

Minutes

OF A MEETING OF THE

Scrutiny Committee

HELD AT 6.30 PM ON THURSDAY 2 MARCH 2017

THE FOUNTAIN CONFERENCE CENTRE, HOWBERY PARK

Present:

Toby Newman (Vice-Chairman in the Chair), Paul Harrison, Elaine Hornsby, Sue Lawson, Jeannette Matelot, Toby Newman, David Turner, John Walsh and Ian White

Apologies:

Richard Pullen tendered apologies.

Officers:

David Hill and Ron Schrieber

Also present:

Councillors John Cotton, Lorraine Hillier and Lynn Lloyd

41 Declarations of interest

Councillor Toby Newman declared a non-pecuniary interest in agenda item 3, single unitary council for Oxfordshire, as he worked for Grant Thornton, the authors of a previous report on unitary options for Oxfordshire.

42 Single unitary council for Oxfordshire

At its meeting on 16 February, Council authorised the Chief Executive, in consultation with the Leader of the Council, to work with other partner councils to develop the terms of a proposal for local government change in Oxfordshire and present a detailed report to Council in due course.

The committee considered the chief executive's report which gave an update on the One Oxfordshire engagement proposal. The committee was requested to make comments and recommendations to Cabinet and Council to assist with their decision making at special meetings on 10 March.

Councillor John Cotton, leader and David Hill, chief executive, attended. They introduced the report, provided additional information and answered questions. The

chief executive reported that both Oxfordshire County Council (OCC) and the district councils had previously agreed that a single unitary council would be the most effective and efficient option for the future governance of Oxfordshire. Both he and the leader of Vale of White Horse believed that it was preferable to support and seek to improve OCC's new proposal rather to oppose it and thereby support the existing two-tier system.

The committee discussed the process by which a single unitary council for Oxfordshire might be created and the way in which such a council might operate. Some members expressed the view that the meeting was premature and that the committee should be given the opportunity to scrutinise the yet unpublished bid document to enable it to make informed recommendations to the special Cabinet and Council meetings on 10 March. Following further discussion, the committee agreed to hold another special meeting once the bid document had been published.

In response to questions and issues raised by the committee, it was reported that:

Process

- OCC had recently completed a public engagement exercise on its proposals. It was not required to formally consult as any decision on the proposal would be taken by the Secretary of State. However it had also run focus groups, opinion polls and workshops to gauge public opinion.
- Whilst the timetable was tight, it had been set by OCC which intended to submit its proposal to the Secretary of State before the end of March.
- The aim of a unitary council in operation in 2019 was based on the assumption that the Secretary of State would make his decision before the summer parliamentary recess.
- Whilst the government was no longer offering additional funding to new unitary authorities, there was an expectation that the new authority would be able to negotiate some freedoms and flexibility. The government had not yet issued guidance on the preparation of unitary submissions but it was anticipated that any such guidance would restrict the current flexibility to draw up a submission that best met the needs of local residents.
- Whilst the support of all Oxfordshire councils would be welcomed, consensus amongst affected local authorities was not required in order for the Secretary of State to consider a unitary proposal. However, it was anticipated that the final submission would allay many of the concerns expressed by some of the councils and some Oxfordshire MPs. There was an open invitation to leaders of Cherwell, Oxford City and West Oxfordshire Councils to join the process to discuss how their concerns could be addressed.
- By supporting an improved bid, the Council would be a party to further discussions and would be able to submit further clarifications should the Secretary of State consult on the proposal.

Detail

- Existing local plans would be preserved and local Planning Committees would continue. At some stage the new unitary authority would need to move towards the creation of a single local plan.
- The bid document would include a commitment to ensuring locally held reserves were used for the benefit of local residents.

- Should the proposal be approved, all Oxfordshire Councils would be represented on an implementation executive to decide the transition arrangements. The leaders of the two main OCC opposition groups would have places on this body.
- The bid envisaged a number of area executive boards in order to ensure that decisions were taken at a local level.
- The bid would include a commitment to a revised model of council tax harmonisation across the county over a reasonable period of time.
- It was anticipated that the new unitary authority would be established with two councillors for each division, based on the current OCC boundaries.
- The future management of Oxford City's housing stock would be considered by the implementation executive as part of the transition arrangements.
- Whilst it was inevitable that the creation of a new unitary authority would lead to some job losses, it was likely that most of these posts would be lost via natural wastage and/or voluntary redundancy.

Some members sought reassurances regarding the unitary authority's future spending and service priorities, particularly in relation to rural areas and communities on the extremities of the county boundaries. The leader reported that, whilst the proposed area executive boards would enable local making decision to address local priorities, it was not possible to give guarantees about what were essentially political decisions to be made by the new authority in the future.

RESOLVED:

- (a) To note that the County Council's public engagement exercise was completed on 28 February 2017.
- (b) That, following the publication of the "A new council for a better Oxfordshire" bid document, a meeting of the committee be arranged prior to the special Cabinet and Council meetings on 10 March, to enable the committee to make informed recommendations to these meetings.

The meeting closed at 9.00 pm

Chairman

Date