

Leighton Andrew AM
Minister for Public Service Delivery
Welsh Government
Cardiff Bay
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Dear Minister

RE: LOCAL AUTHORITY VOLUNTARY MERGER PROSPECTUS

I am writing to formally respond on behalf of the Council to the Voluntary Merger Prospectus issued by the Welsh Government on September 18.

On the 2nd October the Council's Cabinet considered the Voluntary Merger Prospectus and authorised the Leader and Chief Executive of the Council to approach neighbouring local authorities to seek expressions of interest to consider the rationale for merging as set out in the prospectus. It was agreed that the discussions should inform the formal decision of Council.

Members acknowledge the rationale for the Williams Review proposing a merger between Rhondda Cynon Taf and Merthyr Tydfil County Borough Councils. Rhondda Cynon Taf already works collaboratively with Merthyr Tydfil on a number of levels across a range of Council services. These include the Youth Offending Service, Residual Waste, Consultation and Emergency Planning. The two local authorities also share co-terminous boundaries with Health and Police across the region which would potentially support more effective public service delivery across the Cwm Taf region. However, the Council has a number of collaborative links across the wider South East Wales Region which was established to facilitate joint working in local government. The Council is also a key partner in the Central South Education Consortium.

Communities within Rhondda Cynon Taf naturally link on a day to day basis with communities in other local authorities. Examples include the link between the western side of Rhondda Cynon Taf and the County of Bridgend. The Cynon Valley has strong links to Merthyr Tydfil both on a community and service delivery basis. Communities in the South of the County Borough link to the Vale of Glamorgan and the capital city where residents from across Rhondda Cynon Taf commute to work.

Consequently this Council has sought discussions with Merthyr Tydfil, Caerphilly, Cardiff, Vale of Glamorgan and Bridgend County Borough Councils.

This Council believes that any decision in respect of mergers should be taken in the best interest of this Council, its residents and our public services. To make an informed decision with this in mind a detailed business case would need to be developed to demonstrate the rationale and benefits for such a decision being considered.

You will be aware of the recent decisions taken by a number of these local authorities in respect of their own response to the prospectus making clear the options available to this authority to pursue a voluntary merger.

In response to the approach from this Council, productive discussions have been held with the City and County of Cardiff. While the Leader of Cardiff Council and myself acknowledge that as two of the largest local authorities in Wales a case can be made for both Councils standing alone, both sides agreed to pursue discussions around further collaborative working around a number of our administrative functions.

On the 19th November Merthyr Tydfil CBC confirmed their interest in opening formal discussions with Rhondda Cynon Taf CBC on the issue of voluntary mergers.

I have subsequently met with the Leader of Merthyr Tydfil CBC and it was agreed for both Councils to consider this option. An appraisal of the rationale of any potential merger will now be developed by Officers for future consideration by Members.

As a result of Rhondda Cynon Taff and Merthyr Tydfil sharing co-terminous boundaries with Health and Police services locally and the number of varied services which the two local authorities already collaborate upon, a case should be put forward for considering this option further. As formal discussions have not yet developed, it is not possible to give any evidence based consideration to this option and therefore the merits of this arrangement cannot be examined further to inform a decision of Council at this time in response to the Voluntary Merger Prospectus.

While the Cabinet has already made clear its willingness to consider a merger, if it could be demonstrated that this would best serve the interests of residents and there was a strong business case to do so unfortunately due to the late response being received the Council is unable to develop an evidence based response to the Prospectus at this time as a result of no detailed discussions taking place.

As the third largest local authority in Wales it is apparent that there would be only limited economies of scale if a merger with a smaller local authority is implemented. Also, the cost effective corporate arrangements of this Council were recognised in the Williams Report which has further been enhanced by the decision of this Council to reduce senior management costs recently by over £1M. Given the above issues and their context in the ongoing review of local government structures the Council

believes that a case could also be made for Rhondda Cynon Taf to stand alone, particularly if we are able to continue developing collaborative working with neighbouring local authorities.

This Council therefore intends to explore the potential for collaborating on services more closely with the City and County of Cardiff. Discussions at an Officer level are already taking place on this matter. Following the positive response received to our invitation to consider this matter, this Council will expedite formal discussions urgently with Merthyr Tydfil County Borough Council to ensure an evidence based understanding of the option can be brought forward.

I will on behalf of the Council keep you informed of the progress of each of these discussions.

Yours Sincerely,

County Borough Councillor Andrew Morgan

Leader of Rhondda Cynon Taf County Borough Council