

Local government experts appointed to review 'unitary' options

Summary

- Grant Thornton LLP UK to carry out an independent study of all unitary options
- County council to invite parishes and town councils to look at options for local devolution
- Public and stakeholders will be invited to contribute ideas

Background

- The political leaders of Oxfordshire County Council have committed to an independent review of all the options for local government restructuring (including maintaining the status quo), followed by an informed public debate.
- The county council believes a new 'unitary' authority providing council services for the whole of Oxfordshire is likely to be the most efficient and effective model, which a previous study suggested could create savings of at least £30m per year.
- Oxfordshire district councils want four new unitary authorities covering Oxfordshire, and parts of Northamptonshire and Gloucestershire with a 'combined authority' providing some services such as social care to an area with a population approaching 1m
- The county council intends to submit proposals for local government reorganisation to government in early autumn.

Grant Thornton to review 'unitary' options

- Oxfordshire County Council has appointed Grant Thornton UK LLP to consider how local government could be reorganised to reduce costs and protect vital services. The review will be completed in mid-July.
- Grant Thornton's brief is to undertake an objective, evidence-led review of all options. Alternative options could include the creation of one or more new 'unitary' councils, which would be responsible for all local government services rather than the current split between the county and districts.
- The firm will look to identify the model for local government that provides the best services and value to council tax payers and business rate payers in Oxfordshire, and offers the savings needed to ensure long term viability.
- Grant Thornton has worked with a number of councils across the UK currently tackling the same challenges, as well as those that have recently become unitaries.
- The county council invited the districts to join up on a single study, but the districts refused to discuss terms of reference or agree to reasonable conditions that would have ensured the independence of the study.
- In order to avoid duplication and wasting scarce public resources the county council was willing to join the district councils study so long as reasonable assurances could be given:
 - An independent person was appointed to oversee the process to ensure fairness.
 - All options treated equally.
 - Wider stakeholder involvement in the study.
 - No preferential access to the final report

Scope of independent study

- **Service Delivery and Outcomes:** reforms should improve local service delivery and outcomes, particularly for the most vulnerable,
- **Cost Savings and Value For Money:** reforms should deliver significant cost savings and drive value for money and long-term financial sustainability,
- **Stronger Leadership:** reforms should provide stronger and more accountable strategic and local leadership,
- **Economic Growth and Infrastructure:** reforms should drive economic growth and meet the infrastructure challenge, and,
- **Local Engagement and Empowerment:** new structures should engage with communities and empower local areas

County council to convene independent advisory group

- The county council is assembling an independent advisory group to support the work of Grant Thornton, overseen by an independent chair. The advisory group is made up of key stakeholders drawn from businesses, higher education, health and the voluntary and community sector, amongst others.
- The advisory group will offer impartial advice and local knowledge to ensure Grant Thornton fully understands the long-term challenges and opportunities for local government in Oxfordshire.
- Grant Thornton will also invite submissions from local stakeholders with view on local government restructuring to inform the study.

Informed public debate on all the options

- The county council has said it believes a single unitary for Oxfordshire is likely to be the most efficient and effective model for delivery council services. However it wants to ensure that the independent review looks at all the options so there can be an informed public debate.
- The public will be invited to contribute ideas and views to the Grant Thornton study, and the county council will be organising public events to generate debate about local government restructuring in Oxfordshire.

Devolution for parishes and town councils

- The county council is planning a series of meetings with parishes and town councils during June to look at options for local devolution of decision-making and services to communities
- Restructuring local government offers the opportunity to consider 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 consider all of these, no matter what the outcome of the unitary debate, and will work with towns, parishes, and local communities, to consider how Oxfordshire Together could be expanded in the future.