

Local Government Reorganisation- LRA group view

The Government asks that there should be a wide debate on “the best form of governance for a local area in the 21st century” but is “finalising its position on reorganisation in a white paper mid 2006” so there is not really time to put a reasoned view forward. This is not a real consultation – it is a means of government legitimising a plan it already has.

Like the Independent Group, the LRA Group would support the devolving of powers down to the level at which they are most appropriate. We want decisions taken as close to the people as possible, with mechanisms in place for large strategic issues e.g. waste disposal, transport, large planning matters.

The public are confused by our present 3-tier structure; parish, district, county, plus the non-democratic shadowy regional Government office. They would appreciate having mostly one to identify and deal with. That would be principally the community, with oversight and strategic matters being dealt with on a larger scale only. This is broadly the situation in other countries.

We discuss some issues below:

Parish/Town Councils- they are much nearer their communities and should be given more powers and money from central government. Some of our parishes are large enough but others would have to amalgamate. This is not a new idea, and was undertaken successfully by the RDCs and UDCs as set up in the early twentieth century. (there were then 4 UDCs in our area: Buckhurst Hill, Waltham Holy Cross, Loughton and Epping; and 2 RDCs, Ongar and Epping).

Unitary Authorities - if they are chosen to be the main supplier of strategic services we would not support a county-wide or 2 county-wide option. These would be much too far from the local communities. If ECC's preferred PCT solution were adopted, we would be in a UA stretching from Harwich to Buckhurst Hill – absurd.

County Council – ECC is already too far from the local communities. It is doing all it can to foster a sense of identity and self-importance, but in reality, the public see only libraries and social services as its sphere, now that education has school-centred provision.

M25 areas being put into London – we do not think realignment of the boundaries on the basis of the M25 (and/or M11 corridor) is likely. There are 4 county districts (including Watford UA) entirely within the M25 and a further 12 that substantially straddle it, and Surrey would be made completely unviable by such a solution.

Can we defend the status quo? - Mr Miliband says any model would have to demonstrate a commitment to stronger strategic leadership, plus local community input into decision making and delivery of better/more cost effective services. Epping Forest DC was an accident of geography and the settlement that followed abandonment of the Redcliffe-Maud reforms. It had no identity before 1974. We have worked hard at forging one, despite differences between the north and south of the district. We have certainly led on strategic issues such as LSP, crime and disorder, etc. Financially, we are sound, and would not want our reserves to be dissipated outside our present boundaries. We should take steps to ensure reserves are committed ahead of any reorganisation.

In short, we think defending the status quo (apart, perhaps, from a presentational opening bid) is unviable, given the clear thrust of government thinking. Plan B, to be speedily put into action, should involve

- the abolition of Essex County Council,
- the devolution of greater powers to the communities (the size of which remains to be determined) – for instance leisure, parks, street cleaning, street naming, local road maintenance, waste collection, grants, community leadership role.
- a 5-UA solution, with EFDC being merged with Uttlesford and Harlow into a West Essex UA.
- Strongly opposing a one or two unitary authority solution for Essex, which we think ECC has in its undeclared hand, and which ECC may end up, as with the PCTs, by proposing.