

Minutes

of a meeting of the

Scrutiny Committee

held on Monday, 27 February 2017 at 7.00 pm

at the Meeting Room 1, 135 Eastern Avenue, Milton Park, Milton, OX14 4SB



Open to the public, including the press

Present:

Members: Councillors Debby Hallett (Chairman), Alice Badcock (Vice-Chairman), Vicky Jenkins, Monica Lovatt, Ben Mabbett, Chris Palmer, Judy Roberts, St John Dickson (In place of Mohinder Kainth) and Simon Howell (In place of Ed Blagrove)

Officers: David Hill, Ron Schrieber and Mark Stone

Also present: Councillor Matthew Barber

Sc.49 Notification of substitutes and apologies for absence

Apologies were received from Councillors Ed Blagrove (substitute Simon Howell) and Mohinder Kainth (substitute StJohn Dickson).

Sc.50 Declarations of interest

None.

Sc.51 Single unitary council for Oxfordshire

At its meeting on 15 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 6 and 8 March, respectively.

Councillor Matthew Barber, leader attended, together with David Hill, chief executive and Mark Stone, interim chief operations officer. They introduced the report, provided additional information and answered questions. The leader 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 South Oxfordshire 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.

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

Process

- OCC were currently undertaking a public engagement exercise rather than a consultation. It was not required to consult as any decision on the proposal would be taken by the Secretary of State. However it was running focus groups, opinion polls and workshops to gauge public opinion.
- The timetable had been set by OCC. It 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 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 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 Vale of White Horse will be a party to further discussions and will be able to submit further clarifications should the Secretary of State consult on the proposal.
- Council on 8 March would be voting on a proposal to submit a joint bid for a single unitary authority for Oxfordshire.

Detail

- 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 board.
- 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 2 councillors for each division, based on the current OCC boundaries.
- The committee structure and scheduling of meetings would be considered by the Implementation Executive as part of the transition arrangements.
- The future management of Oxford City's housing stock would be considered by the Implementation Executive as part of the transition arrangements.

- There would be no change to the current arrangements by which the Council could delegate functions to town and parish councils, subject to their agreement.
- Whilst it was inevitable that the creation of a new unitary authority would lead to some job losses, it was likely that natural wastage and/or voluntary redundancy would account for most.

The committee requested that, should the proposal be approved, the council's representation on the Implementation Executive, attend the committee on a regular basis to report on the transition arrangements.

RESOLVED:

(a) To **RECOMMEND** to Cabinet and Council:

- That, in order to ensure that decisions are made at a local level, careful consideration be given to the number and structure of area executive 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; and
- 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; and
- clarification of the process by which council functions can be delegated to town and parish councils.

(c) To note that the County Council's public engagement exercise has not been completed at this time.

The meeting closed at 9.45 pm