

## Response to Oxfordshire County Council's 'One Oxfordshire' consultation.

28 February 2017

These comments from Oxford Civic Society on the One Oxfordshire proposal are accompanied by a Gap Analysis which has used devolution governance criteria suggested by Professor Robin Hambleton 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. In addition we have answered the questions posed in the on-line questionnaire but send this e-mail with the Gap Analysis attached as we find the questionnaire an inadequate vehicle to fully express our views.

Our conclusion is that the proposal is fatally incomplete and that it lacks a rigorous evaluation of existing governance arrangements in Oxfordshire and an adequate comparative analysis of arrangements being made in other counties, notably Cambridgeshire and Wiltshire.

The proposal to abolish the District and City Councils and replace them with Area Boards is ambitious, but the characteristics of the proposed Area Boards are not explained in enough detail to assess whether or not they are likely to be an improvement over existing arrangements with elected District and City Councils.

In particular there is no explanation of the potential impact on the City of Oxford and its residents, workers and students if the current city management arrangements are replaced with an Area Board with much reduced powers and budgets. It is difficult to understand how the proposal can fail to list as an objective of the proposed county level unitary council 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.

More work is needed on the One Oxfordshire proposal before it is ready for intensive debate throughout the County. Some suggestions for the additional work needed are set out below:

- 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.
- 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 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. Very 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.
- 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.
- 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.
- 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.
- 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 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 proposed Unitary Council'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?
- 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.

We hope that these points will be considered and that a more detailed one Oxfordshire proposal will be prepared which will be subject to further local consultation.

We also very much hope that two separate proposals for devolution / reorganisation will not be submitted to central government by conflicting groups of Oxfordshire local authorities. The lack of consensus is proving to be a major constraint to improving the quality of life for Oxfordshire's residents.