CABINET – 19 JULY 2016

INTERIM REPORT OF GRANT THORNTON'S INDEPENDENT REVIEW OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT STRUCTURES IN OXFORDSHIRE

Report by Chief Policy Officer

Introduction

1.   On the 25 February 2016, the city and district councils of Oxfordshire launched a proposal to abolish the existing county and district councils and replace them with four unitary councils and a combined authority; the proposal initially included extending the county boundaries to include Cotswold District Council and South Northamptonshire Council.

2.   In response to the city and districts' proposal the county council proposed an independent review of local government structures in Oxfordshire. The city and district councils began to commission a study from PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC) into the future of local government.

3.   The county council were willing to join the city and districts' study so long as certain assurances were made, these were:

   1.   An independent person was appointed to co-ordinate and be the main contact with the organisation completing the study.
   2.   A stakeholder group was formulated, which included not just Districts and the County but other key stakeholders.
   3.   All options were treated equally with no preferences.
   4.   That no particular organisation was given preferential access to revisions for the final report.

4.   Unfortunately the city and districts refused the opportunity to take part in a joint study, and were unable to guarantee the objectivity of their study and the engagement of stakeholders.

5.   Oxfordshire County Council wanted a study that identifies the best solution for efficient delivery of services to the residents of Oxfordshire. Oxfordshire County Council believes it is important that service delivery improvements shape any new structures for local government in Oxfordshire, rather than a preconception of structure dictating the solution.

6.   Therefore in early May Oxfordshire County Council appointed Grant Thornton UK LLP to consider how local government could be reorganised to reduce costs, improve service outcomes, support economic growth, enhance local engagement and empowerment, and provide strong and accountable leadership.

7.   Grant Thornton's brief was to undertake an objective, evidence-led review of all options, including the status quo:

1) 4 New Unitary Authorities
A Southern Oxfordshire Unitary - covering the area currently administered by Vale of White Horse and South Oxfordshire District Councils serving a population of 261,867.

An Oxford City Unitary -covering the area currently administered by Oxford City Council serving a population of 157,997.

A West Oxfordshire & Cotswold Unitary - covering the area currently administered by West Oxfordshire District Council and Cotswold District Council serving a population of 192,795.

A Cherwell & South Northants Unitary - covering the area currently administered by Cherwell District Council and South Northamptonshire Council serving a population of 232,658.

N.B. This option subsequently changed to no longer include Cotswold District Council and South Northamptonshire Council after the districts' decided that cross-boundary unitary options are too complicated at this stage, and would cause lengthy delays.

2) 3 Unitary authorities
A Southern Oxfordshire Unitary - covering the area currently administered by Vale of White Horse and South Oxfordshire District Councils serving a population of 261,867.

An Oxford City Unitary -covering the area currently administered by Oxford City Council serving a population of 157,997.

A Northern Oxfordshire Unitary Authority covering the area currently administered by Cherwell District Council and West Oxfordshire District Council serving a population of 252,700.

3) 2 Unitary Authorities
An Oxford City Unitary based on expanding the existing boundaries of Oxford City to serve a total population of between 250,000 - 300,000

A Unitary Authority covering the remaining area of Oxfordshire outside the City Unitary serving a population of between 370,000 – 430,000

4) 1 Unitary Authority
A unitary authority covering the current administrative area of Oxfordshire, serving a population of 672,500.

5) The Status Quo
A county council for the administrative area of Oxfordshire, and five District Councils for South Oxfordshire, Cherwell, West Oxfordshire, Oxford City, and the Vale of White Horse.

8. The county council asked Grant Thornton to consider the local government structures that would address the following criteria:

    - **Service Delivery and Outcomes**: reforms should improve local service delivery and outcomes, particularly for the most vulnerable,
    - **Cost Savings and Value For Money**: reforms should deliver significant cost savings and drive value for money and long-term financial sustainability,
    - **Stronger Leadership**: reforms should provide stronger and more accountable strategic and local leadership,
    - **Economic Growth and Infrastructure**: reforms should drive economic growth and meet the infrastructure challenge, and,
    - **Local Engagement and Empowerment**: new structures should engage with communities and empower local areas

9. Grant Thornton will share an interim report with the county council for Cabinet's consideration, ahead of publication of a full report by the end of July 2016 that will then be considered by Cabinet in due course. The interim report will be published upon receipt by the county council, ahead of the Cabinet meeting on the 19 July 2016 as an addendum to this report.

    RECOMMENDATION

10. **The Cabinet is RECOMMENDED to** consider Grant Thornton's interim report and ask officers to:
    (a) draw up proposals for the optimum future structure of local government in Oxfordshire taking account of the full findings of the Grant Thornton study once received
    (b) consult with county council members, residents of Oxfordshire and other key stakeholders to help shape the proposals; and
    (c) thereafter prepare a bid to be reviewed by Cabinet later in 2016 in advance of submission to central government.

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July 2016