First as the way forward for local government in Wiltshire. Indeed, within the table at para 70 of your report, proposals for shared working on Building Control are nearing completion.

In fact, within the table at para 70, although there is an implication of equity between the County and districts, the vast majority of expenditure is incurred by districts. For this reason, we are preparing a schedule of services and financial savings to be garnered through shared services which we will, of course, share with you and central government. Our belief is that this route will secure most of the annual savings identified at para 25, without the upheaval required by the creation of a unitary. We would therefore urge the County Council to support this approach and join with us in it.

Sense of Place

Your report approaches the benefits of a county wide unitary from the perspective that big equals good. The dubious financial benefits argued certainly depend on a huge unitary. However, scant attention is paid to the sense of place. You allude to the need for delegation without making any commitment to it.

In our view, work by the district councils on improving the "sense of place" in governance terms is well advanced and there is no reason why the County Council should not make similar advances by delegating control to existing area based structures. Indeed, one might ask why the county argues for such improvement but is reluctant to engage in it now.

Wiltshire is a large county in geographical terms, its rural areas are amongst the most sparsely populated in England, and it has the physical barrier of the Plain. There is inadequate explanation of how these difficulties might be overcome and the risk that a county unitary would be centralist, unresponsive, unwieldy and unpopular.

The arguments for such centralisation are ill suited to a local government institution, and I would urge the County Council to work with us to use our experience in partnership working to generate local democracies which are flexible, approachable and accountable at community level.

Governance

The proposals on the future governance are particularly sketchy. You say that the earliest boundary revisions for elected councillors to a unitary authority would be 2012. There is no indication of how many councillors there would be, nor indeed any commitment to undertake boundary revisions. We do not believe that this offers reassurance to electors of good governance and adequate representation in the long term.



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Even in the short term, it seems to us that your proposal to double the councillors currently representing County Council wards leaves a democratic deficit. You propose a ratio of one councillor to 3,500 electors, twice that offered by the district councillors. We do not believe that 98 councillors covering a huge geographical area can cope with the workload generated, particularly if the new unitary commits itself to delegation to area boards.

Leadership

We think the proposal for an indirectly elected leader is highly unsatisfactory. In every other aspect of your paper you commend the "transformational" effect of creating a unitary. Why, then, is your approach on this issue so timid?

You give the impression that the leadership should be exempt from the radical changes proposed, at the very least we believe that a directly elected executive is required. In this way, the potential leaders of the new authority would submit themselves to the process of direct democratic approval.

District Councils

It would be remiss of me not to address the potential loss of quality currently resident within our councils. We all have balanced budgets, high levels of resident satisfaction, high scores in key performance indicators and low levels of council tax.

It seems to me that on the one hand, you have highly skilled partners to help you with the challenges facing local government over the next 10-15 years and on the other hand that you run the risk of losing a major reservoir of talent which will make future success less assured.

Summary

In summary, we urge the County Council **not to proceed with a bid to create a county wide unitary**, but to engage with us in closer partnership to match the challenges posed by the White Paper for the following reasons:

- There is a **lack of hard evidence** to support the creation of a unitary
- The process will **take 5 years** to complete and distract all of us from more important work
- The savings identified equate to **only 2½%** of annual expenditure
- The financial model is not **fully developed**, and we believe that **hypothetical savings** will become **actual deficits**
- **Partnership** working in Wiltshire is **successful** and represents **the best way forward**
- A unitary council is **too large** geographically and would become **centralist, unwieldy** and **unpopular**
- The future arrangements and numbers of **elected councillors** are inadequate
- The timid proposals for **leadership arrangements** are out of kilter with the radicalisations of the rest of the paper
- Any new unitary should be administered by a **directly elected executive**
- **District councils** are efficient, effective and a high quality resource for improving local services, and should not be **abandoned** for the **uncertain quality** of an entirely new body.

Yours sincerely



**David Crook on behalf of Kennet District Council, Salisbury District Council
West Wiltshire District Council**

Copy to Cllrs Britton, Content, Humphreys
Mark Boden, Andrew Pate
SDC MT and SUHs



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