

"The Future of Local Government"

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THE SOCIETY was congratulated for its initiative in organising a public meeting on this subject, the first of its kind in the area. Like all our meetings it was well attended: a similar occasion in 1973 attracted only six people!

The Chairman began by saying that the title should have been "The Future of Local Government; IF there is one!", lamenting the centralisation of powers in Whitehall and the proliferation of non-elected authorities in health, policing and education etc.

A DISTRICT COUNCIL VIEW

Miss LESLEY CUMBERLAND, Dover District Council's Director of Law, Property and Administration, attractively and competently deputising for John Moir, congratulated the Society on the timing of the meeting because the Banham Local Government Commission had very recently speeded up and would visit Kent to collect local views early in 1994 on the proposal to substitute unitary, all-function authorities for the existing two-tier (county and district councils) system. How small or large could all-purpose authorities replacing county councils, able to retain community identity and to provide efficient services, be?

The Isle of Wight in the first section of areas to be examined should obviously be a single authority, as should old county boroughs like Derby and Bristol, abolished in 1974. Cleveland, Humberside and Avon were much more difficult. The Commission's recommendations, after examining local views, proposed to reduce ten county and sixty-four district councils to twenty-four unitary councils with average populations of 230,000 people, . . . divided between large urban units like Derby or Darlington, and the rest of Derbyshire or Durham lumped into a single rural authority: the "doughnut" solution. The only exception to all this was Lincolnshire, recommended to remain under the two-tier system.

There had been a massive backlash from MPs and councils with the result that the government had issued new draft guidelines to the Commission. If there were local consensus it should carry weight, provided that the criteria of identity, accessibility, responsiveness and democracy were retained. The status quo, however, was not an acceptable option, nor were very large or very small unitary authorities. The time-table – and this was where the Dover Society's timing was prophetic – was speeded up. All reviews must be completed by the end of 1994. The second section of the areas to be examined had been merged with the third, fourth and fifth.

Possible solutions for Kent might seem to be either the status quo or the abolition of the County Council and the survival of the fourteen districts which the districts themselves prefer. Since, however, the government wanted units of 150–250,000 (and Dover District was only 106,000 – 107,000) the districts would not be allowed to "go it alone". In the long run, too, money must be saved.

130 One possibility might be a non-county single authority, but with a 1.5 million population it was highly unlikely. Consultants had suggested the possibility of three unitary authorities; East, North, and West Kent respectively. Another option was seven unitary authorities, so that Dover District would have to go in with one of its neighbours – with Canterbury, Thanet, or Shepway. Where were the community boundaries? Thanet was an island and Dover might therefore have to go in with Canterbury.

The preference would have to be agreed in six weeks from the arrival of the Commission, perhaps as early as January 1994. If there were a District-Parish Council-voluntary society consensus it would carry a lot of weight. If not, the decision would be elsewhere.

A COUNTY COUNCIL VIEW

MIKE BURCHELL, Chief Environment Manager of KCC, said that for five years he had worked successfully and cordially with all fourteen District Councils in Kent and had previously liaised with local government on behalf of the Countryside Commission and the department of the Environment.

The media portrayal of the local government review as a Jurassic Park virility contest of county versus district councils was wrong. There would be neither winners nor losers. A complete change was required but strong and effective local government must continue despite the government's agenda to weaken or undermine it. Consequently a joint county/district view of options was being sought. The criteria were cost, community identity, efficient service delivery, governmental capability, accountability and democracy, linkages with other bodies and compatibility with the requirements of the Local Government Commission.

Up to forty scenarios were conceivable, ranging from modifications of the status quo, through the unitary county to fourteen unitary district councils which must be reduced to realistic options. Mr Burchell's view was that larger, more strategic authorities were preferable and that local community councils, parish and town, should be strengthened. The replacement of a strong county council with several smaller unitary authorities would be retrograde, rendering local government irrelevant and consign it to the delivery of a narrow range of services dictated by central government. Kent, with twenty to twenty-five medium-sized towns each with 40/50,000 people and extensive rural hinterlands would not easily fit the probable solution of something between a unitary county and unitary districts.

It had become increasingly difficult to make the two-tier system work with the spectre of local government review hanging over it and opinion polls showed that the public found the question of accountability confusing, although the joint efforts of county and districts in IMPACT, now in Dover, showed what could be achieved. In many ways a modified two-tier system could meet Kent's needs reasonably well, but the Secretary of State's recent announcement had made such an outcome unlikely.

Reverting to criteria, governmental capacity must mean larger rather than smaller units embracing larger communities rather than particular localities. Strategic planning, highways and transportation, conservation of key landscapes, minerals, waste disposal, provision for gypsies, East Thames Corridor and Channel Tunnel Rail Link could not be dealt with by joint arrangements between unitary authorities, as the Commission suggested, Loose amalgamations like SERPLAN (S.E. Regional Planning Authority) did not work very

well.. Small authorities attracted neither officers nor councillors of sufficient quality. Parochial conservatism meant paralysis. Only large authorities, like the Pas de Calais or Flanders, would cut ice with Brussels. With small units, the government, which was already creating strong regional units in the Departments of the Environment and Transport, etc, would fill the vacuum.

Only larger authorities could achieve economies of scale in the delivery of services. Fragmentation would mean inconsistent standards, as already between the planning procedures of district councils. Centres of excellence, e.g. in county wide matters of countryside, archæology, urban regeneration, drug and alcohol abuse, HIV and AIDS, needed to be maintained.

As for community identity, it was unlikely that people wanted the county of Kent, with its county-wide organisations like the Kent Trust for Nature Conservation, Kent Association of Parish Councils and the Kent Federation of Amenity Societies, to disappear. Existing districts like Canterbury or Dover, lumped in with Deal and Sandwich, fared badly as historic communities and therefore the functions of town and parish councils should be enhanced. Lumping existing districts together would bastardise them even more, although authorities must be big enough and strong enough to provide strategic direction, high quality cost effective services and centres of excellence.

A PARISH COUNCIL VIEW

CRISPIN DAVIES, Secretary of the Kent Association of Parish Councils and also previously experienced in local government from Cornwall to London, began by asking what were the alleged benefits of unitary authorities. If it weren't broke, why mend the status quo?

There were 300 Parish councils in Kent, in a variety of sizes and shapes, and of expertise and enthusiasm, but they covered only 40% of the county.

Although in any case, government could overrule it, of the fourteen Local Government Commissioners, only two were serving councillors, one from a London Borough and one from a (Kent) Parish Council, but none from a district or county council.

In addition to the creeping losses of police, health and housing from local government, the Commission were proposing to halve the numbers of local councillors, which would make them more remote from access.

It was desirable that decisions should be made as close as possible to the people affected, and not, for example, in Brussels. Decisions should not be taken from Kent to Whitehall. Some county questions might be reasonably decided at district level, and some district questions at parish level, as suggested in a recent KAPC document, 'Parish Potential'.

Arrangements should be made for continuing the important contribution of the voluntary sector, Age Concern, for example, delivered services funded by KCC, and the Kent Community Housing Council similarly cared for housing senior citizens. Before its abolition the Greater London Council had established independent charitable trusts to continue some of its commitments.

River had been parished some years ago and the parishing of Deal was now being considered. The same might happen to Dover. Charter Trustees were Dover District Councillors but parish councillors were separately elected. Parish councillors had a wider

132 range of *powers* as opposed to *duties* and could raise a tax and confer benefits. Speed was essential. If there were strong local support, the Commission could recommend it to the Secretary of State.

The Chairman, offering David Shaw's apologies, said the MP favoured Dover District Council as unitary authority. Maidstone was remote. A possible alternative was an area from Dover to New Romney with the boundaries of the existing Health Authority District. At the Wye Conference the County Planning Offices had argued the need for county-wide strategic policies and a District Chief Executive described the mingling of districts as the "nightmare scenario".

In answers to questions speakers agreed that the existing system worked well, with special emphasis on the links with Pas de Calais, Flanders and Brussels. The unitary system might ultimately be marginally cheaper but the upheaval and its setting-up costs, estimated at £1.7 billions, £50-100 per taxpayer, would be large. It was not likely that the authority would be either KCC or DDC but five, six or seven unitary authorities: Dover might be linked with Canterbury/Thanet or Shepway.

The Commission would have six weeks in Kent early next year and would then publish recommended options in order of priority. There would then be nine weeks of further consultation before a final recommendation went to the Secretary of State, who might or might not accept it. Legislation and shadow elections for shadow authorities must follow and the process could take years. The time-table was already in arrears and there might be a general election in the meanwhile. Both Labour and Liberal Democratic parties were committed to reorganisation including regional authorities.

The Dover Society should be involved and present an agreed recommendation to the Commission. It would be more impressive if there were consensus with District and County Councils as the Commission Chairman, Sir John Banham, has stressed, and we should explore this possibility. If it were certain that the two-tier status quo, unitary district and unitary county were all excluded, we should concentrate on possible district mergers and emphasise the need for adequate strategic safeguards. The best option for historic communities like Dover appears to be parishing.

We must press for representation at the impending briefing session with the Commission. Please let me have your views, at 1066, Green Lane, Temple Ewell, Dover C16 3AR

Editor's Note:

About sixty members attended the meeting on 25 October. In view of the importance of the subject and the fact that the Government Commission is visiting Kent early in 1994, it has been decided to alter the programme for 1994. The talks planned for January will now take place in March and the January Meeting will be a follow-up to the October discussion, with another speaker on local government and then small discussion groups for members to talk about the issues involved. As our Chairman explains in his article the timing of the meeting is crucial if the Dover Society is to be represented at the briefing session with the Commission.