

## Detailed note on Oxfordshire Devolution – Themed Debate

On 4 September, the Leaders of the six Oxfordshire Authorities, along with the Local Enterprise Partnership and the Clinical Commissioning Group submitted an expression of interest to government setting out initial proposals for devolution in Oxfordshire for discussion with government. The proposals requested greater local control over significant funding for transport, skills training and health services.

At its meeting on 20 October Cabinet agreed that a debate should be held at full Council in order to understand all members' views. Council had before them a report (CC12) which gave an overview of the context, the proposals, and the current work underway and set out the next stages in the process.

Accordingly, the Council had before them a report on Devolution (CC12).

Councillor Ian Hudspeth moved and Councillor Rose seconded the recommendation as set out on the face of the Agenda.

In moving the recommendations, Councillor Hudspeth opened the debate by saying that with no template, devolution could be a fantastic opportunity for Oxfordshire. At the start of the summer there was an opportunity for areas to bid for devolution of powers. By working with the district councils, the city council, the local enterprise partnership and particularly health we got together and worked very hard over the summer putting forward the expression of interest that is here as part of the agenda pack and that was before the 4 September. It was good to see that everybody was sitting round the table and working for it and we got that bid in.

Nationally there were 34 submissions mainly around skills & employment, transport, housing & planning, fiscal and particularly the 100% retention of business rates. which of course, now the Chancellor has said that 2020 will have that retention of business rates. What that mean in real terms we will have to wait and see as there has got to be some redistribution around the country. Only about half of those submissions included integrated health & social care services, and of course that is one of the key elements of our proposal.

During the debate, individual members made the following comments:

- 1) The commitment to devolution seemed to be made under great pressure coming from the Scottish Referendum.
- 2) The proposal on page 67, regarding getting rid of the requirement for district councils to have a five year land supply for housing was welcomed.
- 3) It was felt that Devolution was a high risk strategy as it was going to have at best a limited democratic accountability and would leave real power in the hands of very few. As with the Growth Board where information about very important and high impact projects was buried in second and tertiary annexes and reports that took a lot of teasing out.
- 4) Was there any mechanism for real formal scrutiny of what was being proposed.
- 5) Transformative step change in service delivery across health, social care and wellbeing – A member stated that although the plans as set out in the paper Oxfordshire Devolution were laudable and ambitious, they remained concerned that the with a shrinking social care budget and an NHS struggling to keep pace

with the needs of an aging population that the Council would be hard pressed to achieve the deliverables without additional resources. Even a potential 9% saving looked optimistic and even if achieved still leaves a significant shortfall. There was some hope of additional funding hinted at in the last sentence on page 73 about using developer contributions to support health provision. This would have to be year on year guaranteed funding and as a funding source needed careful consideration.

- 6) The proposals looked process heavy and funding light. Working with the NHS to reduce duplication, shift care into community settings and improving communication would improve the patient experience and health outcomes. The move towards integration is the right thing to do for patients and carers, but might not result in any significant savings.
- 7) Contractualisation had been a continual process. We are seeing a situation in care homes, all our care homes are under contract to various different charities and trusts, again losing power, losing influence.
- 8) The last 35 years we have had local decision making taken away.
- 9) If we really want devolution we need to take some control of economic development. Why have we got an unelected LEP spending £100 million?
- 10) There was an acceptance that there was duplication, confusion and oversupply in some curriculum areas when the Council are facing so many cuts in so many other areas of the Council's budget. If there was a real move towards devolution we might be able to ask that some of that money could be moved into other allied areas to skills, perhaps in relation to children's centres and the hubs that might help bring people into employment in other ways and introduce them to new skills.
- 11) The government had in the latest round of tax cuts reduced corporate tax yet again and it was only fair that employers should be bearing some of the cost of the skills training to allow us to spend the money on services for the community.
- 12) We have seen a whole host of privatisations; compulsory competitive tendering and now we have seen a lot of out sourcing, contractualisation. We are no longer providers we are commissioners.
- 13) What exactly did the word devolution mean; it obviously means different things if you happen to be in Scotland than if you happen to be in Oxfordshire. So far all I can make out is that it means that we are going to get one form of central funding changed for a different kind of funding. It won't amount to an awful lot more; we might manage to manipulate the figures a little but not a lot more. We won't really be any better off by the end of that kind of restructuring exercise unless there is something else in it for the government and it is that last bit that is where the excitement lies. I would suggest trying to negotiate new ideas and that we want to really just take note of that and perhaps try and influence it as well.
- 14) We have got to grab everything we can from wherever we can for the people of Oxfordshire particularly when we are in the position we are in relation to our budget.
- 15) It hasn't been properly thought through. It seems as if they are throwing at us a whole series of questions about what they want us to do as local government. We have officers working on this when actually we have already cut the officers we have got in this authority to the bone and we have got them rushing around doing the things which the mandarins in central government should be doing.
- 16) Concerned was expressed about the whole devolution agenda. Central government should do the job that it was elected to do and to look at what

devolvement around England should look like in the light of what it looks like in the other countries.

- 17) The concept of Oxfordshire devolution is not only initiative and exciting but there will be huge demands placed on us all ensure success in taking devolution forward.
- 18) It was welcomed that the submission to government majored on the themes that were expressed in the report. The themes were diverse and yet would present difficulties going forward for us to achieve success. The submission of the expression of interest took place over a very short period of time and is only a very small part of what will be a much longer, challenging and resource intensive process as discussion progresses both here locally and with central government.
- 19) All the partners who have signed up to the expression of interest will have to be aware that there will be a requirement to seed and relinquish some power and control from their own individual organisations for the greater good of working together in a seamless manner. There will be a requirement for budget making processes to be aligned currently local authority and health are not. There would have to be complete trust between each of our organisations.
- 20) We are one of only a few local authorities who have truly pooled budgets and there is of course joint working with ourselves and health, but true devolution would ensure that there would be a seamless service and that the pathway that the patient takes from health into social care would become one and thus far similar and more cost effective for the user. Although there will be of necessity more meeting and this could lead to just a talking shop culture but to join with health could give the LA more influence over NHS and equally NHS more influence over ourselves. We have to ensure that in the present financial situation, the health is currently in is stabilised and the commissioning of services would be required to be completely reorganised competitive tendering verses preferred bidder as at now.
- 21) It has been well recognised in the past that Oxfordshire's attractiveness in terms of attracting businesses and so on was based very much on the attractiveness of Oxfordshire as a County as an environment. There is nothing of that in this report. This is a hard nose document. Can we not behave with a heart? Manchester City behaved with a heart when it went for its City deal it took a lot of time to develop plans for public transport and sustainability in general. We did not, why can we not show a little bit more softness when we go into bidding for money?
- 22) Devolution is obviously a very good thing in principal; it's good that services should be closer to the people who use them so that they are more accountable.
- 23) Is it the Eric Pickles type of devolution where it is devolution as long as you agree with me? Why is this particular model being offered, is it a con to give us responsibility to councils without the money to deliver them, is it designed to defect blame from central government for under-resourced public services?
- 24) We have obviously got an affordability crisis in the county, house prices are going up and up. This document does not do anywhere near enough to address. Just talking about and focussing on key worker housing is not going to address the systemic problem with house prices in this county, we want to see power to deliver more social housing that is protected from property speculators and to make sure that is kept in perpetuity for local people who can afford those homes.

- 25) We don't want to see the whole economic development strategy going to the LEP where our own councillors can't even see the minutes of their meetings.
- 26) This clearly is not real devolution if the government genuinely believed in devolution to local government it would simply transfer power to local government it would not have strings attached every time they did it. It certainly would not dictate what form of local democracy a particular area should have in order to access more resources to do the things that need to be done.
- 27) What the government is really doing is trying to squeeze local government so that we find ways, more ways, of delivering things even more cost effectively at a local level, that is not necessarily a bad thing if we can find ways to do it that mean that the pressure on us is reduced compared to what it would otherwise be.
- 28) From what I have seen so far it looks a little bit too much to me everyone is defending their turf. If that continues then we won't get the benefits of this approach. It also means a form of leadership which is transparent and accountable.
- 29) If we elect a governor, a mayor for the whole of Oxfordshire, if they get something wrong we can't boot them out, we have to stick with them for at least 5 years.
- 30) I think the reality is that what we are talking about is not devolution, we are talking about further centralisation and that what this will end up with less money, fewer powers for local people and less democracy.
- 31) I think we really do need to focus this growth board to work properly together and to agree things that we can all get behind or we are not going to be in a position to persuade anybody to give us the money.
- 32) It is important that we don't get hung up on the elected mayor issue at this stage. What we should be looking at is the list of items that we might get something out of and trying to work out what we can achieve in those areas, in particular: skills & employment, transport, business support enterprise and innovation.
- 33) There are two areas where I think there is a lot to be gained, but it is only to be gained if we actually work together on them, those two areas are health and wellbeing where you have got this issue with it being split responsibilities a lot of it is being done by the Clinical Commissioning Group, some of it is being done by us, some of it as we have been reminded is being done by the private sector and there are various aspects of that where the district councils and the city council all have an input we need to bring all that together if we can.
- 34) The public estate, the county, the district, the city and the health authority need to look at what assets we have and how to make best use of them and to try and work out something together and if that comes out of this devolution agenda then we will have achieved something worthwhile but we have got to get that.
- 35) We need a lot of additional housing and Devolution may achieve this.
- 36) The next document will give greater explanation to how devolution will work and how partnerships will work together.
- 37) We have very high density of employment, particularly in Headington. I am worried that we don't have the infrastructure to cope with it.

The Leader of the Council thanked members for a very useful debate. In summing up, he reminded members that any deal would come back to Council for approval to be signed off and that there was no money for this devolution – it was about finding a local solution.