

Commentary on Unitary Authorities Debate

Background

Unitary authorities which combine district and county levels of local government have been around since the 1990s. It's not an option that was previously taken up in Oxfordshire, but has been in place in Berkshire for many years. There is a clear efficiency saving to be made from combining the various levels of government and avoiding duplication.

For the most part, the functions of district and county councils are different, but there are some areas of overlap. For example, in planning the district councils do most of the work, but county councils are responsible for dealing with planning applications for minerals and waste, schools and for county councils facilities. Broadly speaking, councils are responsible for

County council responsibilities	District council responsibilities
Adult social care	Leisure
Children's services	Waste collection
Highways and transport planning	Housing
Fire and rescue service	Environmental health
School support and admissions	Collecting Council Tax
Libraries	Street cleaning
Waste management	Benefits payments
Public health	Planning
Trading Standards	Electoral

In financial terms, in this area, council tax is spent in the following (rounded) proportions:

OCC	76%
Thames Valley Police (TVP)	10%
SODC	7.5%
Parish/Town	6%

There would probably not be any direct change to TVP and town/parish responsibilities (although at some stage, TVP's Police and Crime Commissioner may take over responsibility for fire services which are currently run by OCC) but under any form of unitary arrangement, the OCC and SODC elements would be combined.

The responsibilities of a county council include a number of areas (such as social services for both adults and children) where spending is very much demand led: whatever comes through the door has to be dealt with, so in an era of an increasingly older population and increasing understanding of an concern about child safeguarding, the council responsible has a legal duty to prioritise spending on

vulnerable who have real and urgent needs. Similarly, dangerous road defects such as potholes have to be fixed and cannot be left (although longer-term maintenance can). As far as I am aware, district council spending is much more discretionary (deciding whether or not to have a new leisure centre, for example) or is essentially self-funding (if bins need emptying on a new housing estate, the council tax raised from those new residents will pay for it). District council budgets are, therefore, much more easily managed as well as being much smaller than those of county councils.

Setting up unitary authorities involves dissolving the existing councils and having fresh elections for new wards/divisions in areas, which would be determined by the Boundary Commission. It does not involve one level of government disappearing and another taking over, and it is very likely indeed that new ward/division areas would be set up as the number of councillors for the new authority would almost certainly differ from the numbers in the former areas.

The Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) has said that unitary authorities should ideally serve populations of between 300,000 and 700,000.

Local Situation

In the past couple of years, OCC commissioned a report to look at the savings to be made from adopting a unitary model of local government. The estimates ranged from very little with 5 unitary councils (assumed to be based on the current district council areas) up to £30m per year once all savings were realized with a single unitary authority for the whole county. Nothing further was done about this at the time.

Over the past year, work has been taking place on a bid for devolution of some national government responsibilities to Oxfordshire. This work was being done jointly by the 5 district councils, OCC and the NHS Clinical Commissioning Group (CCG). That bid went in to DCLG in February, with a very large element focused on combining health and social care across the county. Feedback suggested that there might need to be a different model of government in place, such as an elected Mayor (which no one locally seemed to be very keen on at all). This was, I understand, being considered by the various councils in ongoing discussions.

On 25th February we were all told that the 5 district councils had (together with the CCG, although they later said they were not part of the bid) submitted a proposal to DCLG for 4 unitary authorities based on current district council joint working arrangements (SODC + Vale, Oxford City, West Oxon and Cotswolds and Cherwell and South Northants). Two of these 5 areas would cut across current NHS, Fire Service and Police service boundaries. This proposal had not been raised or discussed with OCC before it was submitted.

The 4 unitary authorities proposed by the District Councils would serve populations

of between 158,000 (Oxford City) and 262,000 (SODC and Vale), which according to the DCLG guidance referred to above is too few. A county-wide unitary would have a population base of 666,197 which is within the preferred range, although towards the top end of it.

There has been a considerable volume of public disagreement between OCC and the District Councils about the need for studies to confirm the viability of potential arrangements. The original plan put forward by the local District Councils specifically excluded the idea of a single unitary authority for the county from consideration, so OCC believed that in order for all the potential options to be properly considered it must commission its own study. I understand the District Councils' position has shifted somewhat, but am not clear to what extent and the most recent information I have is that it still focuses on looking at either 3 or 4 local unitary authorities. In the meantime, OCC is proceeding with a tender exercise for a study to consider a wider range of potential options for unitary authority structures in Oxfordshire (1, 2, 3 or 4), in order that the debate can be well-informed. The OCC terms of reference for the study are freely available and I can email them to anyone who would like to see them. I am not aware that this is the case with the District Council's study, but I am sure District Councillors will provide whatever information they can if asked.

Process from Here

As I understand things, DCLG will consider the proposal put forward by the District Councils and any other proposal which may be sent to them. If it decides that a proposal should be taken forward, the county and district councils involved would each vote to accept or reject the proposal and the results of that vote would be considered by the relevant minister. Whatever the outcome of the vote, the minister would, under current planned legislation, have the power to overrule that vote and impose a solution. Town/parish councils and local residents would not have a direct say in this process and there is no mechanism for them to be consulted.

If a decision to move to any unitary structure were taken, I understand that elections planned for May 2017 would not take place (this affects the County Council and some of the Oxfordshire District Councils, although not SODC) but a transitional authority would be set up to manage the process of moving to the new structure. Elections for the new authority/authorities would then take place in May 2018.

That is my understanding of the situation, as objectively set out as I can manage. As I am not an expert but am relying on information provided by a range of others who are, I have done my best to set it all out as simply as possible, but apologise in advance for any errors or omissions! I would be grateful if anyone has additional information that they can send to me.

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