

BCFE (09) 9th Meeting

Minutes of meeting held on 3 June 2009, in the Boothroyd Room in Trevelyan House, Great Peter Street, London, SW1P 2HW

Present:

Max Caller CBE (Chair)
Joan Jones CBE
Professor Ron Johnston
Professor Colin Mellors
Dr Peter Knight CBE DL
Jane Earl

Also present:

Archie Gall	Director
Louise Footner	Senior Lawyer
Alex Robertson	Head of Media and Public Affairs (Item 4)
Gareth Nicholson	Media and Public Affairs Officer
Alison Wildig	Review Manager
Sam Hartley	Review Manager
Kalim Anwer	Review Officer
Tim Bowden	Review Officer
William Morrison	Review Officer
Megan Bayford	Review Assistant

- 1.1 The Senior Lawyer reminded the Committee of the approach it should take to its consideration of the representations received, whether for or against structural change, having regard to the judgment of the Court of Appeal.
- 1.2 The Chair reminded the Committee that its consideration of representations was without prejudice to its consideration of any advice it might provide to the Secretary of State, decisions on which would be taken at its meeting on 15 June. The purpose of the current meeting was to examine in detail what had been said to the Committee and by whom. The Committee was not being asked to take decisions on whether a particular unitary pattern had the capacity to meet the Secretary of State's broad cross section of support criterion.

2. Devon structural review – analysis of responses – BCFE (09) 28

- 2.1 The Review Officer gave a presentation on the responses received during the summer 2008 and spring 2009 consultations and an analysis of them.
- 2.2 The Committee concluded that a broad analysis of the parish representations suggested that if parishes had to choose a pattern of unitary local government, their preference was for a single unitary authority. There seemed to be possibly only one parish in the whole of Devon (aside from Exeter City Council) that supported the two unitary pattern. The majority of parishes in Devon supported the status quo. [post-meeting note: this was clarified after the meeting; the parish did not support the further draft proposal for two unitaries; rather it was for another pattern of two-unitary local government in the county.]
- 2.3 The Review Officer then presented an analysis of responses from other stakeholders to the consultations and introduced a discussion on the geographic spread of representations. The Director reminded the Committee that pro-forma letters and petitions were not factored into the analysis, but the Committee needed to be mindful of them in their decision-making.
- 2.4 The Committee concluded that while it seemed that parishes generally favoured the status quo, a significant number of local organisations and partners were in favour of a pattern of unitary government – and a significantly greater number of those supported a single unitary rather than a two unitary authority pattern. A two unitary authority was primarily supported by those wanting a Greater Exeter authority. Outside Exeter, the argument appeared uniform in that removing Exeter from a Devon authority would 'destroy' the county. A single unitary authority has support across the county, including within Exeter, and in some cases it could be said that it enjoys majority support.

2.5 The Committee agreed that a number of those who had supported a two unitary authority supported an enlarged Exeter rather than the Committee's draft proposals.

2.6 The Committee agreed there was significant support for the status quo from members of the public and local authorities but not from local organisations/partners.

3. Norfolk structural review – analysis of responses – BCFE (09) 29

3.1 The Review Officer gave a presentation on the responses received during the summer 2008 and spring 2009 consultations and an analysis of them.

3.2 The Committee discussed the different level of participation in Norfolk compared to Devon. It noted that the engagement of parishes in the review process seemed to be dependent on the districts in which they were located - there was no even geographic response level from parishes across the county.

3.3 The Committee concluded that a broad analysis of the parish representations indicated that only approximately half of Norfolk parishes had participated in the review, but in general they favoured the status quo. It was clear that where there was support for a unitary pattern, a county unitary had the highest level of support

3.4 The Review Officer presented an analysis of responses from other stakeholders to the consultations and introduced a discussion on the geographic spread of representations.

3.5 The Committee discussed the level of support for a two unitary pattern both within and outside Norwich. It concluded that, at present, there seemed to be an insufficient measure of support for that pattern across a range of stakeholders to satisfy the Secretary of State's criteria for Pattern B. For a single county unitary, there was a measure of support, but the argument has not been as strongly made for change as it had been in Devon and Suffolk.

4. Suffolk structural review – BCFE (09) 30

4.1 The Review Officer gave a presentation on the responses received during the summer 2008 and spring 2009 consultations and an analysis of them.

4.2 The Committee welcomed the fact that the majority of parish councils in Suffolk had responded during one or both of the consultation periods. It noted that there was more support for the two unitary pattern from parish

councils than in Norfolk and Devon and that it was more evenly spread geographically.

- 4.3 The Review Officer presented an analysis of responses from other stakeholders to the consultations and introduced a discussion on the geographic spread of representations.
- 4.4 The Committee noted the level of support for the single county unitary authority. In relation to the two unitary pattern, the Committee noted that the levels of support were similar to those for the two unitary pattern in Norfolk. However, the Committee considered that there was more support for a unitary pattern in general in Suffolk and that fewer people actually opposed the two unitary pattern than in Norfolk.

5. Communication and stakeholder engagement plan – BCFE (09) 31

- 5.1 The Media and Public Affairs Officer presented a paper outlining a future communications strategy for the Committee.
- 5.2 The Committee welcomed the paper and agreed with its overall direction.
- 5.3 The Committee agreed that it should look to become a body involved in discussions of issues affecting local government and that the reputation of the organisation was key to the achievement of that objective. The Committee also agreed that while its key audience was the local government community, it could through its work help build bridges between local and central government.
- 5.4 The Committee agreed that, subject to a direction from the Electoral Commission, it should start moving forward with the stakeholder engagement plans with the commencement of the review of Stoke-on-Trent.

6. Operational report (update) – BCFE (09) 32

- 6.1 The Director presented his operational report.
- 6.2 The Review Manager updated the Committee on the fact that, in addition to St Edmundsbury and Forest Heath, Suffolk Coastal District Council had initiated proceedings against the Committee.
- 6.3 The Review Manager informed the Committee that the Commission would decide at its meeting on 10 June whether to direct the Committee to undertake a review of Stoke-on-Trent.

7. A.O.B.

7.1 There was no business not already on the agenda.

June 2009