

WEST OXFORDSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL
COUNCIL - WEDNESDAY, 22 FEBRUARY 2017
ONE OXFORDSHIRE UNITARY PROPOSALS

REPORT OF THE HEAD OF PAID SERVICE AND STRATEGIC DIRECTOR

(Contact: Frank Wilson, Tel: (01993) 861291)

I. PURPOSE

To advise the Council of the latest proposals of the County Council through its One Oxfordshire project and to seek (i) urgent funding for some consultancy support to protect the interests of the residents of West Oxfordshire; and (ii) authority for the Leader to respond to the proposals.

2. RECOMMENDATIONS

- (a) That additional funding of £25,000 be approved, in order to finance the current communications strategy and other actions to protect the services and democratic mandate of West Oxfordshire residents, to be financed from the anticipated underspends in the 2016/17 revenue budget; and
- (b) That the Leader of the Council be requested to respond to the proposals following feedback from Councillors at this meeting.

3. BACKGROUND

- 3.1. On 18 January 2017 Council debated the Cabinet recommendation that Full Council should support a Combined Authority and Directly Elected Mayor model in support of a devolution bid which would enable the accessing of significant infrastructure funding.
- 3.2. During the debate the Leader confirmed that, despite advice to the contrary, the County Council was likely to continue its twin track approach of supporting both a devolution bid and a Unitary Oxfordshire proposal. Indeed during the Council meeting the County Council launched a public consultation on its proposals entitled 'One Oxfordshire'.
- 3.3. The consultation has taken a number of forms and has been supported by a dedicated website, radio and printed media advertising and a series of drop in events held at libraries. The advice on the website is that the cost of this is £200,000.
- 3.4. It is for Councillors to determine their own perceptions of the survey but feedback from the public and Parish Councils was that the survey is extremely leading and does not portray the alternative options available to the residents of Oxfordshire that could indeed save more than the One Oxfordshire proposal.
- 3.5. In light of the decision of Cabinet and Full Council in January and, utilising budget previously allocated, officers have sought to ensure that residents are presented with a more balanced picture of the risks of the One Oxfordshire model. This has taken the form of providing a short briefing note to Councillors and Parishes and some visual information to be displayed locally. In addition the Communications Team have commenced an information campaign on Social Media which has been backed up by articles in the newspaper by the Leader.
- 3.6. More recently the District Councils of South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse seem to have moved their positions to support an amended One Oxfordshire model. The details of these amendments remain unknown.

- 3.7. It is not entirely clear why the two southern Oxfordshire districts have changed their position but more recently the suggestion from them (and the County Council leader) is that the devolution deal has no chance of success and therefore a Unitary Oxfordshire County remains the only solution. It is the view of your officers that this does not accurately reflect the current position of government and this has been substantiated by comments from the Minister in the last week or so that suggest devolution remains a government priority.
- 3.8. Given all of the above officers have continued to pursue the Councils stated aim of a devolution deal to deliver much needed infrastructure finance as a priority. It is the belief of officers that the Unitary debate will not assist this process and consequently should be parked until a devolution deal is struck and a combined authority starts to deliver on the infrastructure priorities.
- 3.9. To support the position of the Council and residents officers have so far:
- Commissioned some local communications and a residents letter
 - Set up an on-line survey and encouraged residents to respond to the county survey
 - Commissioned some independent market research
- 3.10. The above costs have been met from the original funds set aside for the independent PwC report and for subsequent residents engagement. These funds are now fully committed and officers are requesting additional funding of £25,000 to complete the process to ensure a full picture is given to residents and the risks of a Unitary County proposal are properly considered.
- 3.11. Further work will include the potential for a legal review of the position taken by the County Council and potentially the Secretary of State should the County press ahead with a submission that does not have a broad consensus.
- 3.12. It is the view of the Leader that the One Oxfordshire proposal should also be measured alongside alternate options including the current stated Council position of transformed two tier working together with a combined authority and devolution deal.

4. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 4.1. The Council previously set aside £50,000 to support a devolution deal that included a proposition for a number of Unitary Councils in Oxfordshire. These funds were not fully spent as the Council agreed, along with other Councils in Oxfordshire, to suspend its Unitary proposals and focus on the devolution deal as the best prospect for infrastructure funding for the County.
- 4.2. The proposal still being pursued by the County Council and now Vale of White Horse and South Oxfordshire District Councils does not have a broader consensus and it is believed there are significant risks to residents of West Oxfordshire if the proposals are not countered in a robust and evidenced way.
- 4.3. Officers recommend that Council approves an additional allocation of £25,000 to support the current efforts to ensure West Oxfordshire residents are able to get a fuller understanding of the risks and benefits of the Unitary County proposal and the alternative options available.

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Background Papers:

None.