

Public Consultation Feedback

We have received 18 items of feedback covering the four different council areas. The consultation was advertised on each council's website, on their social media channels, and through the local newspapers and on their websites.

The comments have been placed below under the headings 'In Favour', 'Neutral/mixed feelings' and 'Against'. Comments have been edited to make the main points clear.

In favour

1. I read with great interest your proposals for amalgamation of services. Having been a CEO of a \$500M business where constant efficiency improvement and cost reduction whilst improving customer satisfaction was the paramount objective then keep doing the same with our services.

Keep up the good work and tell us how you are succeeding as well.

2. Yes I agree with the approach.

3. In my view, where considerable investment is needed in technology, it makes sense to band together to create one system into which investment can be made to keep it up to date, rather than the separate authorities patching defective systems, providing clients are readily able to contact Council personnel – particularly if they do not have access to a computer or are not technically minded. This might apply to IT, Revenue and Benefits and finance and payroll.

Regarding legal and HR, providing the Local Authorities are committed to having in place high calibre staff and providing staffing levels are correct, this would appear to make sense. However, there is a perception in the Forest of Dean that where it is in competition with areas to the east, particularly in the Cotswold, it loses out, so systems would need to be in place to ensure that cases were dealt with on an even handed basis.

4. I do agree with this approach.

Who would not be in favour of intelligent, efficient use of resources, but I am particularly keen that we don't lose the benefits of the close working relationships with the District Council that really are notable compared to the rather distant and disconnected county view.

It is clear that you have had some success in collaborating and combining some services, so please learn from your successes and maybe even from the failures.

5. I would like to register my support for the increasing cooperation between West Oxfordshire District Council and its neighbours in Gloucestershire (Cotswold, Cheltenham and Forest of Dean) as presented in the 2020 Vision proposals. I have been particularly impressed by the collaboration between West Oxfordshire and Cotswold District Councils, which has developed over the past several years. Not only has this been successful, but it reflects the shared physical and human geography of the two districts in a way that local authority partnerships sometimes seem to ignore. Further development of these relationships (including Cheltenham and Forest of Dean) clearly offers vital economic benefits. But is also builds on a shared regional identity, which does I suggest, make sense to the people of the area and is also perhaps a reason why it will stand a better chance of working.

Neutral/mixed feelings

6. Interesting possibilities. Presumably we will have less Councillors too? Any numbers yet?
7. Having investigated further and realising the progress made to date, I unfortunately must question the efficiencies actually obtained, apart from a minimal reduction in cost, given that they are not without their problems relating to service delivery, which in a number of areas, appears worse and therefore not working as well as one implies.

I am aware of the activities being undertaken in Cheltenham and fully supportive of their approach given their uniqueness. Similarly the Forest of Dean is also a unique area and I would suggest that issues of public protection, building control (planning services), environmental matters, property and customer services should remain under local control.

The more generic support areas such as HR, finance and payroll could readily be shared services with another local authority providing of course that the level of service delivery does not suffer.

While IT support tends to be more global these days, with the increasing threat posed by interruptions caused by external influences, it is considered important to retain some level of in-house expertise as an emergency fall-back situation: gross failure of an IT system will undoubtedly bring down the business of The Council.

I also have mixed feelings over the sharing of legal expertise as this covers many facets, some of which relate directly to in-house services and delivery. Perhaps a potential mix of legal expertise could be considered.

It is vitally important that we continue to protect services while looking at other options but sometimes further cost savings removes from an area as unique as the Forest of Dean its

historical knowledge and local identity which is worth securing for the community as a whole.

8. The sharing of services with neighbouring authorities at WODC, so far, has been successful in saving money. This is to be applauded. However, there does seem to some falling off in efficiency. Queries are taking longer to be addressed and information given is not always accurate. It would appear that officers are becoming increasingly stretched and failing to live up to the high standards they used to offer to residents of the District. Until this problem is addressed there should be a pause in this proposal to share even more services. Any further dilution of the high standards the public have come to expect of WODC would be regrettable.

9. Brize Norton Parish Council

BNPC have reviewed the published Final Report “A 2020 Vision for Joint Working” and the minutes of the February 2015 Programme Board Meeting (the latest set of minutes on the website). Based on this information BNPC feel that there is insufficient published data to provide a meaningful review of the proposals and their likely impact on the Parish or its incumbents.

As a Parish we naturally welcome cost savings where they can be made without significantly impacting the services provided by WODC to the village. However until we know the detail as to what is being impacted for what saving we are unable to comment further.

10. Witney Town Council

Although the Town Council would applaud WODC for the savings made to date and therefore being able to maintain a low Council Tax for its residents, Members are concerned that shared services across different Counties will dilute local knowledge and commitment.

The Town Council’s Senior Officers no longer have close working relationships with the management team and heads of services, and it is increasingly difficult to reach key personnel when needed.

Communication and knowledge are key and keeping stakeholders such as the Town and Parish Councils informed is important.

11. Cirencester Town Council

In principle, Cirencester Town Council supports initiatives which deliver efficiency and cost savings. However, any review of this nature should consider how services can be improved.

Sharing public facing services could have a detrimental impact on the local community; performance indicators could become more generic and there could be less flexibility in being able to meet local needs which across a large delivery area may well be different from parish to parish and town to town.

Similar concern to that expressed through the Programme Board minutes of February 2015 is echoed by Cirencester Town Council in seeking to ensure that democratically elected members are not distanced from the involvement, scrutiny and accountability in service commissioning and delivery of front line services.

Mechanisms must be in place to ensure that there are high standards of locally accountable service delivery, with measures to ensure that there is sufficient training and knowledge in place; for example officers in Cheltenham Borough Council having adequate local knowledge to be able to respond to Cotswold related customer queries.

Service level agreements must be robust enough to deal with poor service performance, as well as break clauses enabling services to be alternatively delivered if local needs are not being effectively met.

We look forward to receiving more detailed information on the proposals as and when available and trust that town and parish councils across the respective local authority areas will be kept informed of progress and decision making.

Against

12. Your so called sharing of IT is a joke and is not working successfully. The people in charge of IT are not adequately trained. The IT equipment is out of date.

Running several versions of office is asking for problems.

13. It is really difficult to comment on the "Vision" proposals since there seems to be a lack of detailed information but I am very cautious of this approach.

My initial concerns are with a shared customer service provision. How can we be assured that the needs of residents in Cheltenham will be met? The merger covers a wide, wide area. How will I get the best, knowledgeable service from someone based in West Oxford or wherever?

I am also very concerned about potential job losses. As a big local employer will this proposal result in job losses for local people? How is this good for the local economy?

Personally, I would welcome a council tax increase instead of this. I am happy to contribute to services that benefit us all and I disagree with the ongoing freezes.

14. Regarding Building Control, I cannot see how a sharing of services would assist in the slightest. Officers need to be able to cover the ground physically, and to be familiar with the locality. Much of what they do depends on good relations built up in the area. I would be against sharing of services in this area.

15. Whilst the shared services initiative is laudable, I have severe reservations about the practical governance of any institution when there are 4 elected bodies involved & the increased opportunities for 'misuse' by some Councillors, unless stricter ethical standards are implemented.

I'm afraid unless tighter controls cross-boundary are imposed on the personal activities of Cabinet Members involved in shared authorities your 2020 Vision is a recipe for scandal.

16. Burford Town Council

Experience of current shared working arrangements is not encouraging. Witney to the Forest of Dean is a round trip of 55 miles with poor mobile phone connectivity. Officers making this trip 3 times a week lose 10 hours working time. Then there is fuel, vehicle depreciation and communication charges. We suspect that the upshot, over a period of time, will be that the increased cost of shared working wipes out the savings apparently engendered by getting rid of workers. But without the relevant data, who knows.

17. Oxfordshire County Council

At a back-office level, the geographic distribution of partners is a relatively neutral decision. Much of the work in back office functions such as IT, Building Control, Legal, Revenues and Benefits ,HR, Finance, and Payroll is geographically neutral and can often be carried out anywhere in the world to achieve best value.

However there are two services within the list that are not geographically neutral, namely Public Protection and Customer Services. These functions would be best delivered at an Oxfordshire level to provide the best services to residents. Public protection includes taxi licensing where an Oxfordshire protocol is being explored with the City and other districts. Environmental health has strong links with Trading Standards and it is vital that those links

are retained to ensure the safety of residents and avoid unnecessary costs by working across counties.

It is also vital that an Oxfordshire focused Customer services is retained. Most residents do not differentiate between Town, District, or county functions they simply want an answer to a question about a local playground/bus shelter/bin collection/road repair. By adding in a further complication of a customer service team in another county giving the wrong information to the resident then any cost savings may be negated by having poor customer satisfaction.

A better way forward would be to join with the other districts, City & County on having one customer service team providing full information on local matters. This would also show a clear commitment to an Oxfordshire devolved powers proposal.

In addition where integration leads to a greater number of senior joint appointments, there is a loss of efficiency from the multiplication of local partners with whom those senior officers need to engage. This also inevitably increases the amount of working time lost to travel, and the need for officers to be familiar with a multiplicity of policies and practices among partner organisations. Both of these are less of a challenge within a functional economic area benefiting from a high degree of public sector coterminosity.

18. The final item received through the public consultation was from a resident of West Oxfordshire who has experience of change management in a similar partnership who was passing on their experiences and knowledge to the team. We have not included them in this document as the resident was not expressing their thoughts about the Programme.