

PERFORMANCE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

MINUTES of the meeting held on Thursday, 9 March 2017 commencing at 10.00 am and finishing at 12.30 pm

Present:

Voting Members: Councillor Liz Brighthouse OBE – in the Chair

Councillor Janet Godden (Deputy Chairman)
Councillor Yvonne Constance OBE
Councillor Patrick Greene
Councillor Jenny Hannaby
Councillor Stewart Lilly
Councillor Sandy Lovatt
Councillor Charles Mathew
Councillor John Sanders
Councillor David Williams (In place of Councillor Sam Coates)

Other Members in Attendance:

Councillor Nick Hards,
Councillor Jean Fooks
Councillor Michael Waine
Councillor David Bartholomew
Councillor Kieron Mallon
Councillor Lynda Atkins
Councillor Susanna Pressel
Councillor John Howson
Councillor Jamila Azad
Councillor Glynis Phillips (for Agenda Item 5)

Officers:

Whole of meeting Peter Clark, Chief Executive Officer; Maggie Scott, Assistant Chief Executive; Nick Graham, Director of Law and Governance; Lorna Baxter, Director of Finance; Jonathan McWilliam, Strategic Director for People; Bev Hindle, Strategic Director for Communities; Robin Rogers, Strategy Manager; Steven Jones, Corporate Performance and Risk Manager; Colm Ó Caomhánaigh, Committee Officer.

The Scrutiny Committee 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 agreed as set out below. Copies of the agenda, reports and additional documents are attached to the signed Minutes.

8/17 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND TEMPORARY APPOINTMENTS

(Agenda No. 1)

Apologies were received from Councillor Sam Coates (Councillor David Williams substituting).

9/17 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST - GUIDANCE NOTE ON BACK PAGE OF THE AGENDA

(Agenda No. 2)

There were no declarations of interest.

10/17 MINUTES

(Agenda No. 3)

It was agreed to defer consideration of the minutes of the meeting held on 5 January 2017 to the next regular meeting on 16 March 2017.

11/17 PETITIONS AND PUBLIC ADDRESS

(Agenda No. 4)

The following requests had been received to address the Committee:

Matthew Barber	Leader, Vale of White Horse District Council
Nick Hards	Didcot West
Jean Fooks	Wolvercote & Summertown
Michael Waine	Bicester Town
Kieron Mallon	Bloxham & Easington
David Bartholomew	Sonning Common
Lynda Atkins	Wallingford
Susanna Pressel	Jericho & Osney
Roz Smith*	Headington & Quarry

*Did not speak

It was agreed to take the speakers after the presentation on item 5.

12/17 PROPOSALS FOR THE FUTURE ORGANISATION OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT IN OXFORDSHIRE

(Agenda No. 5)

Mr Clark gave a presentation which outlined the “One Oxfordshire” engagement feedback, described what had changed in the “Better Oxfordshire” proposal and examined the Combined Authority and Mayor model.

While the doorstep survey showed 70% support for the One Oxfordshire proposal, the online questionnaire responses indicated 75% opposed to a single unitary. The engagement process also provided more detailed and qualitative feedback.

In response the “Better Oxfordshire” proposal includes

- a higher number of Area Executive Boards to improve local connection with natural communities as well as clarifying that local partners will be involved in the boards.
- a list of new arrangements for Oxford city including a new local council.
- options for council tax harmonisation.
- a commitment that existing local plans and five area planning committees will be retained until a strategic plan for Oxfordshire is in place.

Councillor Barber reported that the “Better Oxfordshire” proposal had been agreed by the Vale of White Horse Cabinet and Full Council. He had previously supported the multi-unitary proposal and opposed the original single unitary idea. However, the multi-unitary proposal was no longer viable and the “Option 6” version of the single-unitary was much improved. He decided to engage in that process and, following the latest changes in “Better Oxfordshire”, he can say that the proposal will be very good for the county.

The discussion was opened to all councillors present to make points for consideration by the Committee.

Councillor Mallon asked if the future Council after the elections in May could rescind any bid agreed by the current Cabinet. He asked how the Implementation Executive would be politically balanced and expressed concern that a single council would be too big and would not reflect the diversity within the county.

Councillor Pressel asked the Committee to be careful about accepting the results of the doorstep survey as many respondents would not have been aware of what would be lost in the single unitary proposal.

Councillor Williams congratulated officers on a very professional job and a very good consultation exercise. However, the proposal was flawed in reducing the level of local democracy. Oxfordshire was too big for one council. Many services were better delivered locally. He believed that three unitaries would be best.

Members raised concerns about tax changes and expressed different views on the number of members of the Implementation Executive. A larger executive could better represent different views but others were concerned that it would be less efficient.

Officers responded with the following points:

- The next council could decide that it didn’t support the proposal and the Secretary of State would take that into consideration under the requirement for a level of consensus.
- The options for council tax range from no change to levelling them. Even in the latter case the biggest change would be for West Oxfordshire at 4%.
- The unitary option allows the flexibility of doing things at the county level or a more local level depending on the particular service.

The Committee then discussed the issues raised and agreed to make the following points to Cabinet:

- The Committee recognised that Better Oxfordshire is only the start of a journey and that many of the principles and details will necessarily be for the Joint Committee and Implementation Executive to consider. The Scrutiny Committee was keen to ensure that there was adequate county councillor representation on both these bodies, and again stressed the importance of community voice informing the approach that is taken.
- Members were keen that individuals can clearly see what the proposals mean in terms of cost and local democracy, and in terms of what might be lost as well as gained.
- The Chair and members praised officers for their work in developing the proposal, noting that the process had been very open to collaboration with members, stakeholder groups and individual residents.
- The Committee welcomed the fact that the proposal had been adopted by the Cabinet and Council of the Vale of White Horse.
- “Option 6” that emerged from the Grant Thornton report greatly improved the unitary proposal in recognising the need for more local empowerment.
- However, there was still a concern that more community involvement needs to be embedded in the structure – in the City Convention, the Area Boards and the Joint Committee work to ensure that the new authority is built up from community to implementation.
- This work must recognise that communities are not just determined by places but also by issues and cultures.
- It’s not clear if budgets will be devolved proportionally or by a bidding system.
- It is being proposed that the new local council for Oxford has a precept. It must be clear that this is to pay for better services and that residents are not paying more for the same services.
- Having too many Area Executive Boards could dilute their effectiveness.
- There is already a problem with lack of diversity among councillors and the reduction in the number of councillors could make that worse.
- How will the Implementation Executive be balanced, politically and in terms of cabinet members or ‘backbenchers’?
- The City Convention should specifically include engagement with BME communities.
- The new council when elected may not include many experienced councillors and the unitary structure will be new to all, so training and member development will be important.
- There needs to be an awareness of the problems for areas on the political boundaries – both the county boundaries and divisions within the county.
- The new council needs to prioritise income generation.

AGREED: (by 9 votes to 1, Councillor Williams voting against) that Cabinet is asked to note the comments from the Performance Scrutiny Committee and in particular to ensure that there is significant community involvement in shaping the development of the Area Executive Board model.

..... in the Chair

Date of signing

2017