

# Minutes

of a meeting of the

## Cabinet

held on Monday 6 March 2017 at 4.00 pm

in the Meeting Room 1, 135 Eastern Avenue, Milton Park



### Open to the public, including the press

#### Present:

Members: Councillors Matthew Barber (Chairman), Roger Cox (Vice-Chairman), Eric Batts, Charlotte Dickson, Robert Sharp and Elaine Ware

Officers: Steven Corrigan, Steve Culliford, David Hill, Mark Stone and Deidre Smith

Also present: Councillors Yvonne Constance and Reg Waite

Number of members of the public: Nil

#### **Ca.87      Apologies for absence**

Councillor Mike Murray had sent his apologies for absence.

#### **Ca.88      Declarations of interest**

None

#### **Ca.89      Urgent business and chairman's announcements**

None

#### **Ca.90      Public participation**

Councillor Debby Hallett had registered to address Cabinet on the unitary authority proposals for Oxfordshire but was unable to attend the meeting. Instead, Councillor Hallett submitted written comments to Cabinet.

The leader reported that he would respond in writing to Councillor Hallett. Several of her comments could be answered by reference to the report. With regard to Councillor Hallett's question on how many staff would face involuntary redundancy, the leader referred to the forecasts by Grant Thornton and PwC in their previous reports that the expected level of redundancies was less than the current level of staff turnover.

## **Ca.91 Unitary authority proposals for Oxfordshire**

Cabinet considered the chief executive's report on proposals for the future organisation of local government in Oxfordshire. The report updated Cabinet on the joint statement by the leaders of Vale of White Horse and South Oxfordshire district councils and Oxfordshire County Council relating to the One Oxfordshire engagement proposals and on the current position on negotiations regarding the One Oxfordshire discussion document.

Cabinet noted that since the publication of the One Oxfordshire proposal, the leaders and chief executive of the Vale and South Oxfordshire had entered into dialogue with the leader of Oxfordshire County Council to improve the One Oxfordshire proposal and to promote the 'A New Council for a Better Oxfordshire' proposal. The Better Oxfordshire proposal, based on feedback from the public engagement, 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.

The Scrutiny Committee considered the report at its meeting on 27 February 2017 and made the following recommendations:

- (a) That, in order to ensure that decisions are made at a local level, careful consideration be given to the number and structure of executive area boards:
  - that the submission should include a clear statement on the future of Oxford City's housing stock
  - that the submission should propose two councillors for each division
  - that the structure and scheduling of unitary authority meetings should reflect the needs of the community
- (b) That the chief executive's report to Cabinet and Council should include:
  - indicative figures on the impact of council tax harmonisation based on current budgetary arrangements
  - clarification of the process by which council functions can be delegated to town and parish councils
- (c) To note that Oxfordshire County Council's public engagement exercise has not been completed at this time.

Cabinet welcomed Scrutiny Committee's input. In response, and to assist Cabinet, three documents were tabled at the meeting for clarification:

1. A vision of a governance structure for the new unitary authority;
2. An indicative model showing projected council tax levels in Oxfordshire; and

3. A comparison of the Better Oxfordshire proposals with those of the original One Oxfordshire proposals and the governance of Wiltshire and Cornwall.

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 Oxford city, 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 report set out the options open to the council. In 2016 the council had considered a three or four unitary council option. However, this was no longer considered to be the preferred option as:

- There was an indication that this would not be financially viable and was likely to be rejected by the government
- There were indications from government departments that they would not endorse strategic safeguarding services being provided on a smaller scale
- There was no longer consensus from Oxfordshire districts over the scope of such unitary authorities, a combined authority, and the potential of a directly elected mayor
- There were strong indications from the Local Government Association that devolution in its previous funded form was not a realistic prospect

Cabinet noted that although the government had not issued recent guidance on unitary council submissions, the Secretary of State had indicated a unitary council population size of between 300,000 and 800,000 would be acceptable; Oxfordshire fell within this range.

Cabinet welcomed the report and considered that the Better Oxfordshire proposal was the best option for the future of local government in the county. It improved upon the original One Oxfordshire proposal and overcame the issues outlined above with the option for three or four unitary councils. A unitary council would achieve the best outcome for the people of Oxfordshire in terms of service delivery and efficiency. Cabinet noted that the Secretary of State was keen to receive councils' proposals for unitary local government. Cabinet did not support the proposals for a mayor and combined authority, believing that this would not provide the best structure for Oxfordshire.

Cabinet welcomed the formation of a joint committee to work on the detail of the Better Oxfordshire proposals. Cabinet amended recommendation 7 to require the head of legal and democratic services to consult the leader and the chief executive before agreeing the terms of reference of the joint committee.

#### **RECOMMENDATIONS:** to Council on 8 March 2017:

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 4.30pm.