

Meeting Date: 1st December 2020
Portfolio: Cross Cutting
Key Decision: No
Policy and Budget Framework: Yes
Public / Private: Public

Title: Local Government Reorganisation
Report of: Town Clerk & Chief Executive
Report Number: CE 06/20

Purpose / Summary:

As members will be aware the City Council has been invited, along with other local authorities in Cumbria, to submit proposals for reorganisation of local government in Cumbria to create one or more unitary councils. An outline submission was submitted on 9 November indicating that a final submission will be made by the deadline of 9th December in support of two unitary authorities being created in the county.

The submission of the proposal is a decision of the Executive, and the members of the Executive seek the views of council to inform (but not direct) their decision on the final submission.

Recommendations:

It is recommended that the Council supports the submission of a full proposal for two unitary councils to be created in Cumbria based on the existing district boundaries of Allerdale, Carlisle & Eden in the North; and Barrow, Copeland and South Lakeland in the South.

1. BACKGROUND

UK Government has expressed its wish to agree devolution deals and establish combined authorities and elected mayors across England. A Devolution White Paper is expected in the new year outlining more detail. In order to make progress on devolution, Simon Clarke MP (then Minister for Regional Growth and Local Government) met with Cumbrian leaders on 9 July 2020. At that meeting it was confirmed that local authorities in Cumbria could ask the Secretary of State to invite proposals for local government reorganisation in Cumbria and that multiple proposals could be submitted covering the same area.

Subsequently all councils in Cumbria received an invitation on 9th October 2020 to submit proposals for local government reorganisation with a deadline for final submissions of 9th December 2020.

The Cumbrian district council leaders are in agreement that, if reorganisation is to happen, then it should be based on two unitary councils covering Cumbria. Some favour the creation of a 'Morecambe Bay' unitary that would include South Lakeland, Barrow and Lancaster City (along with a 'North Cumbria' comprising Allerdale, Carlisle, Copeland and Eden). Others favour a pair of unitaries based on triplets of existing district boundaries. The only possible coterminous triplets are Allerdale/Carlisle/Eden plus Barrow/Copeland/South Lakeland or Allerdale/Carlisle/Copeland plus Barrow/Eden/South Lakeland.

The Leaders of Allerdale, Carlisle, Copeland and Eden favour a model of two unitaries based on triplets and agreed to jointly commission KPMG to work with the four councils on an outline submission and subsequently a full proposal. We have been given just over eight weeks to do this work; the documents for submission will not be finalised until the 7th December. The Executive will meet on this date to agree the final submission. Officials at MHCLG (Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government) have been clear and firm that there is no prospect of extending the deadline.

The Leader has established an informal 'Member Reference Group', which has given those members some sight of the process and an opportunity to comment. However the very tight timescales have not permitted wider member engagement for example through Scrutiny. Therefore the Leader has requested that Council consider this issue, so that the Executive can make a decision on 7th December with the benefit of Council's consideration.

The latest draft of the submission is attached as Appendix 1 (to follow). This explains how two unitary councils strike the optimum balance between local government being close to

the communities it serves, while having the resources and influence to drive positive change. Importantly, two unitaries will also support the establishment of a mayoral combined authority that has a genuine strategic purpose and provides the basis for devolution to the area.

2. OPTIONS

As described above there are two sets of combinations of the existing district boundaries that will deliver two unitaries. Thus the options are 'North/South' (Allerdale/Carlisle/Eden plus Barrow/Copeland/South Lakeland) and 'East/West' (Allerdale/Carlisle/Copeland plus Barrow/Eden/South Lakeland).

MHCLG will reject any proposal with more than one option as 'non-compliant'. A submission from a local authority for two unitaries based within the existing boundary for Cumbria must express either 'North/South' or 'East/West' as a preference.

As part of the work that KPMG have done with the four authorities, an evaluation of the various models against agreed criteria scored 'North/South' as the strongest option followed by 'East/West', although there was little difference and, on that analysis alone, a credible case could perhaps be made for either option.

On balance, the Executive is minded that 'North/South' should be the preferred option and 'East/West' rejected for the following reasons.

- The population of 'East' would be c. 225,000 and 'West' c. 275,000, making 'West' around 22% more populous than its neighbour (the balance for N/S would be c260,000/c.240,000 an 8% variance).
- This population imbalance coupled with the strong economic footprint of Workington, Whitehaven and Carlisle would set a pattern of clearly unequal partners for decades. It would make it difficult for a combined authority to operate effectively.
- A geography which placed Armathwaite in the same council area as Barrow, and Longtown with Millom would stretch the definition of 'local' beyond its customary use.

Supporters of the 'East/West' model will point to the perceived importance of Workington and Whitehaven being in the same local authority area. Whilst it is true that 'West' would form a strong local authority, the concomitant weakness of the 'East' proposition is a fatal flaw. The strategic interests of the West Coast of Cumbria can however be supported by the cooperation of two strong, equal partner authorities within a mayoral combined authority.

3. CONCLUSION

This process, with its very tight timescale, the complexity of working with partners on a submission and the unprecedented disruption and uncertainty of a pandemic has made the level of member engagement that would normally be expected impossible. In spite of this, the Executive is firmly of the view that the interests of the City Council and the residents and businesses of Carlisle are best served by participation in it.

To that end members of the Council are invited to consider the draft proposal for local government reorganisation and support the recommendation as written.