

CABINET

MINUTES of the meeting held on Thursday, 20 March 2025 commencing at 2.00 pm and finishing at 3.05pm

Present:

Voting Members: Councillor Liz Leffman – in the Chair
Councillor Dr Pete Sudbury (Deputy Chair)
Councillor Tim Bearder
Councillor John Howson
Councillor Dan Levy
Councillor Judy Roberts

Other Members in Attendance: Councillor David Bartholomew

Officers:

Whole of meeting Martin Reeves (Chief Executive) Lorna Baxter (Executive Director of Resources & Section 151 Officer), Stephen Chandler (Executive Director of People, Transformation and Performance), Kim Sawyer (Head of Legal and Governance), Helen Mitchell (Head of Public Affairs and Strategy), Chris Reynolds (Senior Democratic Services Officer)

The Cabinet considered the matters, reports and recommendations contained or referred to in the agenda for the meeting, together with a schedule of addenda tabled at the meeting, and decided as set out below. Except insofar as otherwise specified, the reasons for the decisions are contained in the agenda, reports and schedule, copies of which are attached to the signed Minutes.

47/25 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

(Agenda Item. 1)

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Neil Fawcett, Andrew Gant, Kate Gregory and Dr Nathan Ley.

48/25 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

(Agenda Item. 2)

There were none.

49/25 PETITIONS AND PUBLIC ADDRESS

(Agenda Item. 3)

4 Initial Response to Government: Statutory invitation for Local Government Reorganisation and Devolution

Cllr Bethia Thomas – Leader, Vale of White Horse District Council

Cllr Andy Graham – Leader, West Oxfordshire District Council

Cllr Susan Brown – Leader, Oxford City Council

Cllr Ian Middleton

**50/25 INITIAL RESPONSE TO GOVERNMENT: STATUTORY INVITATION
FOR LOCAL GOVERNMENT REORGANISATION AND
DEVOLUTION**

(Agenda Item. 4)

Cabinet had before it a report on interim proposals for Local Government reorganisation in response to a statutory invitation by the Government following publication of the Devolution White Paper on 16 December 2024. Since the receipt of the statutory invitation, all Councils across Oxfordshire had been working together on initial options accompanied by a single interim plan. The plan, and the three proposals, along with the statutory invitation were included in the report.

Cabinet were addressed by a number of speakers regarding the report and recommendations.

Councillor Bethia Thomas, Leader of Vale of White Horse District Council, expressed appreciation for the constructive engagement by her authority with Oxfordshire County Council on local government reorganisation and devolution. She referred to the Government's views of the necessity for a mayoral strategic authority to enable authorities to access the maximum benefits from devolution and supported recommendation 4 in the Chief Executive's report.

Councillor Andy Graham, Leader of West Oxfordshire District Council referred to his authority's their unanimous decision to support a two-unitary option for local government reorganisation. He emphasised the need to protect local services and maintain a local voice for residents. He stressed that residents needed to come first in any discussions around future options for local government.

Councillor Graham acknowledged the importance of financial sustainability but emphasised that councils should serve residents and enhance communities.

Councillor Susan Brown, Leader of Oxford City Council supported the creation of three strong unitary authorities in Oxfordshire, emphasising place-based thinking and the importance of maintaining a strong city and workable unitaries to the north and south of the city. She referenced the statement by the Minister of State for Local Government and English Devolution about the range of possible sizes for unitary authorities and the 500K number being an average population, not a minimum.

Councillor Brown acknowledged that there was a lot more work to be done on the proposals and looked forward to working together with other councils on the detailed proposals.

Councillor Ian Middleton, Leader of the Green Party Group at Oxfordshire County Council, expressed opposition to a single unitary authority, arguing that it would centralise decision-making and reduce local accountability. He supported the two-unitary model as it would maintain some degree of autonomy and recognise the character and needs of different areas. He emphasised that Oxfordshire was a diverse county with diverse local needs, which a single unitary authority might not address effectively.

Councillor Liz Leffman, Leader of the Council presented the report. She stated that the three proposals presented for restructuring: a single unitary authority, two unitary authorities including parts of West Berkshire, and three units which would include Greater Oxford and parts of Berkshire would be submitted to the Government. The County Council's preferred option was the single unitary authority, which the County Council supported.

The report emphasised the collaborative approach taken by the County Council in discussing these proposals, involving various councils and stakeholders. Councillor Leffman reminded members that the County Council currently delivered 85% of local government services, including crucial areas such as social care and highways, which would be impacted by any restructuring. She also referred to the importance of maintaining connections between scientific campuses across the county and the potential for devolving services to town and parish councils. There would be ongoing consultations depending on the Secretary of State's response to the proposals.

During discussion, members expressed strong support for a single unitary authority for Oxfordshire, citing the benefits of maintaining existing relationships, avoiding fragmentation of services, and ensuring financial stability. They commented on the challenges that smaller unitary authorities could face in funding services. There was the possibility of devolving some services to town councils to maintain local delivery within a single unitary structure.

Members also emphasised the importance of including Buckinghamshire in the preferred geography for a mayoral strategic authority, while noting that there were no current conversations with Buckinghamshire. It was planned to progress discussions with Berkshire and to include Buckinghamshire if they decided to join at a later date.

RESOLVED to:-

- a) note the receipt of the statutory invitation received from the Minister of State for Housing, Communities & Local Government on 5 February 2025;**

- b) agree to submit to Government the interim plan as set out in Appendix 1 and each option for local government reorganisation set out in Appendix 2 to 4;**
- c) agree that Oxfordshire County Council proposes and supports as its optimal model for re-organisation – a single county unitary for Oxfordshire as set out as option 1 in Appendix 2.**
- d) agree that as the constituent member of any future Mayoral County Combined Authority, the Cabinet's preferred geography for a Mayoral Strategic Authority is Berkshire, Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire.**
- e) endorse the Leader of the Council to correspond with Government, setting out the County Council's position with respect to local government reorganisation and devolution, and to hold meetings with Ministers on such matters in due course.**

.....in the Chair

Date of signing