

NAME OF MEETING	FULL COUNCIL
DATE OF MEETING	9 OCTOBER, 2014
TITLE	LOCAL GOVERNMENT RE-ORGANISATION
PURPOSE	TO SEEK THE COUNCIL'S VIEWS IN RESPONSE TO THE WHITE PAPER ON LOCAL GOVERNMENT RE-ORGANISATION
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CABINET MEMBER	Councillor Dyfed Edwards

BACKGROUND

1. Members of the Council will have followed the debate on local government re-organisation initiated by the publication of the Williams Commission and national discussions at the level of the Welsh Local Government Association and political parties.

2. By now, of course, a White Paper has been published by the Government and a copy of that White Paper is attached as an appendix to this report. Although the content of the White Paper is extensive, broadly, the proposals in terms of re-organising councils can be summarised as follows:-

- Moving to a pattern of 10-12 new authorities in Wales from April 2020 onwards on the basis of the recommendations of the Williams Commission (Anglesey and Gwynedd in our case)
- The opportunity to amalgamate sooner if authorities volunteer to amalgamate with subtle suggestions of incentives for doing so

3. In more detail, the timetable in terms of what has happened over the recent months is as follows:-

- Publication of the Williams Commission in January 2014 suggesting, amongst other matters, moving to 10-12 councils
- A mixed response from councils and political parties to the proposals
- Publication of a White Paper on Reforming Local Government in July, 2014
- Appointment of a new Public Services Minister with a clear brief to drive the re-organisation forward
- Publication of the Government prospectus on "voluntary amalgamation" in September, 2014

4. Whilst the White Paper, as noted already, does talk about a number of different issues, the main focus of the discussion today will be on the “map” and the risks and opportunities related to moving to that new “map”. The “map” is the Williams Commission map of 10-12 councils that means, in North Wales, Anglesey and Gwynedd / Conwy and Denbigh / Flint and Wrexham. There is a Welsh Government presumption against changing the “map” and they will expect a strong case to justify anything different noting, specifically, that any different proposal would have to be the subject of early voluntary amalgamation.

5. The Welsh Government has now published some key steps for the process from now onwards:-

- Councils to submit expressions of interest in voluntary amalgamation - 28 November, 2014
- January 2015 – Presenting a measure to enable amalgamation of councils
- Formal proposals to amalgamate – 30 June, 2015
- October 2015 – Publication of a draft measure on how amalgamation would work
- Summer 2016 (after the Assembly elections) – Presentation of a measure to establish new councils through amalgamation

6. Any timetable from that point is dependent on councils’ choices in terms of whether or not to amalgamate voluntarily:-

Event	Councils amalgamating voluntarily	Other Councils
Elections	May 2018 (for a 4 year term)	May 2017 (3 year term for the current councils) May 2019 (3 year term for the new councils)
Shadow Council begins	October 2017 (based on the current membership of the amalgamating councils)	May 2019
Vesting Day of the new councils	April 2018 (NB – A month before the elections)	April 2020
Next Elections	May 2022 (for a 5 year term)	May 2022 (for a 5 year term)

WORKSHOP FOR ALL COUNCILLORS

7. On 1 October, 2014, a workshop was held to which all councils members were invited to seek to glean the views of most members to some key questions about re-organisation, giving particular attention to the following:-

- What is the Council’s view on the pattern offered and the risks and opportunities associated?

- If it is going to happen anyway, what should be the Council's attitude to voluntary amalgamation?
- What are the key considerations for the Council in going into any re-organisation?
- Does the Council wish to offer ideas on how to simplify the governance arrangements of local councils?
- What messages should be presented to the Boundary Commission in terms of electoral arrangements?
- Are there any changes that should be introduced to develop and strengthen the role of elected members within their wards?

8. One important factor in this matter is the financial context for any re-organisation and a professional view was shared at the workshop on what could be saved in amalgamating and, subsequently, how this could reduce the cuts to services that this or any other council with which we could amalgamate would have to make in terms of services to the public.

9. Clearly, although there were a good number of members at the session (40), this was still only a workshop discussion and it has no constitutional status; it is a matter for the full Council to form a view on the matter. However, on the basis of the observations made by members from all political groups, the following observations are offered for discussion at the Council.

9.1 The Council's initial view is that we should state clearly that the Council's main responsibility is to safeguard the interests of Gwynedd residents and the services provided for them. Because of this, and accepting the reality that change is unavoidable, the responsible thing to do is not to close the door on any possibility that could lead to savings in management, central or back-office costs that could, in turn, reduce the scale of cuts that any council would have to make in the coming years.

9.2 As a result, the Council states that it is willing to take part in any discussions that would facilitate that in order to identify what benefits could follow if the council amalgamated with another council or councils.

9.3 In doing so, the Council notes some important considerations on which it would seek assurances and some questions that need answering before the Council would be able to proceed further in terms of submitting an offer to amalgamate.

9.4 The key considerations about which the Council would seek assurances in discussing are as follows:-

- a) Ensuring accountable local democracy is crucial in moving ahead and any governance arrangements for the future must include arrangements for ensuring a dialogue on public services at a more local level than that of the current councils. Centralising in larger councils does carry a risk of distancing accountability from local communities and there is a need to improve the accountability and engagement of councils and individual members with residents and communities.
- b) The pattern of public services for the future must include a meaningful role for town and community councils in terms of being responsible for and providing services.

- c) In terms of the accountability of local members, assurances should be sought that the Boundary Commission proposals should not create wards that are too large, making the work of local members in engaging effectively with their communities harder. Specifically, assurances are sought that there will be no more multi-member wards, since such provision can confuse the accountability of local members within their wards.
- ch) Operating a firm Language Policy to support the Welsh Language is crucial for any new council that Gwynedd would be part of in the future.
- d) Certainty is required on the financial and asset position of every partner in order to assess the sort of financial position that any new council would inherit.

9.5 Here are the questions about which the Council wants answers from the Welsh Government and possible partners before forming a final opinion on the possible benefits for the residents of Gwynedd:-

- a) Far more clarity and certainty is required on the “offer” linked to voluntary amalgamation in order to weigh that up against the financial and non-financial cost of moving to reorganise early. What type and scale of practical assistance will be available for councils who amalgamate?
- b) Will the Government’s proposals promote the delegation of services to more local areas and frameworks that promote local accountability and dialogue with local communities and residents?
- c) Will it be possible to be flexible in terms of electoral arrangements that currently, in one scenario, mean two elections within two years (2017 a 2019) on the basis of what will probably be different wards?
- ch) Will the Boundary Commission proposals give proper attention to the differences between rural and urban areas (including seasonal / student populations) when setting the size and nature of wards?
- d) Information must be shared on service provision in different council areas in order to plan effectively for the bringing together of services that currently have different standards and policies.

DECISION

10. The Council’s view is sought on the draft viewpoint proposed above in paragraphs 9.1 to 9.5 in order to convey the Council’s view to the Welsh Government.