



SCRUTINY COMMISSION: 6 MARCH 2019

**REVIEW OF PROPOSALS FOR A UNITARY STRUCTURE OF LOCAL
GOVERNMENT FOR LEICESTERSHIRE**

MINUTE EXTRACT

The Commission considered a report setting out the findings of its examination of the County Council's proposals for a unitary structure for local government in Leicestershire. A copy of the report marked 'Agenda Item 9' is filed with these minutes.

In introducing the report, the Chairman reminded members that the report did not make any clear recommendations but set out the findings from the evidence that had been gathered and issues which the business case should address.

Arising from discussion the following points were raised:-

- (i) The Commission indicated its support for the report, which presented an objective and balanced view of the evidence that had been considered. Whilst a consensus on the way forward had not been reached, the discussions to date had enabled members to develop a greater understanding of the outline proposals and had identified some pitfalls to avoid.
- (ii) There was a general recognition of the need for change and for a more streamlined approach to local government in Leicestershire. However, members of the Commission would welcome greater consideration of options to share services between the County Council and District Councils.
- (iii) Some concern was expressed that the Commission had not undertaken a detailed exploration of the option of two unitary authorities for Leicestershire. It was hoped that the business case would include more detail on the options. A further view was expressed that the proposal for a unitary structure of local government in Leicestershire should be abandoned.
- (iv) It was noted that the Government's criteria for unitary proposals included the need for a population substantially in excess of 300,000. However, guidance on the upper size limit had not been issued. It would be useful to explore issues relating to size further; a single unitary authority for Leicestershire would have a population that was more than double the lower limit in the criteria.
- (v) It was reported that staff in district councils were feeling unsettled by the proposals and a member suggested that a clear message should be sent to

them regarding the process and how staffing issues would be addressed if the proposals progressed.

- (vi) It was noted that the County Council's financial situation remained challenging and that there was still no clarity around the outcome of the national fairer funding review. Some members could see logic behind the concept of a single tier of local government for Leicestershire but felt that the economic and local factors, including why some councils had abandoned unitary proposals, had not been sufficiently investigated.
- (vii) A member suggested that the financial case for change should include a greater level of detail than had been presented to date. Comparisons made with the level of savings that existing unitary authorities had achieved should also be put in the context of the savings that the County Council had already achieved through austerity.
- (viii) Some concern was expressed that the 'transition then transformation' approach did not give a clear picture of what the future organisation would ultimately be like and that this resulted in prolonged uncertainty for staff.
- (ix) If a new unitary authority was created for Leicestershire, it would need a culture that enabled it to engage with communities in a meaningful way.
- (x) Some members emphasised the importance of being open-minded and of concentrating on what would best deliver services for the people of Leicestershire. It was recognised that the national direction of travel was to move towards a unitary structure for local government and that the local focus ought not to be on preserving structures.

RESOLVED:

That the report and comments now made be submitted to the Cabinet for consideration at its meeting on 29 March 2019.