

# Scrutiny Committee

Report of the Chief Executive

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To: Scrutiny Committee

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## Single unitary council for Oxfordshire

### Recommendation(s)

1. to review the current position and information regarding the One Oxfordshire engagement document for local government change in Oxfordshire and provide comments to Cabinet and Council to assist with their decision making at special meetings on 6 March and 8 March respectively;
2. to note that the County Council's consultation has not been completed at this time.

### Purpose of Report

1. To update the committee on the leaders' of South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse District Councils Joint Statement with Councillor Ian Hudspeth, Leader of Oxfordshire County Council, relating to the One Oxfordshire engagement proposal. To provide the opportunity for committee members to ask questions of the Chief Executive and express views on matters that he may wish to take into account when, in consultation with the Leader, he is in negotiations regarding the One Oxfordshire discussion document. To make recommendations/comments to Cabinet and Council.

### Strategic Objectives

2. As stated in the 2016-20 Corporate Plan it is a strategic objective of the Council to pursue a proposal to seek a new structure of local government for Oxfordshire.

3. Achieving this objective could contribute to our other strategic objectives of delivering housing and infrastructure; supporting sustainable communities and wellbeing; building an even stronger economy and running an efficient council.

## **Background**

4. At its meeting on 15 February 2017 Council agreed the following motion:

“This Council supports the principle of a new countywide unitary council for Oxfordshire but recognises that the One Oxfordshire discussion document currently being publicised by Oxfordshire County Council requires strengthening in order to maximise the benefits to, and influence of, local communities and to satisfy the concerns of residents about some aspects of the proposal including the need for more local decision making.

Council authorises 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”.

5. Prior to this, Oxfordshire County Council launched, on 19 January, a discussion document. This set out the County Council’s initial thinking, known as “One Oxfordshire”, for a single unitary authority for Oxfordshire. It should be noted that One Oxfordshire is an engagement document published by Oxfordshire County Council and this paper does not outline the council’s response to that document.
6. In 2016 the Council not only adopted a Corporate Plan recognising the need for a new local government structure, but Council also agreed to support a proposal for a new unitary authority to cover the Vale of White Horse.
7. At that time leaders outlined the possibility of a model with three or four unitaries across the county, working collectively through a combined authority. This is no longer council’s preferred option for a number of reasons:
  - (a) There is a clear indication that the three unitary option is not financially viable and on this basis is likely to be rejected by government
  - (b) Indications from Government departments that they would not endorse strategic safeguarding services being provided on a smaller scale
  - (c) There is no longer a consensus across Oxfordshire districts over the scope of such unitaries, a combined authority and the potential role of a directly elected mayor.
  - (d) Strong indications, at least from the Local Government Association, that devolution in its previous funded form is not a realistic prospect.
8. Vale supports the principle of a unitary system as a means not just to save money but more importantly to improve services, and given that there is an engagement document One Oxfordshire which the County Council intend to support the development of a proposal to the Secretary of State, the logical conclusion is to examine the merits of the proposal from Oxfordshire County Council.

9. Under the current legislative framework, consensus amongst affected local authorities is not required in order for the Secretary of State to consider a unitary proposal. A proposal can be made by any one authority within an area.
10. The County Council's engagement document draws on both of the recent expert reports into unitary options for Oxfordshire, one by Grant Thornton (funded by Oxfordshire County Council) and one by PWC (funded by the Districts and Oxford City). Both reports identified that a move to unitary status would generate service improvements and deliver financial savings.
11. The Government has not issued any guidance on the preparation of unitary submissions, although in speeches the Secretary of State has indicated that as a generalisation, a population size between 300,000 and 800,000 would be acceptable.
12. Within the One Oxfordshire engagement document, the general high level themes identified and data used does not vary significantly from either the Grant Thornton or PWC reports.
13. The Leaders of South Oxfordshire, Vale of White Horse and Oxfordshire County Council agreed a joint statement on 6 February 2017 around key areas of One Oxfordshire, which is attached at Appendix A.

## **Financial Implications**

14. There are no direct financial implications arising from this report.

## **Legal Implications**

15. There are no legal implications arising from this report.

## **Risks**

16. None have been identified in relation to this specific report.

## **Other Implications**

17. None

## **Conclusion**

18. Scrutiny Committee is invited to ask questions of the Chief Executive and Leader, to consider the One Oxfordshire engagement document, and provide comments to Cabinet and Council to assist with their decision making.

## **Background Papers**

- A Fresh Start for Oxfordshire: Proposals for a new Unitary Council - A document for discussion. Published by Oxfordshire County Council, January 2017  
<http://www.oneoxfordshire.org/our-vision>
- Report undertaken by PwC  
<http://democratic.southoxon.gov.uk/documents/s9998/Appendix%201%20-%20PwC%20Review%20of%20proposed%20Unitary%20Authority.pdf>

- Report undertaken by Grant Thornton  
[http://media.wix.com/ugd/8b028f\\_e7f54796ef5f4199ad0246e7bacdd1ea.pdf](http://media.wix.com/ugd/8b028f_e7f54796ef5f4199ad0246e7bacdd1ea.pdf)

# **Appendix A**

## **Council leaders' statement on single unitary council for Oxfordshire**

Becoming a single unitary council will transform the way we deliver our services to the people of Oxfordshire for the better. But these are vital services that will impact on everyone. That's why the changes we make must without fail improve the quality of life for residents, their families and the communities they live in.

We have heard a range of differing views on how these services should be organised and between us, as the leaders of our councils, we have come together with others to make this happen. It has been an incredible journey that has ultimately brought us all together in one place. The statement below sets out our aims for a single unitary council and how we are working together on a joint proposal to government.

- The leaders of South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse councils have agreed to work together with Oxfordshire County Council on a joint bid to government to create a better council for Oxfordshire.
- There is now a strong consensus that in the context of reduced government funding and urgent need for capital investment, a step-change is needed in the way council services are run.
- Having looked at all the evidence, we are convinced that a single unitary council for Oxfordshire provides the best prospect for maintaining high quality services and securing badly needed investment in infrastructure.
- It is also essential that the new unitary council must protect the quality of life for everyone in Oxfordshire, in both urban and rural areas.
- All are agreed that enhancing local democracy and autonomy should be at the heart of the new model for local government, so that different areas can continue to make decisions that work for them. There can be no one-size-fits-all approach.
- The joint unitary bid will build on the foundation laid by the draft One Oxfordshire proposal, with significant improvements to ensure that the priorities of local communities, raised by district council partners, are fully addressed. Over the coming weeks we will be focusing particularly on:
  - Strengthening the model of local accountability, with decisions taken at a much more local level than offered by the area executive board model.
  - Ensuring locally held reserves are used for the benefit of local residents, while recognising the collective benefits of pooling resources to leverage investment.
  - Commitment to a revised model of council tax harmonisation across the county over a reasonable period of time.
  - Ensuring that the planning framework builds on existing and emerging local plans.
  - Establishing a housing company to ensure delivery of sustainable housing and infrastructure.
- It is essential that the model of local government incorporates the very different social and economic make-up of Oxford city and its vitally important economic importance to the whole county.

- We acknowledge that this is a complex issue to resolve and urge the city council to join the working group so that we can draw on their knowledge and expertise of running services in the city to develop a model of local governance that works for Oxford.
- The final proposal will also take full account of the comments and issues raised by residents and stakeholders during the One Oxfordshire public engagement exercise currently being carried out by the county council.
- We note that the 'more local' aspect of the proposal is proving to be of particular interest to residents. They also want reassurance that any change would focus on service improvement through joining up, as well as making savings.
- All councils must be involved in creating the new unitary authority and deciding upon the transition arrangements, with councillors for the county and districts working together to take key decisions, including appointment of an interim chief executive at an early stage of the process.
- Having agreed on the best approach to improving services and securing the infrastructure needed to ensure sustainable economic growth, we plan to jointly submit a bid to the Secretary of State in March. We want a quick decision so the new authority can be created as soon as possible.
- The next step is to form a working group of all the partner councils to develop a new proposal that represents the best deal for the people of Oxfordshire. We hope all the councils will be involved, and will also be asking our business and public sector partners for their input.

Cllr Ian Hudspeth

Cllr Matthew Barber

Cllr John Cotton