
Agenda Item: Local Government Devolution and the English Devolution White Paper

Meeting Date: Monday, 3 February 2025

Contact Officer: Town Clerk/CEO

The purpose of this report is: To inform the Committee about the recent developments in local government devolution, particularly in light of the English Devolution White Paper published on 16 December 2024 **Appendix A**, and to highlight potential future implications for our Council, including the possible transfer of services and assets from Oxfordshire County Council (OCC) and West Oxfordshire District Council (WODC).

Background

The UK Governments English Devolution White Paper, titled Power and Partnership: Foundations for Growth, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/english-devolution-white-paper-power-and-partnership-foundations-for-growth> outlines plans to extend devolution across England. Key proposals include:

Replacing two-tier local government structures with single-tier unitary authorities to improve efficiency and governance.

Empowering mayors and strategic authorities with competencies over transport, infrastructure, skills, housing, economic development, environment, health, and public safety.

Current Situation

Town Clerk's Engagements:

The Town Clerk has actively participated in discussions with the Oxfordshire Association of Local Councils (OALC) and the National Association of Local Councils (NALC) regarding the implications of the White Paper – and what it will mean for Town and Parish Councils. OALC is organising consultations with town councils that have previously undergone devolution processes to gather insights and best practices.

Collaboration with WODC:

The Town Clerk has initiated contact with the Corporate Strategy Officer at WODC and will maintain close communication as the situation evolves to ensure our Council is informed and prepared for potential changes.

Considerations for the Council:

1. Governance Review:

The Council should deliberate its past resolution to undertake a governance review to align Witney's boundaries with new and recent developments. While case studies are prepared, it may be prudent to await further progress on the devolution bid to ensure alignment with new structures and responsibilities, because this may naturally resolve some of the issues.

2. Service and Asset Transfer:

The Town Council must remain vigilant about the possibility of inheriting services and assets from OCC and WODC. Proactive planning will be essential to manage these transitions effectively. This may result in financial pressures in future years if finance doesn't follow function during any negotiations.

3. Dual-Hatted Members:

Councillors who serve on multiple councils (dual-hatted members) may possess valuable insights and information pertinent to these discussions. Their perspectives should be solicited to inform our approach.

Next Steps:

Monitoring Position: Oxfordshire County Council has expressed a desire to be fast-tracked for local government reorganisation while collaborating with partners on a future Mayoral Strategic Authority. However, it is anticipated that they may not be included in the first tranche of devolution.

Engagement with Stakeholders: Continue active participation in discussions facilitated by OALC and NALC, and maintain open lines of communication with OCC, WODC, and other relevant bodies to stay informed about developments.

Internal Preparations: Initiate internal assessments to identify services and assets that could be impacted and develop strategies to manage potential transitions smoothly.

Impact Assessments

The Town Council has a duty to consider the effects of its decisions, functions and activities on equality, biodiversity, and crime & disorder. Consideration should also be given to effects on the environment, given the Council's Climate Emergency declaration in 2019.

- a) **Equality** - The town council would need to ensure any devolved services or functions maintain or enhance equality of access and opportunity for all residents. This includes considering impacts on protected characteristics and ensuring service delivery remains accessible to vulnerable groups.
- b) **Biodiversity** - Devolved responsibilities might include local green spaces, or environmental management. The council must assess how changes in management could affect local biodiversity and ensure protection and enhancement of natural habitats.

- c) Crime & Disorder - With potential increased local authority, the council would need to evaluate how service changes might impact community safety, anti-social behaviour, and local policing partnerships. This includes considering both direct and indirect effects on crime prevention.
- d) Environment & Climate Emergency - Given the 2019 declaration, any devolved functions must be assessed for their carbon impact and alignment with climate emergency goals. This includes considering operational changes, service delivery methods, and opportunities for environmental improvements.

Risk

In decision making Councillors should give consideration to any risks to the Council and any action it can take to limit or negate its liability.

While the devolution process is in its early stages, it is imperative for our Council to stay informed and prepared for potential changes. By proactively engaging in discussions, reviewing our governance structures, and planning for possible service and asset transfers, we can position ourselves to navigate the evolving landscape effectively.

Key risks the Council should consider include:

- Financial risks from taking on new assets or services without adequate funding
- Operational capacity and capability to manage additional responsibilities
- Legal compliance with new statutory obligations
- Reputational risks if service delivery falls short
- Resource constraints affecting existing services
- Insurance and liability implications for new assets/services

Mitigation strategies should include:

- Thorough due diligence before accepting transfers
- Clear agreements defining responsibilities and funding
- Staff training and capacity building
- Regular risk reviews and updates
- Maintaining adequate insurance coverage

Social Value

Social value is the positive change the Council creates in the local community within which it operates.

In the context of devolution, social value opportunities include:

- Increased local control leading to services better tailored to community needs
- More direct community engagement in decision-making
- Potential for local job creation and skills development
- Better integration of services at the local level
- Improved community cohesion through localised delivery
- Opportunities to support local suppliers and businesses

- Enhanced ability to address specific local challenges

The key is ensuring any devolved responsibilities actively contribute to community wellbeing and local development rather than just maintaining existing service levels

Financial implications

There are no direct financial implications arising from this report. However, it is likely that as part of the devolution process there will be an expectation that the Town Council's asset base and service delivery will change, which may increase financial pressures, but may hopefully provide income streams too – along with finance following function!

Recommendations

Members are invited to note the report and consider the position relating to the Governance Reviews being worked on.