

24 January 2007

The Rt. Hon Ruth Kelly MP  
Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government and Minister for Women  
Eland House  
Bressenden Place  
London  
SW1E 5DU

Dear Secretary of State

### **Local Government Re-organisation in Wiltshire**

This letter sets out the views of West Wiltshire District Council and provides some initial comments about the County Council's bid for unitary status.

### **West Wiltshire District Council's View**

This Council believes that re-organisation of local government in Wiltshire would not be in the interest of local people. This is a strongly held view.

There is not a broad cross-section of local support for structural change.

In a special meeting of the Council all political parties - Conservatives, Labour, Independents and Liberal Democrats – agreed their opposition to re-organisation of local government in Wiltshire and, in particular, their opposition to the bid being submitted by the County Council.

There is complete political consensus on this issue. There was a strong majority and no votes cast against this view - 28 for and 7 abstentions.

West Wiltshire District Council believes that the interests of local people are best served by the existing local government structure.

This Council has clear plans and ambitions:

- We are one of the most efficient Council's in the country.
- We are striving for further improvements.
- The Improvement and Development Agency has just carried out a Peer Review and was greatly impressed by our plans and achievements.
- We are positively engaged in partnership work.

- We are actively taking forward the agenda contained in the Local Government White Paper – Strong and Prosperous Communities.

A leaflet setting out our views is enclosed – the headline is ‘Unitary bid seen as major distraction’.

Our views are shared by three of the four districts. The remaining district, namely North Wiltshire, has strong County Council representation on its Council. It appears to see advantage in supporting the County Council without having undertaken any separate work to assess local opinion.

The County Council and North Wiltshire were divided in their votes to support the structural change option: North Wiltshire – 26 to 8 and County Council – 26 to 16.

We have agreed that, if there is to be any change, a public referendum should take place first. The level of change and disruption demands that there be strong public support as a condition of any change.

We trust that, if you are minded to recommend structural change, you will require a public referendum.

### **Wiltshire County Council’s Bid**

We can’t see any reason to select Wiltshire for re-organisation. There is no history to support the case for structural change. At the last re-organisation in 1994 the County Council actively argued for the two-tier structure.

It can easily be demonstrated that the case for structural change in Wiltshire is now less than ever before. The existing structure is working well and can deliver more. We have only five principal councils in the county area and a proactive citizen and customer driven partnership agenda.

The County and Districts have achieved good levels of performance:

- A Customers First Partnership has delivered joined up improvements for customers as we transform these services.
- Joint work is taking place on the Local Area Agreement and sign up is imminent.
- A Beacon Award has recently been won for the combined approach to Community Leadership.
- Capacity building work is set to further improve the performance management of our partnerships.
- Joint projects are underway to secure more efficiencies by combining services, joint procurement and appropriate use of the private sector.

There is an increasingly important role for elected Councillors as community leaders and new opportunities, such as the ‘community call for action’ and neighbourhood working.

- We are jointly researching how best to develop the front line member role – another capacity building project – we want to lead the way on this agenda.
- We can't see how a unitary council with strategic ambitions would strengthen community leadership – especially as it would reduce the number of elected members by more than 50%.

We have considered the context in England. In the light of this we want to highlight some important facts. A unitary Wiltshire:

- Would be nearly 50% larger in area than the largest existing unitary council and 12 times the average size – its area would be 3,256km<sup>2</sup>.

The county is divided in two by Salisbury Plain – an area of 780km<sup>2</sup>, which alone is over twice the size of the Isle of Wight.

Salisbury and the south of the county are separated from the north by the Plain. There are few roads across the Plain which is mainly used for farming and military exercises.

- It is 44 miles from Chippenham to Salisbury and transport links are poor. Trowbridge has better links with the north of the county, but poor links with the south.

There are 248 parishes in the county area and 20 community areas, each with a separate identity. The needs of the districts vary substantially.

This puts a unitary county based in Trowbridge in a poor position to provide leadership, address the needs of local people and the local place shaping agenda.

We are looking at the financial case provided by the County and will want to share more conclusions with you in the next few weeks. We can already be clear that their case:

- Is rushed and based on a poor understanding of the services that will need to be provided.
- Has little information about how any area structure would work in an attempt to alleviate the community identity issues referred to here.
- Assumes greater efficiencies and better financial control despite this being a major problem for the County Council at the moment.

There is a concern that the bid is a means of helping the County Council solve its financial problems. The County's social care costs have recently risen and they have been in dispute with the PCT. The Districts clearly do not want their own services and corporate priorities to be frustrated as a result of this problem.

Even based on the County's figures, the annual savings would only pay for between one and two years Gershon efficiency savings. This implies that, after two years, the financial benefits of change would have been exhausted and applied to meet government targets.

The County's case shows that there would be at least 5 years of disruption. That compares with the two years of financial benefit referred to here.

We believe that basing the entirety of the reorganisation on a hypothetical financial case is ill conceived. The other parts of the unitary county council case are weak and based on assertion.

I have enclosed a joint letter to the County Council from West Wiltshire, Salisbury and Kennet Districts. It concludes:

- There is a lack of hard evidence in the bid to support the creation of a unitary county.
- The process will take 5 years to complete and will distract us all from more important work.
- The savings identified equate to only 2.5% of annual expenditure.
- The financial model is not fully developed, and we believe the 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 and the leadership model proposed is weak.
- District councils in Wiltshire are an efficient, effective and high quality resource and should not be abandoned for the uncertain quality of an entirely new council.

### **The Review Process**

We understand you will consider the case presented by the County Council for a new unitary council. We trust you will also take this letter into account in reaching an initial conclusion.

We have some concerns about the review process:

- Some bids for unitary status are based on assertion rather than fact. How will you be auditing the proposals to ensure they are both accurate and viable?
- The process tends to place an emphasis on bids for structural change rather than allowing equal consideration of alternative views not encompassed in a bid. Will you ensure our views are given equal consideration?
- There is no opportunity for the public to have their say as a condition for any structural change. Will you ensure that where structural change is recommended a local referendum takes place?
- The period of consultation where structural change is being contemplated will coincide with local elections in district and parish councils. Does your timetable allow for this and which Councillors will be consulted?

We request that you keep us well informed and also let us know how you will be addressing our concerns about the review process.

We strongly urge you not to recommend structural change in Wiltshire, but to invite us to continue to improve our joint work: joined up strategies, putting customers first, seeking efficiencies and even better community leadership.

Yours sincerely



Andrew Pate  
Chief Executive



Sarah Content  
Leader of the Council