

You may have recently seen local press comment about restructuring in local government in Oxfordshire. This briefing is to clarify the approach that the District councils are proposing to move forward the debate about public service delivery in Oxfordshire and to invite your input.

As you may be aware, the councils in Oxfordshire worked together with the Local Enterprise Partnership and the Clinical Commissioning Group during the autumn of 2015 on proposals for an ambitious devolution deal with Government, with the aims of securing greater powers and funding locally to realise our economic growth potential, and to reform the way that public services are designed and delivered locally. Following submission of our devolution bid, we received feedback from government that our proposals were ambitious in terms of proposals for investment in housing, skills and transport infrastructure but not radical enough in terms of the structures of local government need to deliver the ambition. Government is strongly encouraging those who wish to progress deals to include proposals for either a directly elected Mayor, or a move to Unitary Councils.

Our vision is for a new and innovative model of governance for Oxfordshire that replaces the cumbersome, expensive and redundant two-tier system with new Unitary Authorities – councils that would be responsible for running all of the local services within their local area on a geography that matches the challenges their communities face. The new Unitary Councils would come together to coordinate services through a new Combined Partnership Body known as a Combined Authority for Oxfordshire where this can improve service delivery or deliver economies of scale, for example, transport infrastructure, strategic spatial planning, Adult Social Care and health and Children and Families services.

In our view, this would offer a better solution for the people of Oxfordshire than the current two tier system or a county-wide Unitary for two key reasons:

- It would allow decision-making and service delivery to better reflect the different challenges and priorities of the communities in different parts of the county; and
- It would build on a strong track record of sound financial planning and service redesign that will be needed to respond to the challenges we face in delivering better and more joined up services.

Partnership working is at the heart of our proposals for a transformed Oxfordshire. In view of the successful partnerships and close working relationships that already exist in the north and west of the county, the Oxfordshire Districts have agreed to explore a four Unitary Option that includes both Cotswold District Council and South Northamptonshire Council.

The Unitaries would work in close partnership with the National Health Service, Police and the Local Enterprise Partnership in Oxfordshire and neighbouring county areas to lead to better joining up of services such as Health and Social Care and Children's services that need to be managed in partnership across a wider geographical area.

The idea of developing and testing these proposals have had strong support from all the Oxfordshire MPs and we have been encouraged by Government Ministers to work up our initial thoughts into a costed proposal.

There is clearly a lot of detail to be worked through over the coming months. We are now in the process of jointly commissioning a study from independent experts to look at all the available options

for unitary government to consider the best model for the provision of local government services for Oxfordshire's residents. Following advice from government on the criteria for the study, it will consider whether each of the options will:

- Deliver better public services.
- Provide value for money.
- Ensure strong and accountable local leadership and governance.
- Deliver efficiency savings
- Help to deal with the demographic pressures on adult social care and improve outcomes through integration with health services
- Ensure a system for children's services that delivers a robust approach to child protection and safeguarding.
- Help support economic and housing growth and secure the necessary infrastructure identified in our Devolution Deal proposals
- Benefit from potential service synergies from unitary authorities having responsibility for planning and delivering services such as spatial planning, economic development, housing, transport infrastructure, social care and health

The District Councils informed the County Council at an early stage that they had been encouraged to undertake this work and we invited their involvement. We are aware that they have decided to contact many local bodies to be critical of our approach and they have chosen to commission a separate study – this is regrettable.

We expect the District study to be completed by the end of June. The detailed proposals will be considered by each of the Councils and we will be consulting on the proposals over the summer. We hope for a decision by government in the autumn. If there are issues or questions you would like to raise at this stage, please let us know. We will be in touch when the detailed work on our proposals has progressed to seek your views on potential new structures. We look forward to working with you on this exciting opportunity for change. We are open to ideas and a significant public debate.