

Independent study of public service reform options

Purpose

- This is an update on the debate about local government reform in Oxfordshire

Background

- Three weeks after submitting a joint devolution bid to government, Oxfordshire district councils announced an alternative proposal to create four new unitary authorities covering Oxfordshire, and parts of Northamptonshire and Gloucestershire.
- Under this proposal, a 'combined authority' quango would provide some services such as children and adult social care to an area with a population approaching 1 million.
- The county council has concerns about the financial sustainability and effectiveness of this model, which also cuts across boundaries for the NHS and policing.
- Other options should be considered, including a new single unitary council for Oxfordshire which could save an estimated £30 million annual and protect frontline services.
- The districts declined to discuss having an independently commissioned joint study, so the county council was left with no alternative but to commission an independent study looking at all the options. It will be published to ensure an informed public debate about all the options.

Scope of the independent study

- The county council has published an invitation to quote for an independent study to look at all the options for local government restructuring in Oxfordshire, namely:
 - A single unitary council for the whole county
 - Four unitaries covering council areas administered by: Oxford City; West Oxfordshire and Cotswolds (Gloucestershire); South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse, and Cherwell and South Northamptonshire (Northants)
 - Three unitary authorities covering, covering areas currently administered by Vale of White Horse and South Oxfordshire; Oxford city; and Cherwell and West Oxfordshire
 - Two unitary authorities, with one covering the city based on expanded boundaries and the other covering the remaining area of Oxfordshire
 - Status quo based on the current arrangement of county and district councils

Criteria for assessing different models

- The independent study will focus on the following areas, with each criteria scored separately to show the relative strengths and weaknesses of different models:
 - Improving local service delivery and outcomes, particularly for the most vulnerable
 - Delivering significant cost savings, value for money and financial sustainability
 - Providing stronger and more accountable strategic and local leadership
 - Driving economic growth and meet the infrastructure challenge
 - Engaging with communities and empowering local areas

Oxfordshire Together – working with towns and parishes

- Restructuring local government offers the opportunity to think from first principles about how to bring real power and influence to local areas, including through parish and town councils. This could potentially include devolution of parking, local planning, and other functions.
- Last year the county council launched its 'Oxfordshire Together' programme, which is designed to give greater control of local services to communities.
- This debate is likely to generate a wealth of creative ideas. The county council will of course consider all of these, no matter what the outcome of the unitary debate, and work with towns, parishes, and local communities, to consider how Oxfordshire Together could be expanded in the future.

Government advice on developing unitary proposals

- Government has indicated that it considers the optimum population range for unitary council areas is 300-800k. This provides the tax base and scale to manage.
- The three and four unitary council models fall short. Oxford city has a population of around 160k so would require significantly expanded boundaries to meet that criteria.
- Government says it is prepared to consider separate sets of proposals for restructuring.

Concerns about the four unitary proposals

- Significant risks to public service delivery without clear evidence of benefits. Social services in particular work better on a larger scale than these four quasi unitaries offer.
- Fragments strategic planning of transport and housing that underpin growth
- Complicates public service delivery in Oxfordshire by involving parts of Gloucestershire and Northamptonshire, and range of other agencies including five local enterprises partnerships (LEPs), three police and five NHS clinical commissioning groups. It also perpetuates two-tier service delivery by creating a combined authority quango.
- Duplication of council functions reduces the chances of efficiency savings.

About local government in Oxfordshire

- As the county council provides the bulk of services by value (80%), the reductions in government funding have had greatest impact on its services.
- Demand for County Council services has increased dramatically. Social care accounts for half of the budget, rising to three-quarters by 2020 as the population ages.
- Smaller unitary councils would have the same pressures without the scale to manage them.

County council responsibilities	District council responsibilities
Adult social care	Leisure
Children's services	Waste collection
Highways and transport planning	Housing
Fire and rescue service	Environmental health
School support and admissions	Collecting Council Tax
Libraries	Street cleaning
Waste management	Benefits payments
Public health	Planning
Trading Standards	Electoral registration