



AGENDA ITEM (8)

ALLOCATION OF FUNDING TO SUPPORT UNITARY GOVERNANCE PROPOSAL

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| Accountable Member | Councillor Lynden Stowe Leader of the Council |
| Accountable Officer | Frank Wilson Strategic Director 01285 623000 frank.wilson@cotswold.gov.uk |

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| Purpose of Report | To update the Cabinet on the Unitary governance proposals and to seek approval for funding to support further work |
| Recommendation(s) | (a) That the Cabinet agrees to work with the District Councils in Oxfordshire, South Northamptonshire District Council and other partners to further develop the initial unitary devolution proposals; (b) that the Cabinet agrees that independent consultants should be jointly appointed by the Districts to undertake detailed work, and a contribution of up to £25,000 be made available to facilitate those studies. |
| Reason(s) for Recommendation(s) | To be recognised as the most efficient Council in the country. |

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| Ward(s) Affected | None at this stage |
| Key Decision | No |
| Recommendation to Council | No |

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| Financial Implications | The project will be completed in two parts with an initial piece of work to establish whether there is a potential opportunity to deliver a workable unitary solution covering Cotswold and West Oxfordshire. Additional work will be commissioned only if the initial work offers a positive outcome. |
| Legal and Human Rights Implications | None |
| Environmental and Sustainability Implications | None |
| Human Resource Implications | None |

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| Key Risks | Given this is a high level scoping and business case appraisal, the risks arising from the commissioning of this report are minimal. |
| Equalities Analysis | Not applicable |

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| Related Decisions | None |
| Background Documents | None |
| Appendices | None |

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| Performance Management Follow Up | Subsequent reports will be brought back to the Cabinet and the Council, as appropriate. |
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| Options for Joint Working | The report will be jointly commissioned with partners |
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| Background Information | |
| <p>1. It is becoming apparent that there is a growing support within government and other key bodies for reforms to the way in which public services are designed and delivered locally. The potential for devolution deals (involving directly-elected mayors or unitary governance) has featured for some time; and there would now appear to be clear encouragement for unitary council solutions.</p> <p>2. Following the July 2015 budget, the Government invited expressions of interest from local authorities for devolution proposals. The Councils in both Oxfordshire and Gloucestershire worked together with their respective Local Enterprise Partnerships and other partners during the autumn of 2015 on proposals for separate county-wide devolution deals with the Government, with the aim of securing greater powers and funding locally to realise their economic growth potential.</p> <p>3. In Gloucestershire, the proposals included:-</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • working in new ways which would streamline and integrate strategic planning under a Combined Authority and under the direction of a Strategic Planning Commissioner; • bringing forward sites and public land for early development and securing infrastructure funding to accelerate the delivery of new homes in the next five years, including pooling development and transport resources; • driving increased productivity and job creation by providing local, integrated and tailored support to high growth companies and companies in key sectors; • making faster progress with health and social care integration; • forming a combined authority, to deliver the vision and reduce bureaucracy. This would include Cheltenham Borough Council, Cotswold District Council, Forest of Dean District Council, Gloucester City Council, Gloucestershire County Council, Tewkesbury Borough Council and Stroud District Council as constituent authorities. The Police and Crime Commissioner, the Chair of the Gloucestershire Local Enterprise Partnership and the Chair of the Gloucestershire Clinical Group would be co-opted as members with full voting rights. <p>4. As set out above, the proposals included the creation of a Combined Authority through which the Councils would work in partnership with other partners to collectively co-ordinate strategic services in which economies of large scale can be secured (e.g. transport planning) across a wider geographical area. The option of a directly-elected Mayor was rejected as not being appropriate for an area as diverse and rural as Gloucestershire.</p> | |

5. Following an initial positive response, the Government subsequently made it clear that any devolution proposals would only make progress if they were accompanied by either a directly-elected Mayor or a move to Unitary Councils.

6. At its Budget Meeting on 16th February 2016, Oxfordshire County Council put forward proposals for a consultation to the Government and made it clear that its preference was for a single Unitary County to cover the whole County of Oxfordshire. The District Councils in Oxfordshire did not believe that a single county-wide unitary authority was the right solution for Oxfordshire and have put forward alternative proposals for a number of Unitary authorities. The view of the Oxfordshire District Councils was that this would offer a better solution for the people of Oxfordshire for two key reasons:-

- it would allow decision-making and service delivery to better reflect the different challenges and priorities of the communities that they represent in different parts of the County; and
- it would build on a strong track record of sound financial planning and service transformation that are at the heart of good governance and effective service delivery.

7. The proposal is to abolish the existing District Councils, including Oxfordshire County Council and to create new Unitary Authorities that would be responsible for running all of the local services within their local areas. In view of the successful cross county boundary partnerships and close working relationships that already exist in the north and west of Oxfordshire, the Oxfordshire District Leaders agreed to explore Unitary Options that include both this Council and South Northamptonshire Council. The preferred option is therefore for four new Unitary Authorities that would come together where necessary to collectively co-ordinate strategic services in which economies of large scale can be secured (e.g. transport planning).

8. The new Unitary Councils would work with appropriate Combined Authorities for strategic joint work and commissioning, and would work in partnership with the National Health Service, Police and the relevant Local Enterprise Partnerships in Oxfordshire, Gloucestershire and Northamptonshire to co-ordinate services that need to be managed across a wider geographical area.

9. The proposals have been drawn up in support of the substantive elements of the original Oxfordshire devolution proposals and are intended to provide a better approach to the implementation of those proposals. Officers believe that this approach could also assist Gloucestershire in its devolution deal approach.

10. There is clearly a lot of detail to be worked through over the coming months. The next step will be to jointly commission independent experts with our partners to produce detailed, costed plans for the preferred option and test them against other options to ensure the best and most cost-effective solutions. Whilst the proposal requests funding for up to £25,000 to jointly commission this detailed work the latest cost estimate is that this initial work should only cost this Council in the order of £10,000. The remaining funds will only be allocated should a positive business case suggest the next phase work has merit.

11. The scope of the work will also consider the impact of an Oxfordshire only solution and how that might impact on the current cross county working between this Council and West Oxfordshire and potential options that might arise for the Gloucestershire devolution debate including both elected mayor and district-based unitary governance options.

12. From this Council's perspective, it is considered that, by being open to positive change and adopting a pro-active approach to initiatives that may present themselves from time to time, the Council will be better placed to lead on influencing the geographic shape of local government in the future. It is preferable for the Council to help drive the national change agenda, instead of being "on the back foot" and having change imposed. In so doing, it would build upon the Council's impressive record of leading the way on change, joint working and developing new business models - which has led to significant financial savings without negative impacts on service delivery.

13. It is clear that an approach incorporating district-based unitary governance is being adopted elsewhere in the country - in Kent, North Yorkshire, Buckinghamshire and Dorset. It is also evident that the Oxfordshire proposal has led to consideration of unitary options across the Northamptonshire districts as a whole; and there is clearly some support for such dialogue to occur across Gloucestershire, either as an alternative or as a fall-back proposition. The potential for unitary governance within Gloucestershire has been mooted in the past, but never pursued; and the main opposition has been based on one single authority being too large and too removed from residents to operate effectively and efficiently.

14. Indeed, the data arising from the proposed studies would be available to assist in any future, District-based Gloucestershire unitary deliberations and/or feasibility work; and may even act as the catalyst for other District studies across the County. This Council has continued to stress that it is important that the proposals being evaluated as part of the Oxfordshire 'solution' do not in themselves make local government unviable in the rest of Gloucestershire - and, with this in mind, it might be able to provide a positive contribution to any discussions.

15. It is considered that the commissioning of independent expert advice will robustly test out the preferred option against other alternatives to ensure that it is viable, sustainable and in the best interests of residents, businesses and communities - which has always been a key priority of this Council. If the option has merit, further work will be carried out, including direct consultation with the public and stake-holders. If there is not a positive outcome in relation to Cotswold, then the position will be reviewed.

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