

Date: 2nd March 2016

Leader's Office
County Hall
New Road
Oxford OX1 1ND

Councillor Ian Hudspeth
Leader of the Council

Dear District Council Leader

We read with interest your press release headlined 'Council Leaders propose simplification of local government to support a Devolution Deal for Oxfordshire'. This 'simplification' would involve: five clinical commissioning groups; three police forces and three Police and Crime Commissioners; four LEPs; three highways authorities; three fire and rescue services, and three local resilience forums with responsibility for emergency planning.

Your proposal also retains two layers of local government in the form of four 'quasi-unitary' councils and a combined authority quangos spread across three counties. We are still unclear about which of the above bodies were involved in developing these proposals, or were even aware of them. We note that the Oxfordshire Clinical Commissioning Group's logo was included on the website, and then removed within a day. The CCG in Gloucestershire has registered its opposition to the plan.

We are told that OxLEP were not aware of the proposal until they saw the press release, and the LEP in Gloucestershire has also come out against the proposal. The lack of involvement of key partners in the proposals is remarkable, not to mention the fact that none of the three county councils, which account for 80% of local authority budgets in their areas, were consulted.

However at least now all the Oxfordshire council leaders are agreed on one thing: unitary local government is most likely to deliver efficiencies and new ways to deliver services that will be needed to address future financial challenges and rising demand for children and adult social care. This will be even more vital if the Chancellor makes further cuts to public spending in the Budget, as he indicated over the weekend. Without meaning any disrespect to the districts in Gloucestershire and Northamptonshire, we believe that for reasons of history, geography and practicality, we should be looking for service delivery model for 'one Oxfordshire'.

The Leader of the County Council previously wrote to district leaders inviting them to discuss the option of unitary councils for Oxfordshire. For whatever reason, we didn't have the debate then so let's have it now.

We are all convinced that the unitary model makes most sense, but they have to be real unitaries, not two tier local government by another name. You say you are planning to hire consultants to produce a business case, which will conclude that your proposals make sense. No doubt the county council could undertake a similar exercise which would conclude exactly the opposite. This would incur unnecessary expense and the public will be rightly suspicious of both arguments.

We propose instead that all the interested parties agree on a single process for looking at all the credible options, including a single unitary for Oxfordshire and the four model plus combined authority model put forward last week. The work already done on the devolution proposal would not be wasted if elements could be included in alternative proposals. The LGA could play a facilitative role in setting out clearly what all the options are, if all involved councils would agree.

This work would be conducted on the basis of jointly agreed terms of reference, and could provide a single set of options with supporting facts that can be the basis of a genuine public debate on the best options for Oxfordshire.

Such an important decision cannot be done on the basis of a political deal and a press release – we need real openness and proper information about the implications of each option. Anything less will look like a shabby deal to the people of Oxfordshire, who should and will demand better.

The way the proposals were announced last week was disappointing after all the work that had gone into the devolution bid submitted only weeks before. We are seeking a formal response from government about our proposal so that we can fully understand the government's thinking on this matter.

Please could you consider the proposal among yourselves and let me know as soon as possible whether you are willing to work together to enable an informed public debate based on reliable, independent analysis.

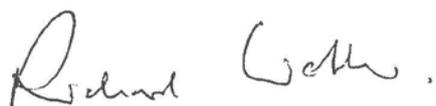
We are ready and willing to work together to look for an alternative approach which is acceptable locally and nationally – and most of all is in the best interests of the people of Oxfordshire.
Best wishes



Cllr Ian Hudspeth
Leader of the Council and
Leader of the Conservative Group



Cllr Liz Brighthouse
Leader of the Opposition and
Leader of the Labour Group



Cllr Richard Webber
Leader of the Liberal Democrat Group

Cllr David Williams
Leader of the Green Group