



Proposals for Future Unitary Structures in
Bedfordshire: Stakeholder Consultation
Summary of responses



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Introduction

1. This document sets out a summary of the responses received to the Government's stakeholder consultation on proposals for unitary structures in Bedfordshire that took place between 19 December 2007 and 13 February 2008.
2. On 6 March 2008, the Minister for Local Government announced that, having considered all the information available, including all comments and representations received in response to this consultation, the Secretary of State had decided to implement the proposals for a unitary Bedford Borough and a unitary Central Bedfordshire. The Order implementing the proposals was laid before Parliament on the same day. It was subsequently approved by Parliament, and came into force on 28 March.

Policy Background

3. The consultation was launched in accordance with the commitment to provide opportunities to create unitary government set out in the *Local Government White Paper, Strong and Prosperous Communities*, published in October 2006. Alongside the White Paper, the Government issued to each principal council in England, outside of Greater London and the Metropolitan Counties, an Invitation to Councils to submit, if they so wished, a proposal for future unitary local government structures in their area.
4. The Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007 ('the Act') includes provisions for implementing such structural changes to local government, i.e. for moving from two-tier to unitary local government. These provisions allow new unitary structures to be created by Order subject to approval by both Houses of Parliament, following proposals by local authorities in response to an invitation (including the invitation issued in October 2006 prior to the commencement of the Act) from the Secretary of State.
5. The Invitation issued in October 2006 provided that any proposal should demonstrate how it met five essential criteria, namely that, if implemented, the proposal would:
 - a) provide strong and accountable strategic leadership;
 - b) deliver genuine opportunities for neighbourhood empowerment;
 - c) deliver value for money public services;
 - d) be supported by a broad cross-section of partners and stakeholders; and,
 - e) be affordable: restructuring must represent value for money and be self-financing.
6. In January 2007, the Government received 26 proposals from councils wishing to move to a single tier of local government. Having been assessed

against the criteria, 16 of these proposals, including those made by Bedford Borough Council and Bedfordshire County Council, progressed to stakeholder consultation which took place from March to June 2007. A summary of responses from that consultation was published in November 2007.¹

7. On 25 July 2007, following this initial consultation, the Secretary of State announced that both of the proposals for Bedfordshire were reasonably likely to meet the outcomes specified by the criteria, but that she was minded to implement the proposal made by Bedford Borough Council for the area of Bedford Borough. However, the Secretary of State recognised that the Bedford Borough proposal was based on the proposition that the rest of Bedfordshire should also become unitary, and considered that were Bedford Borough to become unitary, the remainder of the two-tier area would be unviable. Her decision was therefore subject to there being a satisfactory unitary solution for the rest of the county.
8. Consequently, on November 19, the Secretary of State issued a further invitation to Bedfordshire County Council, Mid Bedfordshire District Council and South Bedfordshire District Council to make a "Type B" proposal for future unitary local government structures for the area comprising of the districts of Mid Bedfordshire and South Bedfordshire. Under the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007, a Type B proposal is one that there should be a single tier of local government for an area which:
 - a) is currently a district, or two or more districts, in the county concerned; and
 - b) is specified in the proposal.
9. A joint proposal from Mid Bedfordshire District Council and South Bedfordshire District Council for a Central Bedfordshire unitary, that is complementary to Bedford Borough Council's proposal, was received in response to this Invitation.
10. Consequently, on December 19, the Secretary of State launched a further consultation on unitary proposals for Bedfordshire.

Stakeholder Consultation

11. The consultation exercise was aimed in the first instance at key partners and stakeholders with an interest in the area of Bedfordshire. However, it was open to anyone to make representations and affected local authorities were also asked to bring this consultation to the attention of local stakeholders. The Government had regard to all responses received along with all other relevant material before decisions were taken.

¹ *Proposals for Future Unitary Structures – Stakeholder Consultation – Summary of Responses* [available from http://www.communities.gov.uk/publications/localgovernment/unitarystructureresponses](http://www.communities.gov.uk/publications/localgovernment/unitarystructureresponses)

12. We consulted the key stakeholders who had been identified for the purposes of the first national consultation exercise which took place in spring 2007. These were primarily partners and organisations with an interest in, or responsibility for, various matters in the areas affected by the proposals and were accordingly invited to respond. A list of these consultees was posted on the Communities and Local Government website and can be found at Annex A. We also drew the consultation to the attention of other individuals and organisations who had responded to the previous stakeholder consultation expressing an interest in relation to Bedfordshire.
13. The consultation asked respondents to consider the extent to which the proposals from Mid and South Bedfordshire District Councils (“Central Bedfordshire”) and Bedford Borough Council, if implemented together (“the two unitary option”), were likely to meet the outcomes specified by the five criteria set out in the Invitation. It also requested that respondents consider which of the alternative proposals, the two unitary option or the single unitary proposal made by the County Council (“the single unitary option”), would achieve to a greater extent the long-term outcomes specified by the criteria, namely effective strategic leadership, neighbourhood empowerment, and value for money and equity on public services.
14. We have analysed responses on the same basis as we did during the previous stakeholder consultation², by counting multiple responses from one individual or organisation as a single representation, to avoid double counting. The responses received include some 30,000 campaign responses, where people had filled in a pro-forma distributed to them as part of an organised campaign, or had signed a petition. In the interests of consistency, all responses in campaign format have been classified as such, even if submitted by a key stakeholder. Similarly, in line with the approach taken to the previous stakeholder consultation, the representations were sorted into a broad range of groups as follows:
 - Local government – councils, councillors and leaders of political groups in councils
 - Town and parish councils – including associations of local councils
 - Public sector – public organisations including housing, education sector and public sector unions
 - Business sector – including chambers of commerce
 - Voluntary and community sector – including lobby groups and church groups
 - Public – including all other representation not accounted for above

² *Proposals for Future Unitary Structures – Stakeholder Consultation – Summary of Responses* [available from http://www.communities.gov.uk/publications/localgovernment/unitarystructureresponses](http://www.communities.gov.uk/publications/localgovernment/unitarystructureresponses)

Number of representations received

Local Government	11
Town and Parish Council	11
Political Party	4
Public Sector	26
Business	15
Voluntary and Community Sector	11
Public	17
Total	95
<i>Campaign responses received (approx)</i>	<i>30000</i>

Summary of views expressed by respondents

15. We received a number of responses from local authorities. Bedfordshire County Council submitted its 'fourth submission' to the Secretary of State, which contained in particular a critique of the affordability of the two unitary option. There were six responses from Chief Executives of local authorities outside the affected area, the majority of which questioned the viability of small unitary authorities being able to meet the financial criteria, linking their views to the Secretary of State's decision to refer unitary proposals made in relation to Ipswich, Exeter and Norwich to the Boundary Committee for advice. More locally, neighbouring unitary authority, Luton Borough Council raised concerns about the timing of reorganisation (whichever proposal was implemented), and consequential impacts on the growth agenda, plans for housing and the Local Delivery Vehicle.
16. The Bedfordshire Association of Town and Parish Councils expressed a commitment to work with whichever new authorities were implemented; it hoped that the new unitary council(s) would effectively engage with the parish sector, for example, through increased devolution of services; facilitation of networks and improved practical support. Individual parish councils requested a speedy solution to end the uncertainty in the area. Some parishes felt that the two unitary option would be better able to meet the neighbourhood empowerment criteria, as it would be 'closer to the people' than a larger single unitary. Others expressed concern as to the financial viability of smaller unitary authorities.
17. The responses from the public sector demonstrated general support for a unitary solution (in whatever form) for Bedfordshire and a commitment to working with whichever unitary structures were to be implemented. Some key stakeholders highlighted that a single unitary authority would be coterminous with their existing boundaries. Teachers' unions and some schools who submitted a pro-forma response expressed concern about the impact of the two unitary option on Children's Services.

18. The majority of businesses were concerned about achieving the future economic growth anticipated for the county; in the main, it was felt that this would be achieved most effectively through the single unitary option.
19. There were mixed views from voluntary and community organisations about whether the Central Bedfordshire proposal met the criteria, and whether the single unitary proposal or two-unitary proposal would better meet the long-term criteria. In terms of which of the two options for Bedfordshire better met the long-term criteria, some felt that the two unitary proposal better met their needs by being closer to the community than a larger single authority. However, some organisations were concerned about the effect of establishing two councils on existing partnerships.
20. There were 18 responses from members of the public. There was consensus amongst these respondents that there should be a quick resolution to end the current uncertainty for the people of Bedfordshire. The majority of respondents expressed concern about the viability of smaller unitary councils. In addition, the County Council submitted a petition of approximately 30,000 signatures as part of their 'Save Our Services' campaign.

Annex A

Proposals for future unitary structures: stakeholder consultation

List of Key Stakeholders

Arts Council England
Association of Chief Police Officers
Association of Council Secretaries and Solicitors
Association of County Chief Executives
Association of Electoral Administrators
Association of Larger Local Councils
Association of Local Authority Chief Executives
Association of Police Authorities
Audit Commission
Broads Authority
CBI and other significant business organisations in the area.
Chambers of Commerce
Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy
Chief Cultural and Leisure Officers Association
Chief Constables
Chief Fire Officers
County Associations of Local Councils
Electoral Commission
English Heritage
Environment Agency
Fire and Rescue Authorities
Health and Safety Executive
Highways Agency
Jobcentre Plus
Local Government Association
Local Probation Boards
Local Strategic Partnerships
Metropolitan Passenger Transport Authorities
Museums, Libraries and Archives Council

National Association of Local Councils
National Federation of Arm's-Length Management Organisations
National Park Authorities
Natural England
New Local Government Network
NHS Foundation Trusts
NHS Health Trusts
Police Authorities
Primary Care Trusts
Principal Local Authorities in affected areas
Public Sector People Managers Association
Public Sector Unions
Regional Assemblies
Regional Development Agencies
Society of County Treasurers
Society of District Council Treasurers
Society of Local Authority Chief Executives
Society of Local Council Clerks
Sport England
Strategic Health Authority
The Learning And Skills Council In England
Universities and Colleges
Voluntary Sector Organisations
Youth Justice Boards

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