



PORTFOLIO AREA: POLICY AND PERFORMANCE

Date of Meeting: 3rd March 2003

Public

Key Decision: Yes

Recorded in Forward Plan: No

Outside Policy Framework

Title: REGIONAL GOVERNMENT UPDATE

Report of: Town Clerk and Chief Executive

Report reference: SP05/02

Summary:

The report outlines the issues raised by both the "Soundings" exercise being undertaken by Office of the Deputy Prime Minister Consultation together with the draft guidance to the Boundary Committee for England on the issues surrounding preparation for regional government. A copy of this report has been circulated to Council for consideration tomorrow 4th March 2003.

Recommendations:

1. That the views of the Council are submitted to Office of the Deputy Prime Minister.
2. That the implications for preparatory work, in the expectation that the Boundary Committee for England may begin work in Cumbria as early as June 2003, are noted and that a further report on these implications be submitted to the Executive.

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1. BACKGROUND INFORMATION AND OPTIONS

1.1 The Regional Agenda

Report CE1/03 outlined the Government's actions to put in place a statutory framework for Elected Regional Assemblies.

The Regional Assemblies (Preparations) Bill if it is enacted will give the Secretary of State powers to order referendums in any of the eight English regions on the issue of elected regional assemblies. In addition the Bill will:

- Set out a question to be asked in the poll and those eligible to vote;
- Set out the conditions which are to be met before a referendum could be held;
- Provide for local government reviews to be conducted by the Boundary Committee for England before the referendum is held;
- Enable the Government to require the Electoral Commission to provide advice on the electoral arrangements for an elected regional assembly;
- Give a new power to the Government to pay grant to the existing regional chambers for their work as regional planning bodies.

A "soundings " exercise inviting views on the level of interest in each region of holding a referendum is underway. Responses are requested by the 3rd March. The ODPM have indicated that the response from the City Council will be taken into consideration after today's meeting. This will allow us to include within our response the views of the City Vision Partnership. At the time of writing we had received five written responses (appended) and one verbal response from Cumbria Chamber of Commerce which indicated its view that there should be a referendum.

The outcome of the soundings exercise will be used as a guide for the Secretary of State in his deliberations about those regions in which a referendum will be held. Before a referendum is held the Boundary Committee for England would be directed to carry out a local government review. The Government believes that moving to a single tier of local government in regions that opt for a regional assembly would simplify relationships for both local government and the assemblies. Before a referendum takes place, the Boundary Committee for England must have made recommendations on the most appropriate unitary structure where there are currently two tiers of local government.

Draft guidance for the Boundary Committee has been issued. Views and comments on this are requested by the 3rd March 2003. A suggested response from Carlisle City Council is included in section 1.2 of the report for members consideration.

In a speech to launch the "soundings" exercise Nick Raynsford the Regions Minister, indicated that the first referenda could be held in October 2004 – probably in the north-east, north-west and Yorkshire. Indications from the North West Regional Assembly suggest that there is considerable support within the North West region as a whole for a referendum.

If it is apparent from the "soundings" exercise that there is support and the Government is already minded to include the North West in the first tranche of regions, then it is likely that a local government review will begin in Cumbria this year. In a recent presentation to the North West Regional Assembly, representatives of the Electoral Commission and the Boundary Committee outlined a process for the review, which would take about 12 months. The first stage of this review would require submissions to be made within 12 weeks of the announcement of the review. If, as anticipated, the Minister is able to make announcements of those regions to be included in the first tranche as early as June 2003, then Carlisle City Council will need to move quickly to prepare its submission. Carlisle City Council needs to earmark resources - officer, member and financial - to assist the preparation of a thorough submission to the Boundaries Committee. The timetable seems tight when there are still so many issues which have yet to be resolved – the size of the assembly for the north west, the role of stakeholders, how the referendum will work, the functions to be devolved to the assembly.

1.1 The "soundings" exercise

Members of the City Vision Partnership and Parish Councils have been circulated with a letter advising them of the soundings exercise which the Government has initiated and asking them for their thoughts on the issue of a referendum.

Each of the written responses will be forwarded to the ODPM along with the Council's own response.

In its response to the soundings exercise the following response from Carlisle City Council is suggested:

"Whilst Carlisle City Council accepts the inevitability of regional government it has concerns about the level of accountability which can be achieved for the people of Cumbria. It has already made the ODPM aware of this view. However, it considers that the best way of deciding on the issue is to hold a referendum and allow people within the North West decide for themselves. For the referendum to be effective then people need to fully understand what they are being asked to consider, this

means providing full and objective information on the proposal. Carlisle City Council believes that this issue should be clarified."

1.2 Draft Policy Guidance and Procedure Guidance to the Boundary Committee For England.

In carrying out a local government review the Boundary Committee is required to make recommendations as to the most appropriate arrangements for unitary local government in those areas where there are two tiers. It is prevented from making recommendations which have effects outside of the region, so Cumbria will remain part of the North West region. The Boundary Committee has no powers to recommend its inclusion as part of another region say the North East, even where local opinion is in favour of such a change.

In making its recommendations the Boundary Committee is asked to:

- ◆ Assume that there is an elected regional assembly;
- ◆ Have regard to the need to reflect the identity and interests of local communities;
- ◆ Have regard to the need to secure effective and convenient local government; and
- ◆ Any other guidance from the Secretary of State.

The Government believes that the most appropriate structure will be one resulting in local authorities that are best suited to deliver the modernisation agenda for quality services and community leadership and to take forward the agenda for sustainable communities. Geography, structure or size may only indirectly impact on this. The paper states that quality political management, a willingness to innovate and sound corporate structure and capacity may be more significant. With this in mind the Boundary Committee will need to consider the impact of local government review on the organisational and managerial capacity of authorities. In particular it will need to look at:

1. The track record of existing two tier authorities using published best value and CPA data;
2. The nature and effectiveness of community engagement and existing partnership arrangements;
3. The view it reaches of the capacity and resources likely to be available to the new unitary authorities.

Carlisle City Council is giving significant time to its CPA preparations. This should continue to be given a high priority. The Boundaries Committee will look to CPA

data to assist its judgements about Carlisle's organisational and managerial capacity.

The Boundaries Committee will also wish to see evidence of Carlisle's commitment to positive engagement with the citizens of Carlisle. Two Best Value Reviews which will be particularly relevant here are those looking at Supporting Communities and Democratic Engagement. The outcomes of these reviews could have positive benefits for the authority in preparing its submission to the Boundaries Committee. It is suggested that these are given a higher priority within the authority and should both have senior officer and member champions. The remit of one or the other should include area working, if it is not included already. It will be necessary for Carlisle to consider its relationships with Cumbria County Council as part of this area debate. If Carlisle City Council is to show that the provision of quality public services responsive to the needs of the communities it represents are at the heart of its thinking, then it needs to reflect this in its working relationships.

Community identity and interests

The Government does not believe that the sole reliance on geographical communities is a good basis for drawing up administrative boundaries for local authorities. A local authority should recognise and respond to various "communities" that use local services. Clearly the Government does not wish to rule out the option to make recommendations which cut across existing local authority boundaries. The Boundary Committee is encouraged to attempt to reflect tradition, historic and county connections. However, the Government feels that greater weight should be given to wider patterns of community within an area and to the economic links between communities.

In considering community interests and identities the guidance suggests that a good place to begin would be an examination of the extent to which the structure, geography and size of an authority might influence its ability to exercise community leadership, engage with local communities and work effectively with partner organisations.

Effective and convenient local government

This is best understood by looking at local authorities' ability to:

1. Deliver high quality local services economically, efficiently and effectively; and
2. Give service users a democratic voice in the decisions that effect them.

Government considers that the capacity to deliver strong local leadership and quality public services is more important than imperfect assessments of cost. Cost maybe a determining factor only where the Committee is judging between options which in all other respects appear to offer equal advantages.

Important considerations in terms of democratic accountability are :

- The ability of service users to influence the provision of services which affect them. The development of community strategies is seen as the primary way for community views to be represented in the decision-making process and through which conflicting priorities can be resolved;
- Relationships with parish councils; and
- Joint working and successful partnership arrangements.

If the guidance is adopted the Boundaries Committee will be looking at issues around the internal focus of the organisation i.e. leadership, corporate capacity, CPA data and Best Value Reviews. However this section, on effective and convenient local government, makes it clear that an authority's external relationships and the role of community leader will be important considerations. Carlisle has adopted a vision or community plan for the area (through the City Vision Partnership) and is seeking to combine this into one joint community plan for the Carlisle/Eden area (via the Carlisle/Eden Local Strategic Partnership). We need to be clear and be able to demonstrate what we are seeking to achieve through these arrangements and how they will benefit the Carlisle area. A further report will be taken to the Executive which looks at these two partnerships in more detail and which will suggest a means of rationalising these joint planning arrangements. Again work in this area cannot preclude joint work and development with Cumbria County Council. Attempts to do so will be to the detriment of the local community and this will not reflect well on either authority.

The guidance highlights those issues which local authorities will need to address in preparing their submissions to the Boundaries Committee. In this sense it provides a useful checklist. This view should be included in the response to the ODPM.

In addition it is suggested that that the Council concentrate its response on the following issues:

♦ **Timetable**

All indications seem to be that the north west region will be included in the first tranche. If announcements are to be made in June 2003 then submissions will need to be prepared quickly. Carlisle City Council does not consider that this

gives authorities sufficient time to consider properly all the options and to provide timely and objective information for the citizens of Carlisle before a Referendum takes place.

♦ **Changes outside the region**

The guidance to the Boundaries Committee gives it no powers to make recommendations for the inclusion of an area into another English region even where there is strong support locally for this option. Carlisle City Council considers that this should be included as an option.

♦ **Raising public awareness**

There is very little in the guidance which looks at the issue of public awareness. If people are being asked to vote in a referendum then they need to be aware of all the issues and implications of a proposed Regional Assembly and local government review. Carlisle City Council does not consider that given the indications on the timetable that there is enough time to do this properly.

1.3 Options for Cumbria

If there is sufficient interest in a referendum in the North West then this will trigger the review. There seems little the Council can do other than outline its concerns as indicated above and concentrate its activities on identifying the best option for residents, communities and businesses in Carlisle and Cumbria. There are a number of potential options ranging from a single unitary Cumbria authority to six unitary authorities based on the existing district boundaries. An objective assessment of these options is necessary as a first step in Carlisle's preparations. This objective assessment should judge the options against the guidance issued by the Government and should look at the cost implications of each of the options. If the assessment is to be truly objective then it needs to begin with an assessment of what is the best option for the people and communities of Carlisle.

Carlisle needs to begin preparations as soon as possible. If we wait until the announcements are made then we will be running to catch up. It is recommended that the following practical steps are explored in a further report to the Executive to begin a process that will result in a submission to the Boundaries Committee:

- 1.3.1 Investigation of the costs of commissioning an objective assessment of the options through an external agency, such as The University of Northumbria, will be undertaken and reported to the Executive. Where in the view of officers it would be of benefit to do this jointly with the other Cumbrian councils then this will also be researched and reported.

- 1.3.2 This could be followed with a conference or seminar to look at the outcomes of the study. This ideally would be done on a countywide basis and include Cumbria County Council.
 - 1.3.3 Contact to be made with other councils where local government reorganisation has been completed recently.
 - 1.3.4 Best Value Reviews on Supporting Communities and Democratic Engagement to be given a higher priority and senior member and officer champions.
 - 1.3.5 Facilitate the area-working debate in discussion with Cumbria County Council where necessary.
 - 1.3.6 Report to a future Executive to clarify relationships with City Vision Partnership and Carlisle/Eden Local Strategic Partnership.
- 1.4 Each of these may require a substantial resource commitment for the Authority as a whole and the Strategic & Performance Services Business Unit in particular. These resource issues will be included in the report to the Executive.

2. CONSULTATION

- 2.1 Consultation to Date.
The outcome of the consultation with the City Vision Partnership and Parish Councils is included in section 1.1 of the report.
- 2.2 Consultation proposed.
The report outlines the Council's concerns about public awareness of the issue locally. Initially it is proposed that a seminar takes place to look at the options for Cumbria. Part of this could include contact with the press to see how we could work together to begin to raise the level of interest in this debate.

3. STAFFING/RESOURCES COMMENTS

A further report to be submitted to the Executive detailing the staff and resources issues.

4. HEAD OF FINANCE'S COMMENTS

Not applicable.

5. LEGAL COMMENTS

Not applicable.

6. CORPORATE COMMENTS

Not applicable.

7. RISK MANAGEMENT ASSESSMENT

To be included as part of the further report.

8. EQUALITY ISSUES

Not applicable at this stage.

9. ENVIRONMENTAL IMPLICATIONS

Not applicable at this stage.

10. CRIME AND DISORDER IMPLICATIONS

Not applicable.

11. RECOMMENDATIONS

1. That the views of the Council are submitted to Office of the Deputy Prime Minister.
2. That the implications for preparatory work, in the expectation that the Boundary Committee for England may begin work in Cumbria as early as June 2003, are noted and that a further report on these implications be submitted to the Executive.

12. REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATIONS

To enable the Council to respond to the consultations on regional government

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Primary Care Trust

Our ref: GO/sm//PCT/letter03/Regional Govt Carlisle City Vision

20th February 2003

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Dear Mr White

REGIONAL GOVERNMENT

Thank you for your letter of 4th February 2003 concerning the potential holding of a referendum on the issue of elected regional government and the points made by the City Council in its statement.

In considering the City Council's position statement on this matter, the PCT agreed that there should be appropriate size of an assembly to ensure fair representation for all areas.

It is however, less clear as to the optimum size of a unitary authority in terms of efficiency and effectiveness of service delivery to the population. So although there is support for a unitary local government arrangement that will help to remove a number of the organisational and communication barriers, the PCT would welcome further clarification on the issues that would help determine the number of authorities in Cumbria.

The PCT is happy to support the City Council's position around the involvement of key stakeholders and that only democratically elected representatives should be full members of the Regional Assembly.

Consideration needs to be given to other organisations such as the health services that operate in Cumbria in order to arrive at an organisational 'footprint' that will have benefits outside the Local Authority arrangements.

The PCT considers that it would be appropriate to hold a referendum on the issue of an elected regional government for the North West, since this matter has potentially far reaching implications for the socio-economic structure of the area.

Yours sincerely



Graham Ogden
Chief Executive

carlisle
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councils
association

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Mr J White
Policy and Performance Manager
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19th February 2003.

Dear Mr White

Regional Government

The Chairman, Mrs J Holland, has asked me to respond to your letter of 4th February 2003.

The Association welcomes being involved in the City Council's consultation on this important matter.

We regret however that we are not able at this time to provide a definitive opinion as the matter is currently under discussion at both Local and County level within CALC.

The Association is aware of proposals for Regional Government and Unitary Authorities and whilst content to work within current structures, will similarly take full advantage of any changed structure.

A general view for the moment is that there is wisdom in the formation of unitary bodies based on present LSP or CSP (Local Strategic Partnership and Cumbria Strategic Partnership) boundaries.

Yours sincerely

Clive Moth

Clive Moth
Secretary to the Association



KIRKLINTON PARISH COUNCIL

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20 February 2003

Dear Mr White,

REGIONAL GOVERNMENT – REFERENDUM

Thank you for your letter dated 13 February 2003.

In the short time available I have tried to solicit the views of my Members and gauge the level of interest in holding a referendum on the issue of regional government.

In the main there is little or no enthusiasm for such a referendum at present. The main reason for this is that the community is still recovering from foot and mouth and therefore any proposals for radical change has little support at present.

Yours sincerely,

David J Gasgarth
Clerk to the Parish Council

Mr J White
Policy and Performance Manager
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SA/

Mr Jim White,
Policy and Performance Manager,
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Dear Mr White,

Regional Government

Thank you for your letter of 4th February together with a copy of the City Council's statement on Regional Government which have been seen by The Principal. On this occasion, the Principal does not wish to submit any comment on behalf of St. Martin's College.

Yours sincerely,

Sarah Anderson
PA to Assistant Principal/Carlisle Campus Principal



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EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT



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12 February 03

Mr J White
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Dear Mr White

Regional Government

Thank you for your letter, seeking my views on the Regional Assemblies (Preparation) Bill.

I believe that it is up to the communities within the regions to determine whether or not regional government is introduced. I therefore support the holding of a referendum in a region.

I also believe that there should be very full consultation with local communities before an existing local authority determines its preference for the future unitary authority structure of an area.

Yours sincerely

Brian Simpson
Member of the European Parliament

The Labour Team for the North West

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