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Unitary Structures Consultation Team  
Department for Communities and Local Government  
Zone 5/E8  
Eland House  
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LONDON SW1E 5DU

Dear Sir/Madam

In October 2006, with the introduction of the White Paper "Strong and Prosperous Communities", we not only had the opportunity to develop models of excellence in the devolution of services and move decision making closer to our communities, but we were encouraged to push out the boundaries of work on community engagement and empowerment of local people.

With the offer of reduced Government control and a simplification of the performance management system, Local Government was encouraged to rise to the challenge and bring forward proposals to respond to the Government's objectives of strengthening local leadership and accountability to local citizens, enabling communities to have more power and a bigger say in the issues that matter most to them, the services they receive. The White Paper encouraged improved partnership arrangements to better meet the public's needs.

At the same time, the opportunity was presented to design a new approach to two tier working or introduce Unitary Authorities to respond to the above objectives and to strengthen the relationship between Authorities and their partners within Regions. Once again, we welcomed the opportunity to consider new approaches to develop 'leading edge' local government thinking and design governance, partnership and service delivery arrangements that were fit for the future.

The main focus of the White Paper is to help people to engage with their local Council and help them to play their part in the design of services that will fulfil their needs. Unfortunately these objectives would seem to take second place to an overwhelming desire to replace the existing Local Government structure in Durham County that has served people well for over 30 years.

The City of Durham Council has consistently indicated that the retention of the existing arrangements for Local Government in our area was our preferred option and that the proposal for a single unitary authority for County Durham had never enjoyed widespread public support in the past. Therefore on this issue alone the single unitary bid should never have progressed, subsequently, the County wide referendum conducted by the District Councils has overwhelmingly confirmed our view that the public prefer the present arrangement which safeguards their level of representation.

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Instead of strengthening local leadership, devolution and accountability, the single unitary bid proposes that the *existing* level of devolved resources, decision making and accountability is centralised to a large administrative Council. The abolition of the Local Strategic Partnerships and replacement with Area Action Partnerships removes decision making and accountability at a local level with the exception of a token budget.

The bid proposes a largely unimaginative Council structure with departmentalism prevailing, the flexibility shown by this Council in reacting to the needs of our residents would be lost in such a top down organisation. Our services have fully embraced the principles of devolution, strengthening local partnership arrangements to ensure we deliver at the most effective local level, close to and engaging our communities.

Both Political supporters of the bid and senior officers of the County Council have publicly stated that one of the main objectives of the bid is to provide a Unitary Council that is in a position to 'fight our corner' against the pressures from Tyne & Wear and Tees Valley. Contrary to this attitude, as a partner with other District Councils we have been working to strengthen collaborative working within the Region as we believe that this is essential for the further development of an excellent North East Region.

Our communities in Durham deserve better! Indeed our public referendum conducted by Electoral Reform Services went well beyond the initial rejection of the County Council's proposal in their own public survey.

**Our residents in the City of Durham have said emphatically "NO" 72% voted against the establishment of a single unitary Council .**

In drawing our conclusions on the clear inadequacies of the bid put forward by Durham County Council we have taken into account independent external opinion and analysis, which has supplemented the joint work carried out by the District Councils - drawing on the experience of current political leaders and senior officers – as follows:-

- Professor Michael Chisholm to review the financial case put forward by Durham County Council and the affordability aspect of the proposal
- The Electoral Reform Society to hold a public "referendum" to gauge the true nature of public support for a single unitary council and carried out alongside this a comprehensive stakeholder consultation exercise
- The Tavistock Institute to comment upon the proposals for community and neighbourhood engagement and devolved service delivery.

Our detailed response to the bid not only demonstrates why the bid *should not* proceed but also provides strong evidence as to why it *cannot* proceed on the grounds of finance and public support alone if the objectives as outlined in the White Paper and the 'Invitation' for improved arrangements in two tier areas are to have any credibility. Our conclusions are that the proposals are:-

- Not affordable
- Not supported
- Will lead to inertia in leadership, made worse by the removal of local leadership

.../...

- Will not empower neighbourhoods, making services further from the people, not closer, and
- Will lead to service disruption and a 'one size fits all' approach, dealing inadequately with the needs of diverse communities.

The City of Durham remains strongly committed to the improvement of public services that respond more effectively to our communities needs. We stand prepared to respond to the challenges made within the White Paper but cannot ignore the wishes of our residents that improvement must be delivered using the existing Local Government framework and through enhanced joint-working arrangements

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'B. Seal'. The signature is stylized with a large, sweeping initial 'B' and a cursive 'Seal'.

Chief Executive