

Minutes

OF A MEETING OF THE

Scrutiny Committee

HELD AT 4.30 PM ON THURSDAY 9 MARCH 2017

MEETING ROOM 1, 135 MILTON PARK

Present:

Elaine Hornsby, Jeannette Matelot, Toby Newman, David Turner, Ian White and Bill Service (as substitute for Sue Lawson)

Apologies:

Richard Pullen, Paul Harrison, Sue Lawson and John Walsh tendered apologies.

Officers:

David Hill, Ron Schrieber and Mark Stone

Also present:

Councillors Elizabeth Gillespie, Jane Murphy and David Nimmo-Smith

43 Election of Chairman

The chairman had submitted apologies for absence and the vice-chairman's arrival had been delayed. Accordingly the committee was asked to elect a chairman for the duration of the meeting.

RESOLVED: to elect Councillor Ian White as chairman for the duration of the meeting.

44 Urgency

The chairman reported that, as the Committee, at its meeting on 2 March, had resolved that a further meeting be held to consider the single unitary authority for Oxfordshire bid prior to the Cabinet and Council special meetings on 10 March, it had not been possible to give five clear days' notice of this meeting, as required by the Local Government Act 1972.

In light of the special circumstances the chairman stated that he was of the view that the meeting should proceed on the grounds of urgency in order to allow the views of the committee to be considered by Cabinet and Council.



Listening Learning Leading

45 Declarations of interest

None.

46 Single unitary authority for Oxfordshire

Further to the decision at its meeting on 2 March, the committee considered the “A new council for a better Oxfordshire” bid document.

Councillor Jane Murphy, deputy leader attended together with David Hill, chief executive and Mark Stone, interim chief operations officer. They introduced the item, provided additional information and answered questions.

The chief executive reported that the Better Oxfordshire proposal was based on feedback from the public engagement and included executive area boards for decision making at a more local level and bespoke arrangements for Oxford city area. The proposal for executive area boards included:

- Localised decision making and budgets
- A membership of unitary councillors with voting powers, together with non-voting parish/town council representatives
- The number of executive area boards would be determined by the further work of a new joint committee
- The executive area boards would be formal committees of the unitary council with significant devolved powers, decision making and resources, the detail to be developed by the joint committee
- Local engagement on unitary-wide matters such as consultees on the budget and formulation of policy
- Creation of dedicated ‘area’ plans to target resources and direct activity

The Better Oxfordshire proposal also included five local planning committees and a strategic planning committee.

To assist the committee, three documents were tabled at the meeting for clarification:

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

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

- It was intended to set up new bodies to ensure that a proportion of the council’s reserves continued to fund projects in South Oxfordshire. However, a significant proportion of the council’s reserves were locked up in long term investments.
- Should the Secretary of State approve the proposal for a new authority not everything would change in May 2019. Statutory requirements would have to be met but many functions would continue as before for some time.
- The council’s representative on the implementation executive could provide regular assurance to the committee that risks were being managed.
- A chief executive would be appointed by the implementation executive to oversee the implementation of the new authority.

- As the housing revenue account was ring fenced, promotion of house building by the new unitary council would not impact on its general fund.
- The implementation executive could not meet prior to the Secretary of State approving the bid for the proposed single unitary authority and should not make any significant decisions until the risk of a legal challenge had passed. The report to Cabinet and Council recommended the creation of a joint committee to develop detailed proposals which would be submitted to the implementation executive for inclusion with the proposed constitution of the new council.
- There would be no immediate changes to existing ward or parish boundaries. At some time in the future, it was likely that the new authority would request a boundary review.
- The new authority would need, over time, to decide on its preferred models of service delivery.
- 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.
- Although the £2.5m cost of IT systems integration was an estimate, this figure had been validated against historical examples. Significant savings could be made in some areas.

Following further discussion the committee

RESOLVED: to

- a) ask Cabinet and Council to note a number of concerns raised on matters of detail, as set out above; and
- b) to 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.

The meeting closed at 6.00 pm

Chairman

Date