

HERTFORDSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL

CABINET

MONDAY 10 FEBRUARY 2003 AT 2.00 PM

COUNTY COUNCIL

THURSDAY 13 FEBRUARY 2003 AT 10.30 AM

REGIONAL ASSEMBLIES (PREPARATIONS) BILL

Report of the Chief Executive

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Executive Member: Michael Janes, Regeneration, the Regions and Europe

1. Purpose of report

The report provides an update on the process agreed at Cabinet on 16 December for developing a response to the soundings exercise on the level of interest in holding a referendum about establishing an elected regional assembly in the East of England and to consultation on proposed statutory guidance on local government reviews.

2. Summary

The Office of the Deputy Prime Minister is currently consulting local authorities on :

- i) whether a referendum should be held to establish an elected regional assembly in the East of England;
- ii) proposed statutory guidance on local government reviews that would be used by the Boundary Committee to develop proposals for the replacement of county councils and district councils by unitary councils in regions where a referendum is to be held.

The deadline for responses to both consultation exercises is 3 March 2003.

In considering the County Council's response to consultation on proposed statutory guidance on local government reviews, members may wish to take account of the draft response prepared by the County Councils Network which is attached as an appendix to this report. This is due to be finalised at a special meeting of the County Councils Network on 19 February 2003. A draft response to the soundings exercise will be considered at the same meeting.

A Cabinet Panel will be considering the County Council's responses to both of the above consultation exercises at a meeting on 6 February and the views of the Cabinet Panel will be reported to all members.

At its meeting on 2 December 2002, the Hertfordshire Local Government Association Steering Committee asked the County Council to consult the public on whether Hertfordshire belongs in the East of England region as members of the Steering Committee were of the view that Hertfordshire's interests were not well served by being in the East of England. The County Council commissioned MORI to undertake a telephone survey of 1,000 Hertfordshire residents in January 2003 to ascertain the views of the public on this issue and on whether a referendum should be held in this region. The results of the survey will be considered by the Cabinet Panel on 6 February and will then be circulated to all members. The County Council has also sought the views of town and parish councils, voluntary organisations and further and higher education establishments. The responses received to date will be reported to the Cabinet Panel on 6 February and a summary of responses will then be circulated to all members.

Members may also wish to take account of the findings of a survey of perceptions of the East of England commissioned by the East of England Development Agency and carried out by MORI in 2000. This found that residents in the East of England tend to identify with their local neighbourhood, town or county much more strongly than with the East of England region and that awareness of which region their county was in was particularly low in Hertfordshire, with only 5% of residents aware that they were in the East of England region and 38% believing that they were in the South East region.

3. Conclusion

The Cabinet and County Council need to decide how to respond to:

- i) the soundings exercise on the level of interest in holding a referendum about establishing an elected regional assembly in the East of England;
- iii) consultation on proposed statutory guidance on local government reviews.

Background information referred to by the author

- Regional Assemblies (Preparations) Bill soundings exercise on the level of interest in each English region in holding a referendum about establishing an elected regional assembly (ODPM – Dec 2002)
- Regional Assemblies (Preparations) Bill Local Government Reviews – consultation on proposed statutory guidance to be issued by the Secretary of State (ODPM – Dec 2002).
- Cabinet report of 16 December 2002 on the Regional Assemblies (Preparations) Bill
- MORI telephone survey on regional issues January 2003
- MORI report on Perceptions of the East of England – research study conducted for the East of England Development Agency February – April 2000