

PERFORMANCE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

MINUTES of the meeting held on Tuesday, 13 September 2016 commencing at 2.00 pm and finishing at 4.30 pm

Present:

Voting Members: Councillor Liz Brighthouse OBE – in the Chair

Councillor John Christie (In place of Councillor John Sanders)
Councillor Sam Coates
Councillor Yvonne Constance OBE
Councillor Janet Godden
Councillor Mark Gray
Councillor Patrick Greene
Councillor Jenny Hannaby
Councillor Steve Harrod (Deputy Chairman)
Councillor Stewart Lilly
Councillor Michael Waine (In place of Councillor Charles Mathew)

Other Members in Attendance:

Councillor Richard Webber
Councillor Alison Rooke
Councillor Nick Hards
Councillor Anne Purse
Councillor Mark Cherry
Councillor Laura Price
Councillor John Howson
Councillor Mark Gray
Councillor Pete Handley
Councillor Jean Fooks
David Williams
Councillor John Tanner
Councillor James Mills (for Agenda Item 5)

Officers:

Lorna Baxter, Chief Finance Officer; Peter Clark, County Director; Simon Furlong, Assistant Chief Fire Officer; Bev Hindle, Acting Director of Environment & Economy; John Jackson, Director of Adult Social Services; Jim Leivers, Director for Children's Services; Jonathan McWilliam, Director of Public Health, Maggie Scott, Chief Policy Officer; John Courouble, Sue Whitehead and Steven Jones (Corporate Services)

The Scrutiny Committee considered the matters, reports and recommendations contained or referred to in the agenda for the meeting and agreed as set out below. Copies of the agenda and reports are attached to the signed Minutes.

35/16 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND TEMPORARY APPOINTMENTS

(Agenda No. 1)

Apologies were received from Councillor Mathew (Councillor Waine substituting) and Councillor John Sanders (Councillor Christie substituting).

36/16 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST - GUIDANCE NOTE ON BACK PAGE OF THE AGENDA

(Agenda No. 2)

Councillor Mills sought to declare an interest but the Chairman confirmed that he was speaking as an invited councillor and no declaration was required.

Councillor Constance indicated that she was a member of Vale of White Horse District Council. The County Director clarified that membership of a District Council did not constitute a disclosable pecuniary interest.

37/16 MINUTES

(Agenda No. 3)

The Minutes of the meetings held on 12 and 24 May 2016 were approved and signed as a correct record.

38/16 PETITIONS AND PUBLIC ADDRESS

(Agenda No. 4)

The following requests to address the Committee had been agreed by the Chairman:

Richard Webber	Leader, Liberal Democrat Group and Councillor for Sutton Courtenay & Marcham
Alison Rooke	Abingdon East
Nick Hards	Didcot West
Anne Purse	Wheatley
Mark Cherry	Banbury Calthorpe
Laura Price	Witney South and Central
John Howson	St Margaret's
Mark Gray	Benson & Cholsey
Pete Handley	Carterton South & West
Jean Fooks	Wolvercote & Summertown
David Williams	Leader of the Green Group, and Councillor for Iffley Fields & St Mary's
John Tanner	Isis
Neville Harris*	Didcot Ladygrove
James Mills	Witney West & Bampton

* Did not speak

39/16 REPORTS INTO THE FUTURE OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT IN OXFORDSHIRE

(Agenda No. 5)

Performance Scrutiny Committee had before them the outcome of the two reports into the future of local government in Oxfordshire, in order to make recommendations to Cabinet regarding the next steps in response to them. All members of the Council had been invited to speak.

In the light of comments from a number of County Councillors and following presentations from representatives of Grant Thornton and the County Director the Committee considered the two reports and discussed the following issues:

- The importance of focusing on the needs of the residents of Oxfordshire and people who use Council services, not the needs of institutions.
- The areas of agreement in the two reports; that the status quo is not acceptable and that unitary government is the way forward.
- The need to have an open public debate around the best option in order to reach a position to put to Government.
- The risk that a pattern of smaller unitaries would not deliver the same scale of savings, and that individual areas, in particular Oxford City, could be rendered financially unviable due to their high levels of need and low levels of income.
- The need for joined-up planning of growth, land use, housing, and infrastructure for the county's functional economic area through a structure plan - noting for example that the Oxfordshire knowledge spine currently encompasses part of four separate district areas and therefore local plans.
- The irrational situation and poor perception created when districts and counties are making conflicting budget decisions.
- The importance of parishes and town councils as part of the local devolution offer.
- What evidence of local agreement is required by the Government in order to give a proposal the 'green light' and what change the new Prime Minister and Cabinet have brought to this agenda.
- The views of government on whether an elected Mayor was a requirement or not.
- How the Boundary Committee would operate to determine the number and apportionment of Councillors in a new unitary.
- How a multi-unitary option would function through a Combined Authority, including the lack of any clear precedent for delegating responsibilities for services to children, education, and families and schools.
- The importance of working together with the other Councils for the benefit of residents and stakeholders to create that broad consensus required by government
- The potential lack of visibility and accountability of a Combined Authority in a multi-unitary scenario.
- The decisions to be made by any new authority in relation to council tax, reserves and assets.

- Whether it is reasonable to argue that a unitary county would be too large given that the proposed Combined Authority in a multi-unitary scenario would cover just as large an area.
- The benefits and risks of the options and how Option 6 could address the need for the single unitary option to demonstrate local working and empowerment. The committee recognised that more work would be needed on the detail of Option 6.

Following discussion it was proposed by Councillor Harrod, seconded by Councillor Greene and by a show of hands it was:

AGREED: (by 8 votes for, with 2 against and 1 abstention) that Performance Scrutiny welcomes the report put forward by Grant Thornton. In light of the savings potential coupled with the localism inherent in the proposal that supports local democracy, the Performance Scrutiny Committee recommends that Cabinet directs officers to investigate thoroughly the proposal put forward by Grant Thornton as Option 6, including the detail of what powers could be delegated, such as setting of local precepts.

Furthermore, Cabinet should make every effort to present Option 6 as a viable alternative to the District and City Councils, with a view to working with stakeholders to present a broad consensus to Government in order to move forward the process of transforming local government in Oxfordshire, for the benefit of local residents and people who use services.

..... in the Chair

Date of signing 2016