

CABINET

MINUTES of the meeting held on Thursday, 9 January 2025 commencing at 12.00 pm and finishing at 1.25 pm

Present:

Voting Members: Councillor Liz Leffman – in the Chair
Councillor Dr Pete Sudbury (Deputy Chair)
Councillor Tim Bearder
Councillor Neil Fawcett
Councillor Andrew Gant
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), Anita Bradley (Director of Law & Governance and Monitoring Officer), 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.

1/25 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

(Agenda Item. 1)

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Kate Gregory and Dr Nathan Ley.

2/25 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

(Agenda Item. 2)

There were none.

3/25 PETITIONS AND PUBLIC ADDRESS

(Agenda Item. 3)

4 Devolution White Paper and Response

Dan Glazebrook

Councillor Susan Brown (Leader -Oxford City Council)

Councillor Alex Powell (Oxford City Council)

Councillor Bethia Thomas (Leader -Vale of White Horse District Council)

Councillor Andy Graham (Leader -West Oxfordshire District Council)

Councillor David Rouane (Leader -South Oxfordshire District Council)

Councillor David Hingley (Leader – Cherwell District Council)

Councillor Ian Middleton

Councillor Bob Johnston

Councillor Liz Brighthouse OBE

Councillor Eddie Reeves

4/25 DEVOLUTION WHITE PAPER AND RESPONSE

(Agenda Item. 4)

The Chair welcomed members, public speakers and observers to the meeting. She began her remarks by offering the Council's congratulations to Rob MacDougall, Chief Fire Officer and Director of Community Safety, who had been awarded the King's Fire Service Medal in the New Year Honour's List.

Cabinet had before it a report setting out a proposed response to the Government's Devolution White Paper published on Monday 16 December 2024.

The White Paper set out the most significant reforms to local government since the Local Government Act 1972. A significant element of the Paper progresses the English devolution agenda which commenced in 2009, providing powers to create Combined Authorities that would enable Councils to collaborate more formally to accelerate inclusive and sustainable economic growth.

Councillor Liz Leffman, Leader of the Council introduced the report which provided an overview of the government's White Paper published on 16 December, and thanked Helen Mitchell, Head of Public Affairs and Strategy and other officers for their work in preparing the report. The Leader commented she was not of the view that Oxfordshire was in a position to be part of the Devolution priority programme as there was a need for further

discussions with neighbouring authorities on agreeing definite proposals for a strategic combined authority and local government reorganisation.

Cabinet was then addressed by a number of speakers including members of the public and the leaders of the District Councils in Oxfordshire.

The following points were made by the speakers:-

- The importance of moving forward with devolution and reorganisation, suggesting a broader geography for a mayoral combined authority and the need for a larger devolved economic powers within the Southeast of England.
- A member of the public referred to the drawbacks of the current two-tier system of local government and concerns around the use of Growth Deal funds for the Oxpens Bridge project
- Some of the District Council Leaders were of the view that priority should be given to moving forward with the combined strategic authority first and that further detailed discussions were required on any proposals for structural reform of local government in Oxfordshire
- One member of the County Council expressed concern about the haste of the proposals, the lack of genuine consultation and the potential risks of the introduction of large unitary authorities
- Another member provided historical context on the previous reorganisation attempts in Oxfordshire, and supported the report's recommendations emphasising transparency in the decision-making process

Members then discussed the report and recommendations. The Head of Public Affairs and Strategy answered a number of questions and explained the current status of the Government's devolution process and timelines.

During discussion, several members raised concerns about the potential postponement of the County Council elections in May 2025 and the need to maintain the normal democratic processes during any period of reorganisation. There was general support for moving forward at pace with devolution and reorganisation to avoid uncertainty for all stakeholders including the Council's workforce.

RESOLVED to:

- a) Note the publication of the Devolution White Paper and the emerging impacts for Oxfordshire County Council and local government in Oxfordshire;**
- b) Agree the response to Government for issue by 10 January 2025 (as set out in Appendix 1);**

- c) Request that Government places Oxfordshire into a ‘fast track’ programme to progress local government reorganisation ambitions first and continue to work with partners on a future Mayoral Strategic Authority;**
- d) Express to Government the County Council’s significant concerns in postponing ordinary elections in 2025, but that it would accept a postponement if it can commit to the most ambitious timescale of elections to a new shadow Council/Councils in May 2026.**

.....in the Chair

Date of signing