

29/07 - **PUBLIC ARRANGEMENTS – QUESTIONS:** Pursuant to Standing Order 27, the following questions had been received: -

(01) Question to the Leader from Honorary Alderman George Crowther OBE in relation to the Government's "Invitation to Councils in England to make Proposals for Unitary Structures" dated October 2006

(a) Does the Leader recognise the widespread dissatisfaction felt by the 155,300 residents and 6,500 businesses in Harrogate District about the manner in which the whole issue has been conducted by Central Government, North Yorkshire County Council and Harrogate Borough Council, compounded in recent days by the realisation that the three originally responsible Ministers: Kelly, Woolas and Smith, are no longer in relevant posts, being replaced by Hazel Blears and others who have also now been assigned to the region's flooding problems.

(b) What possible courses of action does the Leader foresee once the Government decisions, scheduled to be announced later this month, have been made public?

(c) Will the Leader recognise and support the wealth creators located within this District who in their recent submission to Government stated "We wish to invite the Minister to fully investigate, evaluate and allow proper public consultation that this District has a compelling case that it should become a Unitary Council entirely based on existing boundaries". In this way it can play a full part in the emerging Leeds City Region, in partnership with its immediate neighbouring unitary councils in York, Leeds and Bradford. It could thereby restore the effective links to the west that existed for over 1,000 years, rejecting the unsatisfactory arrangement imposed in 1974, which over the past 33 years has proved not to be in the best interests of this community.

(a) The Leader recognised the widespread dissatisfaction felt by the residents and businesses of this District and was very keen to represent their views but rejected entirely the suggestion that Harrogate Borough Council had any part in those feelings of dissatisfaction.

This Council had complied fully with the requirement of the Government's bid document unlike both North Yorkshire County Council and the Government itself.

We had discussed the future with our colleagues in the other six District Councils and agreed a proposal for joint working which was fully in line with the Government's proposal.

Officers were fully engaged in preparing the District's response at Stage 1 and then the District's further submission at Stage 2, which ran to 950 pages.

Officers also ran a variety of meetings and other consultation exercises across all sections, and consulted 7,000 people and groups by letter. The Council had contributed to the cost of two Ipsos MORI polls of residents and Parish Councils across North

Yorkshire. Over 1,200 letters of support were received across the County (nearly 400 in this District alone).

We were one of three District Councils mounting a legal challenge.

Our Officers also prepared detailed material for the District's Joint Response to the late and probably inappropriately late submission by the County Council.

Officers had briefed all seven North Yorkshire Members of Parliament on all developments and provided a briefing note to opposition Members of the House of Lords on the recent Amendment debate.

The Leader personally went to London to lobby the Minister.

The Leader was shocked at how little Honorary Alderman George Crowther OBE seemed to know about this and was appalled at his clear failure to recognise the vast amount of work put into this by our Officers and, indeed by Councillors.

He also pointed out that those District Authorities which did not comply with the Government's rules all had their cases thrown out. So acting as Honorary Alderman George Crowther OBE wanted and making our own case without regard to our partner Districts would have been a considerable waste of time and effort.

(b) It depends: -

If the Government threw out the North Yorkshire County Council bid – we would be developing a shared services agenda with the County and the other districts as required by the Government;

If the Government allowed the County Council bid to go forward we would continue our legal challenge and look also at whether the Second Stage evaluation was in full compliance with the law.

We would also continue to lobby against any re-organisation on that scale.

(c) That recent submission to the Government was not in accordance with the rules and would not be considered as part of this process.

This is an important constitutional issue, we have complied exactly with the Government's requirements and it was a major part of our legal challenge that others have not. Supporting a submission, which does not comply, would be wrong and inconsistent.

We were, however, very enthusiastic about the City Region and continue to play a full part in its development and so obviously that would be a major consideration if in the future the rules change again and Unitary Councils are back on the agenda.

(02) Question to the Cabinet Member for Planning and Transport from Amanda Brayshaw

In light of a number of concerns raised by the business community in relation to business signage, will the council look again at its policies to ensure they are both consistent and fair?

The Cabinet Member responded by advising that the Control of Advertisement Regulations required that applications for signs be determined in the interests of amenity and public safety. In each of the two cases, permission for signage was refused, in one case retrospectively after the sign had already been put up without planning permission, the latter case being in his own ward, Harlow Moor. Both cases went to appeal, and the Secretary of State rejected both appeals. He was quite sure that the Council acted both consistently and fairly in both cases, and the Planning Inspectors were of the same opinion.

Looking to the future; he had approved for public consultation a Development Control policies Issues and Options report. The consultation was being held over an 8-week period, beginning tomorrow and ending on Friday 14 September. This consultation provided an opportunity for businesses in Harrogate District to submit views on the specific subject of planning control of business signage within the scope of amenity and public safety. The interests of a particular business could not be taken into account in planning decisions or in planning policy.

Information on how to take part in this consultation could be viewed on the Council's web site. Alternatively, copies of the consultation document could be requested by telephoning the offices.

He welcomed the question from Avenir Properties and gave an assurance to them and to the wider business community that any representations made would be given full consideration.