

## **The Unitary Debate – it sounds boring, but it will affect you. By Cllr David Bartholomew**

Many people (including some councillors!) are puzzled about the difference between District Councils and Oxfordshire County Council (OCC). At the most basic level, Districts empty your bins and do planning, while OCC does roads, social care and education (although education is slipping away). Why can't we have just one council? (These are usually called Unitary.)

Well, at last (May 2016) all the councils in Oxfordshire have agreed that we should move towards Unitary Local Government, but the way it is being handled makes me veer between anger and despondency. Here's the story so far...

Without consulting the public or OCC, on Thursday 25th February a surprise announcement was made by Oxfordshire's District Councils and Oxford City Council. It called for the abolition of OCC and the establishment of four district quasi-unitary councils. The four quasi-unitaries called for are as follows:

- A new Southern Oxfordshire Unitary Authority that would cover the area currently administered by Vale of White Horse and South Oxfordshire District Councils.
- An Oxford City Unitary Authority that would be formed in the centre of the county, covering the area currently administered by Oxford City Council.
- A West Oxfordshire-Cotswold Unitary Authority that would cover the area currently administered by West Oxfordshire District Council and Cotswold District Council.
- A Cherwell-South Northants Unitary Authority that would cover the area currently administered by Cherwell District Council and South Northamptonshire Council.

In addition, the announcement called for the creation of an unelected quango to be known as a 'Combined Authority' to take on difficult areas of responsibility currently with OCC, such as social care and major road projects. So, we would end up with four councils spread across three counties, plus an over-arching, unelected quango.

The Districts put out a tender to consultants to produce a report to support their proposals. Their brief to consultants initially stated: "The District Councils' view is that a single county-wide unitary authority is not the right solution for Oxfordshire". It went on to say that any finding suggesting a single county-wide unitary is best would not be approved. The OCC view, unsurprisingly, was that a single county-wide unitary authority was an option that should be considered, and stated that it would therefore be forced to commission a separate report.

As a result of OCC and public pressure, District Council leaders eventually agreed to revise their tender brief and to commission a report covering four options (the two referred to above, plus two more: a two-council model (Oxford City and the rest of the county) and a three-council model (North Oxfordshire, South Oxfordshire and the City). At this point I thought common sense would prevail and we would have just one report. However, I was to be disappointed.

Almost unbelievably, the protocol for managing the tender, awarding the contract and reviewing the report findings could not be agreed between OCC and Districts, so the nett result is that two separate reports costing in excess of £100,000 each are now proceeding – all funded by the Council Tax payer at a time when horrendous cuts to services are being made. The reports will be finished in June/July and it is anticipated that Greg Clark, the Secretary of State for the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG), will rule on them in the autumn, following a period of public consultation.

My view is that the District Councils' proposal is nonsense. Do we really want four councils involving two neighbouring counties plus a monster quango? But I also have grave concerns that unless a way is found to devolve money and power to towns and parishes, the OCC-favoured option of a single Oxfordshire unitary could be too big and too distant. As an OCC County Councillor I already have to shout very, very loud for the concerns of the south of the county to be heard. Yes to a unitary proposal – get rid of districts and county and have just one council in one area – but keep it local and close to the people. Perhaps the best option is one Unitary council for North Oxfordshire, one for South and one for the City – but I'll read the reports before I decide.