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Dear Tricia

Visit to Central Bedfordshire Council

I am writing to thank you and your colleagues for taking the time to meet me last week and to share with me your views about implementing the new unitary council in Central Bedfordshire.

I was encouraged by the commitment of the whole Shadow Executive to creating the new unitary council and by their recognition that this needs to be a wholly fresh start. You are well aware of the challenges that remain, and I do understand the scale of the task that you all face over the next six months — and beyond. As I have said before, we in Government wish to do all that we can to help and as I explained I want to be alerted immediately if you see action by Government is needed in order to help guarantee the timely delivery of the new unitary council.

In the discussion, you explained how you are working towards creating a new authority with a new unitary culture; it is evident that progress is being made to move on from past relationship difficulties between the existing councils, although there is some way to go. On key services, such as Children's Services and Adult Care, it will be important that there is a clear move away from old county thinking and that you develop to the full the new opportunities for service delivery that unitary status provides. This should be helped by the external Director appointments that you have made – the mix of three external appointments, one from the county, and one from the districts, is a good basis on which to move forward.

A smooth transition to the new unitary council is the priority; this demands that key decisions are taken in a timely manner to ensure the new council is up and running by 1st April with no diminution in service and delivering tangible benefits for communities. In the remaining six months, as you rightly see as a priority, you will need to put in place the concrete operational frameworks necessary to secure local service delivery – dovetailed with Bedford Borough where appropriate, and pursue such challenging aims as the growth

agenda. You recognise that developing an affordable budget that delivers the commitments in the unitary bid for savings and council tax will be central to your tasks over the next few months.

I am impressed by how you have engaged with local partners – business, public sector bodies and the third sector – in developing the new unitary authority. As you recognise, their contribution is essential to ensure improved outcomes across the board for the people of Central Bedfordshire. When facing the inevitable difficult decisions over the coming months, you and the council will need to provide the necessary strategic leadership, whilst maintaining their confidence. Particularly in relation to education, you will need to provide a clear direction and drive if your high aspirations are to become a reality.

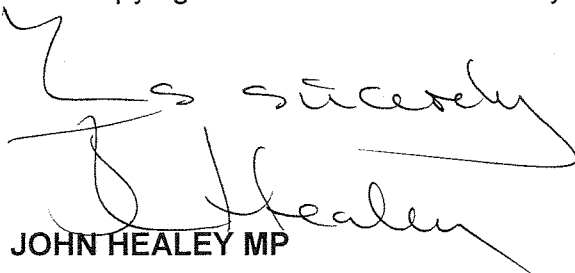
You also explained your plans for community engagement, based around the Community Area Networks with a strong involvement for parish councils. In order to maintain the momentum and interest you have created through positive dialogues and discussions with local communities and partners, you now need to agree detailed practical arrangements which genuinely empower people and their most local communities; including the specific roles, responsibilities and implications for both residents and partners. As you appreciate, these arrangements will need to reflect the diversity of the area, with the flexibility to develop at different speeds and in different ways as appropriate for the most local communities.

All these issues are the very elements on which the success of the new unitary will be judged and for which, as you know, you and colleagues will be held to account.

Finally, in the discussions you touched upon how you are communicating the local government changes to the public over the coming months – from touring local libraries, talking to local groups, to the Central Bedfordshire website. As you know, local media and those who read and listen to it must have a clear understanding of the vision of the new Council, of what it will deliver, of how it will work on day one, and hence how, from the outset, people can contact and engage with the new Council and all service providers in an integrated and simple way. The importance of doing so can not be overstated. Given Bedfordshire's recent history, it is imperative that all the outgoing councils present a united message about the two new unitaries, and ensure a seamless transition.

Once again I would like to thank you for a very useful and constructive visit. I would be grateful if you can pass on my thanks to Jaki Salisbury, Jon Ruddick and other officers for organising the visit, and for taking the time to meet with me.

I am copying this letter to Jaki Salisbury and Jon Ruddick.


JOHN HEALEY MP