Supplementary Council Agenda

Epping Forest District Council

Council
Tuesday, 21st February, 2006

Place:	Civic Offices, Epping
Room:	Council Chamber
Time:	7.30 pm
Committee Secretary:	Council Secretary: Ian Willett Tel: 01992 564243 Email: iwillett@eppingforestdc.gov.uk

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10. LOCAL GOVERNMENT REORGANISATION (Pages 3 - 6)

The paper submitted by the Liberal Democrats Group is attached.

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The Liberal Democrat Group Paper

The Local Governance Debate – An ODPM 'Consultation'

When is a consultation not a consultation? The ODPM presentation, appearing coincidentally with Sir Michael Lyons latest report that he has been asked to review the form as well as the financing of local government seems to be strong pointer to an early reorganisation of local government. The ODPM invites proposals from local government for restructuring and promises a White Paper in mid-2006 on the future of local government.

Group Leaders and the Joint Chief Executives considered the situation recently and decided that an early public debate was desirable in order to inform a response to ODPM and to awaken Epping Forest residents to the possibility of changed local government administration.

The ODPM 'Presentation' which outlines Government's speculation on local government, starts with a list of those services that are already being subjected to change – County Police Services; NHS Primary Care Trusts and Strategic Health Authorities; Job Centre Plus (a reduction in the number of job centres!); Learning and Skills Council.

It continues as an almost blank canvas with a variety of suggestions and arguments that might be used in building up form and structure. It hints at reducing the total number of tiers, councils and councillors, with an emphasis on efficiency, empowerment and participation, while appreciating that 'one size does not fit all'. Also, paradoxically, it implies that there is a need for a clearer role for ward councillors/representatives as leaders of communities, engaging community stakeholders and individuals (e.g. parishes, schools, faith groups, voluntary and community sector) and representing communities to the executive

At the same time, it states that the 'debate' will finalise the position on reorganisation and, if it provides a 'yes', ODPM will invite proposals from local government for restructuring and the agreed proposals will be implemented by primary legislation.

The Liberal Democrats Federal Party, in developing revised policies on devolution across the UK and local and regional governance in England has already agreed to apply the following principles to our policies (which ODPM seems to have noticed):

- Decision-making should be as close to the people and as locally accountable as possible.

- Citizens must have every opportunity to be involved in the decision making process.

Systems of governance must be sympathetic to this.

- Governmental structures must be representative, open and accountable but also efficient.

- Systems of governance should not be uniform across the country but should be adaptable to the localities they serve and the needs for which they are set up.

The Liberal Democrat Group has reviewed the District's position in the light of these principles and the ODPM 'presentation'. On the assumption that one point of the exercise is that Government wants local ideas about the most effective local governance structure, we have come to some conclusions about a response that, if adopted, would, in our opinion, result in clearer democratic representation and more efficient administration for the citizens of Epping Forest District.

There are five key points that we have examined.

1. Our experience is that citizens are confused by the three-tier system of local government. Only a minority is aware of the different responsibilities of each tier and which councils and councillors are being elected on polling day.

2. District Councillors who have also served as County Council members report a totally different experience of contact with constituents in each role. As District or Parish Councillors they are frequently consulted by constituents; as a County Councillor rarely.

3. The perceived remoteness of Essex County Council by Councillors and citizens.

4. The overbearing position taken by County over the Highways Agency, the sale of 'redundant' Youth & Community Service buildings, negotiations over social housing at Ongar and the siting and use of waste management facilities.

5. The viability of the District seeking to adopt Unitary Authority powers, either alone or in partnership with other districts.

6. In the event of imposition of Unitary Authorities, the viability and desirability of parts of the District being transferred to other authorities.

7. In anticipation of a possible dissolution of EFDC, the preparation of a strategy for the beneficial investment of financial assets in capital investments.

Structural Change

We know that the three-tier system causes confusion in the citizen's mind and gives opportunities for councils to avoid addressing issues and taking responsibility for service failures. The Unitary Authority removes these problems but runs the risk of being as remote as Essex County Council.

Local Citizen Democratic Involvement

The Group is concerned that a move to Unitary Authority status would lead to the loss of the local democratic involvement that has been so valued by town and parish councils.

This can be addressed by Area committees or forums representing a town, one or more settlements with a community of interest or a group of villages. They should be allowed to operate in a similar manner to Parish/Town Councils, with responsibility for local functions. While they could not precept, they should receive a budget. Elected UA ward councilors could be ex-officio, reporting, members of these local bodies and other members would be locally elected from the Area. They would bid for project funding in the same way as a council service.

Unitary Authority Powers

The Liberal Democrat Group concludes that the citizens and politicians of Epping Forest District would benefit from being part of a Unitary Authority.

The Group expects that public opinion has not changed since 1973 and that most citizens would still not wish to become Greater London residents in a London Borough.

Essex County Council's proposal to divide the County into two unitaries is clearly absurd. The population of County of Essex is **1,312,700;** dividing it into two, three, four or five unitaries would give average population sizes for the UAs of 656,350 (2); 434,233 (3); 328,175 (4); 261,140 (5).

It is probably unrealistic for Epping Forest District to try to become a Unitary Authority alone because it does not have a large town at its geographical centre and its population and business base is too small to generate sufficient income to support a well-paid workforce and efficient strategic services.

The transfer of responsibility of some the peripheral settlements to adjacent authorities might be a possibility but would probably mean transferring a very large population into the LB of Redbridge and would leave Epping/Thornwood/N Weald in a very equivocal position.

Combining Epping Forest, Harlow and Uttlesford Districts would achieve a population of approximately 260,000 but the inclusion of Uttlesford (which covers an area of 641 square kilometres or 247.5 square miles) would treble the area and make it geographically too large.

Epping Forest, Harlow, Sawbridgeworth and Bishops Stortford would also achieve a population of 250,000 and be more compact and have reasonable transport links. The opinion of these authorities on this tentative proposal has not been sought.

The Liberal Democrat Group believes that by becoming a UA in combination with Harlow and the two other settlements adjacent to the M11 and in the Commuter Belt Sub-Region would be a viable possibility ["Stort & Roding Unitary Authority"]. It would bring a single decision-making body with full powers close to the people and as locally accountable as possible. It would be clear to citizens that there was one council serving their needs and interests

If the relevant local authorities can agree on such a proposal, all citizens should be consulted on the proposal in a referendum.

Area or Town Panels would give citizens every opportunity to be involved in the decision making process by an overview and scrutiny process.

A Proportional Electoral System and Local Tax Raising Powers for the bulk of required income would produce a fairer, more accountable and more sustainable system of local government.

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