

The Future of Local Government

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THE Final Recommendation of the Banham Commission on the Future Local Government of Kent is the status quo and unless John Gummer, the Secretary of State, vetoes it, which is highly unlikely, the status quo of Dover District Council and Kent County Council is what we shall get. Having listened twice to both of them, the Dover Society opted for precisely that and decisively rejected the Commission's initial half-hearted recommendation of unitary authorities for NW Kent and the status quo for the rest.

We are modestly entitled to pat ourselves on the back because we got it right, whereas Dover District Council got it wrong. Their first option was for a unitary merger with Canterbury and Thanet, which they thought would make them a bigger fish in a smaller pond (though there would have been redundancies and obvious rivalries for tourism and trade with the other two), and their second, after the local elections was to make no choice at all.

I say "modestly" because even if our submission was the best and most cogent of the lot, we can never know, and there were more than 52,999(!) other respondents, as well as a MORI poll and a questionnaire to most households. We were therefore only a unit in the consensus. Moreover, even if we have laurels we cannot rest on them because this is the beginning and not the end of the reform process and there are new issues on which we must now reflect and advise.

The status quo must be improved. Divisions of responsibility between the two tiers must be re-examined, as the Commission concludes, "to extend the partnership approach between the two tiers, and to review the extent to which the operational components of county-level functions might be transferred to districts within the context of agreed county-wide strategic schemes ... there is scope for some reallocation of functions where appropriate". County and district councils might establish "one-stop shops", joint staff training, and "community forums" to develop a common approach to problems of deprivation".

More locally Dover, as the Society, the District Council and the Charter Trustees already agree, is recommended by the Commission to have a Town Council with Parish Council powers, to think of and speak for Dover as a distinct community. There could be improved consultation on planning and highway issues, with their environmental implications, and the devolution of sports ground and library facilities.

The Committee needs your views on these matters before deciding how best to advise both District and County Councils. Please write to or phone the Chairman, the Secretary or any Committee Member: the sooner the better.