

Minutes

OF A MEETING OF THE

Council



Listening Learning Leading

HELD ON FRIDAY 10 MARCH 2017 AT 6.00 PM

DIDCOT CIVIC HALL, BRITWELL ROAD, DIDCOT, OX11 7JN

Present:

Paul Harrison (Chairman), Anna Badcock, Charles Bailey, Joan Bland, Felix Bloomfield, Kevin Bulmer, Nigel Champken-Woods, Steve Connel, John Cotton, Margaret Davies, Pat Dawe, David Dodds, Elizabeth Gillespie, Will Hall, Tony Harbour, Lorraine Hillier, Elaine Hornsby, Sue Lawson, Lynn Lloyd, Jeannette Matelot, Jane Murphy, Anthony Nash, Toby Newman, David Nimmo-Smith, Bill Service, Robert Simister, David Turner, John Walsh and Ian White

Officers:

Pat Connell, Steven Corrigan, Steve Culliford, Alice Lynch, David Hill, and Mark Stone

Also present:

Robin Rogers (Oxfordshire County Council)

63 Apologies for absence

Councillors Anthony Dearlove, Stefan Gawrysiak, Stephen Harrod, Imran Lokhon, Richard Pullen, Alan Thompson and Margaret Turner had all sent their apologies for absence.

64 Declarations of disclosable pecuniary interest

None

65 Chairman's announcements

The chairman alerted attendees to the emergency evacuation arrangements, asked everyone to switch the mobile phones to silent, and asked the public to remain silent and listen to the debate.

In view of the significance of the issue before the Council at this meeting, the chairman proposed that Council procedure rules 44 and 45 were suspended to allow unrestricted length of speeches by councillors. Council agreed the proposal.

RESOLVED: to suspend Council procedure rules 44 and 45 to allow councillors unrestricted time to make their speeches at this meeting.

66 Public participation

Mr Neville Harris had registered to address the Council.

Mr Harris informed Council that he was in favour of the proposal for a single unitary council for Oxfordshire. However, if the proposals were to be a stepping stone, it was vital to adopt an inclusive form of local government for Oxfordshire, where representative democracy, elected member involvement and participation were maximised at the centre of decision making. This must not remain the prerogative of a minority of councillors as at present in the two-tier system, where the majority group elect a leader, who appoints a cabinet. The electorate believed that all councillors made a difference. All councillors should have a more inclusive role to play in decisions that affect our everyday lives. The proposals before Council were focussed on the status quo; instead they should be neutral. This was a matter for the first elected unitary council to decide on which form of governance it adopted.

The report before Council was asking councillors to abdicate their responsibilities on this important issue. It recommended delegating authority to officers, leaving little involvement for backbench councillors. He believed all elected representatives should decide on a material change in wording, and to decide on the terms of reference of the joint committee. Too much would be decided by too few.

He asked councillors to ensure that the proposals did not espouse the status quo and were at least neutral in their final recommendations. These proposals would mean life in Oxfordshire was a postcode lottery; in some places 'yes' to certain services, in other places 'no'. Delegation was not devolution. If things were to really change for the better, a unitary council would evolve with the passage of time.

The chairman thanked Mr Harris for his statement.

67 Single unitary council for Oxfordshire

Council considered the report of the chief executive on proposals for a single unitary council for Oxfordshire. Council recalled that at its meeting on 16 February 2017, it had passed a motion supporting the principle of a single unitary council and authorised the chief executive and leader of the council to work with partner councils that supported the same proposal, to develop the terms of a submission for local government change in Oxfordshire, and to submit a report to Council in due course.

Since that meeting, the chief executive and leader had worked with the leaders of Oxfordshire County Council and Vale of White Horse District Council to improve the county council's One Oxfordshire proposal to form a new submission 'A New Council for a Better Oxfordshire'. The Better Oxfordshire proposal was now presented to Council. The proposal had already achieved the support of Vale of White Horse District Council and would be put before Oxfordshire County Council's Cabinet on 14 March 2017.

The chief executive's report had been considered by the Scrutiny Committee on 2 and 9 March 2017. The committee had recommended to Cabinet and Council to:

- (a) note a number of concerns raised on matters of detail; and
- (b) support the proposal for the future organisation of local government in Oxfordshire as set out in the chief executive's report to Cabinet and the "A New Council for a Better Oxfordshire" proposal.

Cabinet had met on 10 March 2017, prior to the Council meeting, and had supported the recommendations set out in the chief executive's report, with the amendment of recommendation 7 to read (additional words shown in **bold type**):

"authorise the head of legal and democratic services, **in consultation with the leader and the chief executive**, to agree the terms of reference of the joint committee, which will include making recommendations regarding the initial functions of the implementation executive, and to make this council's appointments to the joint committee".

Tabled at the meeting were three additional documents to provide clarification:

1. A vision of a governance structure for the new unitary authority;
2. A model of council tax in Oxfordshire; and
3. A comparison of the Better Oxfordshire proposal with the One Oxfordshire proposal and the governance arrangements in Cornwall and Wiltshire.

Cabinet noted that the council tax modelling was based on figures published in the Oxfordshire districts' and county council's medium term financial plans, and assumed council tax increases across these councils in the lead up to the new unitary council being established. The figures also assumed that there would be a new council for the city of Oxford, setting a precept of £150 in a new town council role. The model showed that it would be possible to achieve levels of council tax no higher than would be expected under the current two-tier principal council system in Oxfordshire.

The leader of the council introduced Cabinet's recommendations, explaining that he had worked with the leaders of Vale of White Horse District Council and Oxfordshire County Council to improve the One Oxfordshire proposal and develop the Better Oxfordshire proposal. This offered the opportunity for greater efficiencies and improved governance arrangements with some decisions being made by executive area boards. The detailed proposals would be developed by a new joint committee. He offered to bring any significant changes back to Council for debate.

Council debated the proposal and welcomed the progress made since the last Council meeting. Councillors believed that this single unitary council bid presented the best opportunity for an efficient form of local government in Oxfordshire. A single unitary council would be easier for the public to understand. Councillors supported the proposal but recognised that the detail would require careful consideration, especially around local decision-making. Council accepted that this work should be conducted by the new joint committee. All principal councils in Oxfordshire should be invited to participate in the joint committee.

Although it was recognised that in developing the detail the council would have to make concessions, Council hoped that its reserves, built up through years of careful financial management, would be retained for use in South Oxfordshire and would not be used to support services across Oxfordshire. The leader reported that he would bring back proposals to Council later in the year on how the council's reserves could be used.

The leader offered to engage with Council on the unitary council as often as it wished. Councillors expressed confidence in the leader and chief executive to achieve the best deal for South Oxfordshire.

Some councillors expressed disappointment that the proposal had not been supported by Oxford City Council, Cherwell District Council and West Oxfordshire District Council. The leader was hopeful that these councils would support the Better Oxfordshire bid once it had been submitted to the Secretary of State.

RESOLVED: to

1. note and commend the approach taken by the Leaders of Vale, South Oxfordshire, and the County Council in putting the interests of residents, business and communities first in bringing forward these proposals;
2. consider the proposals, in particular taking note that 70 per cent of those responding to the County Council's representative household survey supported the proposal for a new unitary council for Oxfordshire;
3. respond to the recent letter from the Secretary of State and submit proposals to Government subject to any amendments required provided that they are materially in accordance with the attached proposal;
4. delegate the power to make such amendments to the chief executive in consultation with the leader and with South Oxfordshire District Council and Oxfordshire County Council;
5. ask officers to seek local support from key stakeholders and the wider public to promote the proposals to government and respond to any subsequent consultation undertaken by the Secretary of State;
6. support the further development of the Area Executive Board model, a joint committee, open to all Districts and City Councils across Oxfordshire and the County Council, should be formed as early as possible. This joint committee should work with the existing County Council advisory group, local communities, Town and Parish Councils, and key delivery partners to develop detailed proposals that articulate the role, powers, format, scale and responsibilities of the Area Executive Boards which will be submitted to the Implementation Executive for inclusion with the proposed constitution of the new council;
7. authorise the head of legal and democratic services, in consultation with the leader and the chief executive, to agree the terms of reference of the joint committee, which will include making recommendations regarding the initial functions of the implementation executive, and to make this council's appointments to the joint committee;
8. ask officers to take steps to establish the City Convention to work with residents and local stakeholders to design the new model of governance in Oxford; and

9. in light of the above decisions, and the absence of unanimity among the current local authorities, confirm that Council does not support the proposals for a Mayor and Combined Authority as being the best structure for Oxfordshire.

The meeting closed at 6.54 pm

Chairman

Date