

The Hitcham and Taplow Society comments on the proposals for Unitary Authorities within Buckinghamshire.

The Society has been in existence for over 50 years. It has a main objective to ensure that all development within the district is of the highest standard and preserves the quality of the environment. It represents a significant proportion of the residents of Taplow.

The previous Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government expressed a view in favour of a single Unitary Authority for South Bucks (SBDC), Chiltern (CDC), Wycombe (WDC) and Aylesbury Vale (AVDC) in preference to two authorities (AVDC and a combined SBDC, CDC and WDC). We strongly believe that this is the wrong choice and ask that you take the opportunity of a fresh pair of eyes to re-assess.

The three southern districts have a natural fit. They are all in the Thames Valley Enterprise Partnership, are London focussed, have large areas of Green Belt and Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty, with a concomitant limitation on extensive development. They make an ideal Unitary Authority which we do not believe is in question.

Aylesbury Vale has an entirely different focus. It is in the South Midlands Enterprise Partnership and is very much focussed on the Oxford – Cambridge axis that is a major government initiative for development. It looks towards Milton Keynes. It has few of the restrictions identified for the southern half of the county. It is also the focus of major housing development.

The previous indication of support for the single authority is likely to have come from officials concern that the population of Aylesbury Vale is on the small side for a Unitary Authority. We submit that there is no objective evidence to support this view. We point out that Milton Keynes is a Unitary Authority and has been since 1997. It is highly successful and fast growing. Never the less, its population is still only 250,000 so was considerably smaller when created. The housing growth scheduled for Aylesbury Vale in the next period of time would bring its population to a comparable level and quickly resolve concerns over viable size.

Other concerns may relate to integration with other services (NHS etc.). Although these have different geographic structures there is already extensive cooperation and this would improve with two authorities. Further gains from a single authority would be modest.

Our fundamental concern is that a single Unitary Authority is simply far too large to be efficient or democratic. It is close to 70 miles long. The financial projections of greater savings for a single authority are so small as to be within error levels and the associated proposals for distributed “hubs” are an implicit admission that it is too large.

The present county authority has a poor reputation for efficiency and local responsiveness which is likely to roll over into a new single authority. The southern districts have a decent track record of adaption to changing pressures.

The focus of the Aylesbury Vale area must be on its extremely rapid development, both of housing and development within the Oxford Cambridge corridor. It should be free to focus on this as its own authority. Merging with the southern districts will dilute this focus and also distract attention for the different concerns of those southern districts

Opinion polls across the county reflect a clear preference for two authorities. The government should take a forward looking view and opt for two authorities to drive positive growth and effective democracy.