One Oxfordshire Proposal: Gap Analysis

This assessment of the One Oxfordshire proposal by the Oxford Civic Society (OCS) has used devolution governance criteria suggested by Professor Robin Hambleton[1] in his recent presentation to OCS. It does not revisit the recent essentially 'financial efficiency' assessments provided by consultants to the Districts / City and the County. The intention is to broaden the debate to include additional essential aspects of governance. The demand for devolution and governance reform includes the following:

- **Economic -** economic growth could be accelerated if the county (in whatever governance configuration) is less dependent on centralised funding. Devolution can enable localities to respond dynamically to the needs and opportunities of their economies.
- **Social -** devolution might lead to the development of more effective ways of tackling social challenges – for example, growing inequality, inadequate housing supply and issues relating to health, education and public safety. Devolution will, by integrating separate services more effectively, and by combining the efforts of the public, private and non-profit sector, enable a range of pressing social issues to be addressed in a more cost-effective way.
- **Environmental -** devolution can play a vital role in promoting sustainable development and the creation of more sustainable patterns of living. Devolution should promote sound spatial planning of city regions and a more coordinated approach to, for example, transport planning and urban growth management. Critically, devolution should foster policies specifically aligned with global, national and local emissions-reduction targets, and which recognise the imperative of responding to the likely effects of climate change.
- **Democratic –** devolution can bring government closer to the people, strengthen civic engagement and revitalise local democracy. Devolution should increase public involvement in local affairs and enliven local democracy.

The assessment also takes into account the government's response to the recent DCLG Select Committee[2] devolution report and in particular:

- *"The Government's key aim through this agenda is to support local places to identify and achieve their own objectives ….*
- *…. it is important to recognise that this iterative, bottom up approach to devolution has allowed for rapid progress in ensuring that devolution to local areas, and the creation of stronger local governance across functional economic areas, becomes a tangible reality ….*
- *…. the Government is clear that deals should be bottom-up, bespoke and place-led, in terms of the specific measures agreed but also in the way in which those measures are implemented locally ….*
- *…. inevitably, pioneering new measures carries greater challenges than implementing measures where there is a precedent, and both Government and places must rise to these challenges. In particular, this places even greater emphasis on the quality of the evidence base, business case and evaluation framework underpinning proposals ….*
- *…. the Government considers that the broad, enabling framework set out by the Cities and Local Government Devolution Act provides a good basis for the devolution agenda to continue to evolve over time. The Government's commitment to the ongoing devolution of substantial powers, including where these*

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[1] Robin Hambleton is Professor of City Leadership, Centre for Sustainable Planning and Environments at the University of the West of England, Bristol

[2] Government Response to CLG Select Committee Report: "Devolution: the next five years and beyond" Presented to Parliament by the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government by Command of Her Majesty, May 2016

touch on fiscal levers, is most notably demonstrated by the plans announced in October 2015 to move to 100% business rates retention within local government ….

- *…. the Government supports further exploration of health devolution to local areas and agrees with the Committee that devolution, in the right circumstances, has great potential to achieve considerable benefits for health and social care, including further support to progress towards better integration ….*

The following matrix attempts to assess the extent to which these demands for governance reform are being met in the One Oxfordshire proposals of the County Council. The purpose of the assessment is to respond to the County Council's current consultation and to enhance the current debate by offering constructive suggestions for governance reform which meets the demands[3].

One Oxfordshire Proposal

- The 'One Oxfordshire' proposal abolishes the existing two-tier structure of six councils (County Council plus five city and district councils) and replaces them with one, new unitary council.
- The unitary council would retain responsibility for decisions affecting Oxfordshire as a whole, including infrastructure, transport and housing. It would also determine policy for adult social care and public health services, integration of services with health partners, and children's services – meeting need and determining the allocation of resources across the County.
- Area Boards would be established based on the administrative boundaries of the current City and District Councils exercising delegated (but reduced) powers and budgets from those available to the Districts and City currently
- The proposal contains a commitment to explore further enhancements to the roles of Town and Parish Councils.

We are suggesting a subjective assessment of how far a proposal contributes to satisfying a criterion **C**ontributes [C-, C, C+] or **S**ubstantially **C**ontributes [SC]. Delivers [D] is also available, but not used thus far!

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[3] Please note that a further matrix has been prepared which assesses the alternative proposal of the Districts and City for three unitary authorities (UA) with a Combined Authority and Elected Mayor. This further matrix will be refined as the District and City proposal evolves.

Criteria	Comments	What more is needed?	Rating
Civic leadership • **Does the One Oxfordshire proposal provide for effective leadership - which includes the capacity to develop a Vision for Oxfordshire coupled with a governance arrangement that can ensure effective and accountable delivery of this Vision?**	• Not one of the listed objectives of the proposed new unitary council refers to the protection of the unique characteristics of the City of Oxford as the driver of the economic activity of the whole county, as the home of the leading University in the world, or as a world-famous tourist destination and an icon of cultural and architectural heritage – effective leadership with the capacity to develop a Vision for Oxfordshire would need to include an understanding of the key role of the City of Oxford in the County. • The proposed reduced urban management capacity of the City of Oxford would not contribute to effective County-wide leadership. • There is no clear explanation of how the number and area of representation of local councillors would be decided and by whom, and what the criteria for such determination might be. This will have a significant impact on county-wide leadership.	• An Elected Mayor is not proposed but with suitable accountability arrangements and Terms of Reference an elected Mayor might be able to transcend the existing political divisions and evident current urban and rural divide and build consensus around a Vision. • An explanation is needed of how the number and area of representation of local councillors would be decided (by a statutory Boundary Commission?), and by whom and what the criteria for such determination might be. This will have a significant impact on county-wide leadership. Would the representation reflect, for example, the geographic area, the population, or the economic importance of each Area or sub-Area? • An explanation is also needed of the impact county-wide of the proposal on current levels of civic engagement and much needed revitalisation of local democracy.	C- (C with an Elected Mayor)
Considered judgement (effective decision making) • *Does the One Oxfordshire Proposal support high quality decision-making processes that go beyond discovering the preferences of various stakeholders?* • *Devolution should, by integrating separate services more effectively, and by combining the efforts of the public, private and non-profit sector, enable a range of pressing social issues to be addressed in a cost-effective way.*	• County, district and city local authorities in Oxfordshire have been unable to effectively work together on a number of issues (including devolution proposals) and an explanation is needed of the causes of the coordination problems in order to justify proposals for addressing this. • An assessment of the quality of local democracy is missing, including how far communities and businesses are involved in public affairs. Would the One Oxfordshire lead to higher levels of involvement including turnout in local elections?	• As county, district and city local authorities in Oxfordshire have been unable to effectively work together on a number of issues (including devolution proposals) an explanation is needed of how this proposal can overcome the causes of the coordination problems whilst maintaining or enhancing local democracy. • Much more discussion is needed with Parish Meetings, Parish Councils, Town Councils and the unparished areas of the City on what devolution they would welcome and how they would discharge additional responsibilities	C-

Criteria	Comments	What more is needed?	Rating
• *Devolution should promote sound spatial planning of city regions and a more coordinated approach to, for example, transport planning and urban growth management*	• A single strategic county plan integrating transport infrastructure would be beneficial, but there are different ways to achieve this, not necessarily with a single unitary council. Similarly with social care – joined-up services would be more efficient but a single Unitary Authority is not the only way to achieve this, as evidenced by successful examples elsewhere. • The proposal notes that current governance structures fail to enable conclusive prioritisation across the county area, and fail to join up the development choices made by district planning authorities and the impact on local infrastructure. **This statement is indisputable, but there is no explanation of why a unitary county council is especially appropriate to meeting the challenges.**	including contributing to decision making processes • The proposal states that only a countywide strategic approach to housing and infrastructure policy combined with a structure of community engagement, neighbourhood planning and devolved decision making has the capacity to bring about the scale of change that the housing and infrastructure challenge requires. V**ery similar challenges are being resolved by different devolution and local authority reorganisation arrangements as in Cambridgeshire especially. An explanation is needed of why the One Oxfordshire proposal is the most appropriate in Oxfordshire, with thorough critiques of arrangements being made in similar contexts.**	

Transparency and efficiency
• ***Does the One Oxfordshire proposal make it clear (to other councillors, professionals and the public at large) who is making decisions, on what issues, when, why and how?***
   • *Transparency is fundamental not only in building trust and confidence in the political process, but also in ensuring efficiency.*
   • *Does the One Oxfordshire proposal bring government closer to the people, strengthen civic engagement and revitalise local democracy?*
	• In principle a single unitary county council authority should score well on this but lack of clarity on the characteristics of the Area Boards, Town and Parish Councils muddies the waters.
	
	• It is suggested that the One Oxfordshire proposal is not ready for consultation as there is no explanation of responsibilities to be delegated to Area Boards, with what budgets, and how the distribution of responsibilities and budgets would be set. At this stage it is not clear who would make decisions, on what issues, when, why and how.
	
	• Savings may not be as great as suggested – for example the costs of setting up Area Boards needs to be considered.
		• The proposal needs to explain in much more detail not only how Area Boards will work but also how Town and Parish councils would work with the Area Boards, their powers and accountability arrangements.
		
		• The proposal needs to explain how One Oxfordshire will bring government closer to the people, strengthen civic engagement and revitalise local democracy
		
		• Arrangements for ensuring efficiency of all aspects of the unitary council's work needs to be explained thoroughly – districts have been successful in reducing back-office costs for example including sharing back office support with other authorities. How the unitary council will be more efficient needs to be explained.
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Criteria	Comments	What more is needed?	Rating
		• The estimated £20m pa efficiency savings could be achieved with other devolution and reorganisation arrangements – the One Oxfordshire proposal needs to explain why it is the preferred option relative to other options which would be less disruptive and would not require abolition of existing elected district and city councils.	
Accountability and legitimacy • *Does the governance model ensure that decision-makers are held to account?* • *More specifically, are sound arrangements in place to ensure that there is effective scrutiny of decision-making by those seeking to hold the executive to account (non-executives, the public, other parties)?*	• Accountability of the Unitary Council is through the ballot box but the outcome is almost certain to be either Conservative or a coalition, with a single set of elected representatives operating at County and Area Board level. • Democratic representation at the Area Board level would be by a subset of county-wide unitary councillors – a single set of members would effectively work at both levels. • Is there a risk of failing to bridge the rural/urban divide in Oxfordshire (of which there is no discussion). Linked to this, how is accountability to the national growth imperatives to be achieved?	• As above there is an urgent need for an explanation of the proposed governance arrangements for the Area Boards • For example could consideration be given to leaders of each Area Board being provided with an automatic seat on the county-wide unitary executive board? • Scrutiny arrangements need to be explained for Area Boards as well as the Unitary Council and it's Cabinet.	C-

Inclusive public involvement
• *Does the governance model provide for effective public involvement in decision-making?*
    • *Does the One Oxfordshire proposal bring government closer to the people, strengthen civic engagement and revitalise local democracy?*
    • *Devolution should increase public involvement in local affairs and enliven local democracy.*
	• The County's outreach to town and parish councils and evident concern that these councils need to be integrated into the proposed unitary arrangements is welcome as it could strengthen public involvement. But the One Oxfordshire proposal provides no details of how this might work – it is not possible to comment on the proposal if such key features of the proposed implementation arrangements are missing.
	
	• Referring to Councillor numbers, it is stated that to determine councillor numbers for a new authority, a formal Local Government Boundary
		• The One Oxfordshire proposal needs more detail at Area Board level. For example does the City become multiple Parishes or a very big Town Council?
		
		• The existing Parish & Town Council model across the County needs review to ensure it can bear possible additional responsibilities.
		
		• The current LEP and OGB (which can perhaps be seen as a 'shadow unitary?') arrangement for public involvement in strategic matters is inadequate: how would the One Oxfordshire arrangement improve on the existing
			C-

Criteria	Comments	What more is needed?	Rating
	Commission review will be required. If implementation of the proposals will necessitate a Boundary Commission review, why not consider a Wiltshire / Swindon solution (e.g. a unitary county council and a separate unitary city council with expanded city boundaries)?	inadequate level of public involvement in strategic planning matters? • More explanation is also needed of the role of Area Boards in ensuring that social and environmental safeguards are incorporated into the county's statutory Local Plan. • An explanation is needed of the transition from the District and City statutory Local Plans to a single Unitary Council Local Plan. • Could the Area Boards include 'Development Forums' as proposed by OCS in its Futures Report?	
Inclusive business involvement • ***Does the model provide for the effective involvement of local business interests?*** • ***What role will local enterprise partnerships (LEPs) play in governance arrangements?*** • ***How will the unitary council assist local businesses***?	• Growth certainly needs to be managed, but this is not necessarily synonymous with the establishment of a single Unitary Council. • The means of involvement of the LEP may cause concern as the LEP is not elected and is essentially an advisory body. • On the evidence of the consultation response to the LEP's Strategic Economic Plan update there is much work to be done to improve the gathering and debate of business views. The One Oxfordshire proposal does not explain how it can improve on the existing level of business involvement and why a unitary council is appropriate.	• More explanation is needed of how the LEP would set the economic development agenda with the fully effective involvement of local business interests (note responses to recent SEP update) and the way in which the LEP is integrated into the unitary council and if there is a role for the Area Boards in economic development planning.	C-