

Press Release



Listening Learning Leading

Author: Nikki Malin

Tel: 01235 540376

Email: nikki.malin@whitehorsedc.gov.uk



18 May 2006

Council Leaders Go Public on Possibility of a Single Council for Southern Oxfordshire

The Leaders of South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse District Councils today announced that they had agreed to work together to explore the possibility of creating a single unitary council covering the whole of southern Oxfordshire.

The area has a combined population of nearly 250,000, easily bigger than a number of existing high performing unitary authorities. The largest centres of population within each existing district, Abingdon and Didcot, sit on the boundary of the two districts and are only five miles apart.

The two Council Leaders, Jerry Patterson of the Vale of White Horse and Ann Ducker of South Oxfordshire District Council, have decided to make their plans public in the run up to the expected publication of a Government White Paper in the summer that will address the reorganisation of local government. The Government has indicated that it wants proposals to come from local councils, rather than be imposed from above. A unitary southern Oxfordshire council would mean local control over services such as education, social services, libraries and highways as well as current district council services.

What makes this proposal particularly interesting is that it crosses the political divide. South Oxfordshire is currently Conservative controlled, while Vale of White Horse is run by the Liberal Democrats. The two councils, however, already have a strong track record of working together and recently put in place a combined finance, revenues and benefits team under a single Head of Finance who will work for both councils. The Leaders of the main opposition parties have given their endorsement to examining the possibility of creating a single unitary authority for southern Oxfordshire.

South Oxfordshire Leader, Ann Ducker said: "I am very pleased to make this joint announcement with Jerry. Up to now the debate about unitary councils has tended to focus on urban areas like Oxford. We feel that there are strong efficiency and effectiveness arguments for unitary rural councils too and we must make sure that the Government does not neglect this in the forthcoming debate. With a population of 250,000, significantly larger than any of the six unitary councils in Berkshire that have been running now for nearly a decade, we think that a unitary council for southern Oxfordshire makes sense and will offer

residents better services than the current two-tier arrangements. I am keen that we start work to explore what is possible without delay.”

Vale of White Horse Leader Jerry Patterson said: “I have no doubt that a single unitary Council for the market towns and villages of southern Oxfordshire is the right way forward. It will provide real community leadership with real accountability. People who live and work in the area would have one local Council with which to plan and deliver improved prosperity and quality of life.”

The two Leaders are also calling on the six local authorities in Oxfordshire to work together on looking at the different options for local government in the county. Oxford City and Oxfordshire County Councils have already put forward their ideas. Cllr Patterson added: “I see little point in the six councils working separately on this. We must listen to the residents of Oxfordshire and come up with proposals that are in their best interests. I think that the best way of achieving this would be to work collectively and share knowledge and ideas.”

Ends

Note to editors

The contact details for the Leaders and Opposition leaders for both Councils are:

Vale of White Horse District Council

Leader, Councillor Jerry Patterson 01235 540391 or 01865 730588 (home)

Opposition leader, Councillor Melinda Tilley, 01235 540366 or 01865 820385 (home)

South Oxfordshire District Council

Leader, Councillor Ann Ducker 01491 823130

Opposition leader, Councillor David Turner 01865 891169