

11. LOCAL GOVERNMENT WHITE PAPER

The government had issued a white paper on local government, “Strong and Prosperous Communities”, a summary of which was presented to Cabinet to inform members of matters arising from the paper. The paper was a statement of intent, not a consultation document.

The Leader reminded members of the previous local government re-organisation exercise from 1992-5, during which arguments were made against a merger with Cambridge City Council, and supported the recommendations that the Council not apply for unitary status for the same reasons as in 1995. He also noted that surveys conducted prior to the introduction of new political structures in 2001 had demonstrated that the majority of residents related more to their local parish councils than to the district council, making it very difficult to justify having a directly elected mayor. Although there could be benefits for applying to become a partner pathfinder authority pioneering an enhanced two-tier local government model, current resources were insufficient to pursue this option. There was surprise expressed at the reference to re-warding an area to have single member wards, following the Electoral Commission’s creation of multi-member wards during the last Periodic Electoral Review, and members noted that representatives of single-member wards could be excluded from debates due to personal and prejudicial interests, leaving their residents without local representation.

There was support for strengthening the overview and scrutiny role, especially provisions for requiring public service partners to appear before or provide information to the Council’s Scrutiny and Overview Committee. Councillor R Hall, Vice-Chairman of the Scrutiny and Overview Committee, welcomed the proposals and stated that the body’s enhanced role and powers should not be underestimated.

Councillor SGM Kindersley expressed concern that Cabinet was being asked to agree recommendations not to pursue unitary status, as there had not been much recent debate about the proposals, and he felt that the government eventually would not allow the current two-tier system to continue. In response to requests to refer the issue to full Council, the Leader explained that the short timescale given to debate the issue precluded its reference to full Council and that Cabinet had to make a decision now to inform officers and partners of the way the authority wished to proceed.

The Chief Executive, responding to queries from Councillor Mrs EM Heazell, explained that he had received a letter from the Cambridge City Council Chief Executive asking if the two authorities, along with Cambridgeshire County Council, wanted to submit a joint response, but that all three Chief Executives acknowledged that the government’s timescale made it impossible to schedule special meetings of their authorities. Having conducted an informal consultation with members of the Cabinet and with the leader of the Liberal Democrat group, the Chief Executive responded that there was no support to seek unitary status at this time; his letter made clear that this was a conclusion reached on informal discussions with members and did not commit the Council to any course of action.

Cabinet **AGREED**

- (a) Not to apply for unitary status at this time, nor to become a partner pathfinder authority pioneering an enhanced two-tier local government model at this time; and
- (b) To wait until the enabling legislation, regulations and guidance were published before requesting appropriate bodies and / or lead officers to consider the principles the authority wishes to adopt and the practical implications of implementing the legislative, etc., requirements.

