

<b>REPORT TO EXECUTIVE</b>			
<b>PORTFOLIO AREA: POLICY &amp; PERFORMANCE</b>			
<b>Date of Meeting:</b>	27 JANUARY 2003		
<b>Public</b>	Yes		
<b>Key Decision:</b>	No	<b>Recorded in Forward Plan:</b>	No
Inside Policy Framework No			

**Title:** REGIONAL GOVERNMENT: GUIDANCE ON SEEKING SOUNDINGS

**Report of:** TOWN CLERK AND CHIEF EXECUTIVE

**Report reference:** CE.1/03

**Summary:** The Government has launched its consultation on the level of interest in holding referendums on elected regional assemblies. The Government has also published draft guidance on local government reorganisation in areas, which have referenda. Both consultations end on 03 March 2003.

### Recommendations:

The Executive is requested to:

1. Refer the report to the Corporate Resources Overview and Scrutiny Committee for comment.
2. Indicate whether local consultation should be carried out.
3. Advise the Council of the views of the Executive on:
  - a. The draft guidance by the Boundary Committee
  - b. Whether or not a referendum should be held in the North West of England.

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## 1. THE REGIONAL ASSEMBLIES (PREPARATIONS) BILL

1. Following publication of the White Paper, 'Your Region, Your Choice' previously reported to the Council (TC.133/02) the Government has now introduced the Regional Assemblies (Preparation) Bill to provide the opportunity for English region(s) to hold a referendum about establishing elected regional assembly/assemblies during this Parliament.
2. The decision as to which region(s) should be invited to hold a referendum rests with the Secretary of State. Ministerial soundings are currently underway and the soundings exercise is inviting views, information and evidence from Councils, regional chambers, MP's, MEP's and others on the level of interest in each region in holding a referendum. There is no element of compulsion as it is up to each region to demonstrate that there is sufficient support for Regional Government and for a referendum to be held.
3. The full consultation paper is Appended (Appendix A). The Executive is asked to recommend a response to the Council in time for the end of the consultation period of 3 March 2003, and to seek the views of Overview and Scrutiny and local organisations, partnerships etc, if it so wishes. It is important to note that the consultation at this stage is on the level of interest in having a referendum, not on whether the organisation or person supports regional government or otherwise.
4. The Bill requires that any region permitted to progress to a referendum will be subject to a review of local government in that region to establish a wholly Unitary pattern of local government. Therefore, if the Secretary of State decides to call a referendum in a region, The Boundary Committee of the Electoral Commission will review the current two-tier areas (Counties and Districts) of that region and recommend the pattern of unitary local government. Existing Unitary authorities would not be affected.
5. The Government has published draft policy and procedure guidance to the Boundary Committee for England for this task. This is available on the ODPM web site via [www.local-regions.odpm.gov.uk/conindex.htm](http://www.local-regions.odpm.gov.uk/conindex.htm) and a copy is attached (Appendix B). This guidance is that which the Government intends to issue to the Committee before it begins a review of local government in any region under the Regional Assemblies (Preparations) Bill.
6. Subject to the Regional Assemblies (Preparations) Bill gaining Royal Assent in say April 2003, the work of the Electoral Commission Boundary Committee could start early in 2003, in those regions anticipated to move forward to a Referendum. Thereafter, the Minister may be in a position to announce in June 2003 which if any region (s) are to proceed to a referendum. Regions that do not go ahead with a referendum initially will have the chance at a later date.
7. The Government has made it clear that the Boundary Committee review is independent and can recommend any form of wholly unitary authorities appropriate in a region.
8. Representatives from the Electoral Commission and the Commission's Boundary Committee gave a presentation to elected members of the North West Regional Assembly and Economic and Social Partners in January 2003 and made the following points:

- The Electoral Commission and Boundary Committee are independent of Government and 'non – political'
- The process would include four stages

- I. Submissions
- II. Consideration of draft recommendations
- III. Consultation
- IV. Consideration of consultation responses and reports to Government.

- The Committee anticipate that review of local government will take approximately 12 months with a report to Government in Spring 2004. Local authorities and localities will have 12 weeks to present their initial views.
- The Committee would welcome propositions with evidenced support.

Cross party agreement between local government and its partners will be a powerful influence. Alignment of council boundaries with partnerships and other major agencies is significant.

- The Commission is asked to consider not only communities of place but to give weight to 'wider patterns of community within an area and the economic links between communities'. Consideration is also to be given to traditional patterns of attachment and established place names including country identities. Objective criteria are encouraged e.g. travel to work areas, shopping patterns etc.
  - No criteria have been established for minimum or maximum population size.
  - The Committee will not take sole account of public opinions as this is to be balanced with what's best for local government and the region.
  - Account will be taken of the levels of achievement of and performance of existing authorities. New authorities will be expected to be highly performing.
  - Issues of costs and savings must be identified and audited and will come into play in weighing finely judged proposals.
  - Revised electoral arrangements will only be considered for new authorities on new boundaries (combinations of existing districts will not trigger an electoral review)
  - New authorities can cross-district and county boundaries within a region. Existing unitary authority boundaries and regional boundaries may not be changed.
  - Town and parish councils will not be affected (but have an important influencing role)
  - More than one option may be identified for further consultation.
1. Overall the Boundary Committee will be seeking improved outcomes in local government through better quality decision making, use and allocation of resources, improved strategic direction and integration and engagement with key stakeholders.

It may be noted that in the guidance the Boundary Committee is asked to consider:

- Existing district council services being carried out by larger units, up to the size of

the county council.

- County functions being carried out 'by smaller units but at least of a size that, on the basis of current experience of English local government, would have the capacity to carry out the full range of county functions.
- Any increase in the joint arrangements which, would be needed by the area.

## **2. CONSULTATION**

The Executive is requested to refer this report to the Corporate Resources Overview and Scrutiny Committee and to indicate the consultation to be carried out prior to any response by the full Council.

## **3. STAFFING/RESOURCES COMMENTS**

None at this stage.

## **4. CITY TREASURER'S COMMENTS**

None

## **5. LEGAL COMMENTS**

None

## **6. CORPORATE COMMENTS**

N/A

## **7. RISK MANAGEMENT ASSESSMENT**

N/A

## **8. EQUALITY ISSUES**

N/A

## **9. ENVIRONMENTAL IMPLICATIONS**

N/A

## **10. CRIME AND DISORDER IMPLICATIONS**

N/A

## **11. RECOMMENDATIONS**

As front sheet

## **12. REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATIONS**

To allow the Council to respond to the Government consultation papers by

03 March 2003.