

The change would not put our residents first

THE “One Oxfordshire” proposal may sound attractive on the surface, but digging a little deeper, we soon see the adverse impacts it will have on our residents and how it is likely to change our district.

This greatly concerns me. Residents want to see infrastructure improvements and high on our agenda is the need for funding to improve our transport.

People are fed up of travelling on congested roads and the A40 in particular causes a lot of misery for many people.

With all the Oxfordshire councils, we have agreed to bid jointly for devolution funding through a combined authority model.

However, this work is in danger of being severely delayed if a new “One Oxfordshire” authority is created, as it would take years to put a new authority in place.

Our council tax would also rise under a single authority.

Currently West Oxfordshire has, by far, the lowest charge across the county, which is less than a third of the Oxford City Council charge.

A “super council” would mean local decisions would be taken remotely. They would be significantly influenced by councillors who represent areas outside of West Oxfordshire.

They simply cannot have our residents’ best interests at heart.

The district council provides a local voice and regularly speaks out about issues affecting our communities. As a statutory body, our views have to be taken into account – without us being here, who else would do this?

Our campaign against Oxfordshire County Council closing Dix Pit was successful and, at the moment, several of our councillors are leading on local campaigns to maintain hospital and health centre provision in Chipping Norton and Witney.

Rural West Oxfordshire has al-



WEST Oxfordshire District Council leader James Mills

Picture: Ric Mellis

A bid for an Oxfordshire ‘super-council’ could hold up efforts to improve the A40, West Oxfordshire District Council leader **JAMES MILLS** writes

ready faced a heavy burden of service cuts by Oxfordshire County Council from children’s services to public transport.

A new “One Oxfordshire” authority is a threat to our free parking policy in West Oxfordshire. It would lead to the introduction of parking charges, the same as the rest of the county.

Our grants programme helps communities maintain and improve parks, play areas and village halls. Future improvements are planned for our leisure centres in Carterton, Chipping Norton and Witney. Without a district council in the future, there is no guarantee that these improvements will take place and indeed cuts are more likely in order to fund the statutory services currently provided by the county council.

Savings made from having one council are not substantial.

“One Oxfordshire” proposes savings of £20 million a year, but this

is a small sum when considered as part of the proposed authority’s total budget of over £821 million.

It is only a 2.4 per cent saving and does not compare well with the 14 per cent savings we are currently making in West Oxfordshire through shared working alone.

A large “One Oxfordshire” authority will not have the agility and ability to work as efficiently as the smaller district councils.

I am not against the concept of unitary councils as they can provide advantages financially and through improved decision-making. But, to be successful, a unitary authority must be based on strong areas of community interest.

There are no examples in England where a unitary council has a city in the heart of a largely rural environment.

My purpose as an elected representative is to put residents first and “One Oxfordshire” simply does not do that.

James Mills's District Dossier

THE CONSERVATIVE LEADER OF WEST OXFORDSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL



Unitary authority would harm tourist trade

BUSINESS across our district and beyond is under threat from the Oxfordshire County Council unitary proposals.

Its 'one size fits all' approach means that our economy will undoubtedly suffer with jobs lost and resources stripped in areas which give West Oxfordshire its unique appeal.

You may not realise it but tourism is our biggest industry generating £274m for the local economy and employing almost 5,000 people. In turn it supports a wide range of businesses such as shops, cafés and pubs.

We support these businesses through key policies such as free parking across the district. Businesses tell me that without it their trade would suffer as visitors would find it a less attractive place to come. But free parking is under

threat from the county council's unitary plans.

Other attractions such as Chipping Norton Theatre benefit from grant funding by the district council, providing a vital prop to enhance their facilities and so attract more visitors.

These smaller facilities would doubtless be overlooked by a large unitary lacking the local knowledge to appreciate their value yet I believe it is vital to maintain and develop our own attractions as part of the district's distinct cultural heritage.

The way forward is through devolution involving the districts rather than creating a single unitary authority.

Last week we saw how the county was promised £24.16m from the Government's Local Growth Fund – a mere fraction of the £380m the Local Enterprise Partnership applied for. When you consider the

county spent £10m on roadworks on Oxford's Wolvercote and Cutteslowe roundabouts, then you realise how little that is.

The Government will look far more favourably on a devolved authority with clear plans for where the money is going such as the A40, housing and skills development.

The county's plans will involve creating a whole new council which would take at least two years. Meanwhile, our roads become even more potholed, social care shrinks still further and rural bus services continue to disappear.

It would be spending huge amounts of money internally rather than creating and maintaining the services our residents clearly need.

Then, when we have come through that vacuum, the structure of local Government will be radically different and the likelihood is that we will be a lot worse off.

Would it not be far better to create a devolution model which would be faster administratively and drawing on our excellent financial track record to create a viable and prosperous future for West Oxfordshire?

The districts of Oxfordshire have delivered around 15 per cent efficiency savings that dwarf the County Councils proposed 2.5 per cent – let's have a more local and agile local government, not a monolithic county giant.

● See Page 16

It would be spending huge amounts of money internally rather than creating and maintaining the services our residents clearly need

February 8th 2017

February 15th 2009

£3m boost will keep A40 scheme on road

Matt Oliver

moliver@nqo.com

PLANS to battle chronic congestion on the A40 between Oxford and Witney are set to get a £3m boost.

Highway bosses say the £38m proposals for a park-and-ride at Eynsham, which would be linked to the city by an eastbound bus lane, were gaining pace.

They are now expecting to begin detailed planning of the project, provided Oxfordshire County Council's cabinet gives approval next Monday.

A public consultation on the scheme took place last year and engineers want to begin construction by autumn 2018.

If all goes to plan, the park and ride and bus lane would be complete by autumn 2020. The scheme is funded by the Government, on condition of certain conditions being met.

County council leader Ian Hudspeth said: "I'm very excited this scheme is off the ground and we are now moving to the next stage.

"The county council is making this £3m commitment to the project and we are hoping to get the next instalments of funding from the Government after producing our more detailed plans.

"This shows our commitment to West Oxfordshire and the people who live here.

"The A40 has long been an issue that people have raised and

DETAILS: Highway engineers working on designs for jam-busting project



CONGESTION: The A40 at Eynsham

we are doing something about it. Getting traffic moving means more economic growth, more employment and less congestion on the roads."

The county council's proposal would see a new park-and-ride built just east of Cuckoo Lane.

The bus lane would stretch from there to the Duke's Cut canal bridge, with Oxfordshire County Council saying it will give buses more reliable journey times.

Project sponsor Isaac Webb said about 600 responses were made to the public consultation, with 70 per cent in favour of the scheme. It is seen as a first step, with longer-term plans also in development to eventually dual the A40 carriageway between Witney and Eynsham.

However, critics have said the bus lane plan is flawed because it will hit 'pinch points' at various bridges on the road to Oxford.

Mr Webb said he expected most bridges to have the necessary width for the standard carriage-way and bus lane. But on others engineers would consider traffic lights that would stop normal traffic to give buses priority.

Cycleways would also be served by separate bridges, he said.

Mr Webb added: "We hope this scheme will make getting the bus more attractive.

"It is about trying to give people more certainty with their journey times. We are pleased to be getting this project underway. This is an important arterial road."

War of words erupts over 'super council'

February 15th 2017

Matt Oliver

moliver@nqo.com

A WAR of words has erupted over plans for a 'super council', with rival authorities ramping up their attacks as they turn on one another.

In an extraordinary exchange, Oxfordshire County Council accused its district counterparts of spreading 'misleading scare stories' on social media.

Since last month, it has been campaigning for the six biggest authorities in the county to be scrapped and replaced with a single organisation, which it argues would save £20m a year and make services better.

But in a series of broadsides, city council leader Bob Price hit out at the super council vision spearheaded by county council leader Ian Hudspeth, branding it 'a massive threat' that would put community facilities and local democracy at risk across Oxfordshire.

It comes as a taxpayer-funded campaign against the plan was launched by Oxford City Council, with a petition on website change.org against the project, which it says will see people in the city lose control of their own affairs.

Mr Price said: "Oxfordshire County Council has cut and cut and cut. They have closed homeless shelters by cutting grants, they have left communities isolated by cutting bus subsidies, they have devastated families by cutting children's centres, and they have left our roads riddled with potholes and gridlock.

"And now, with nothing left to cut, and in an act of sheer desperation they are coming after Oxford City Council, your money and your city."

Meanwhile, Cherwell District Council said the county council was 'closing children's centres [and] impacting on families' in a Twitter post.

A county council spokesman said: "Like many other councils that run social services, Oxfordshire County Council has had to

SHAKE-UP: County accuses rivals of scaremongering as petition launched



BROADSIDE: City council leader Bob Price and county council leader Ian Hudspeth

make some difficult decisions as a result of reducing government funding and rising demand for children's and adult social care.

"It is worrying that Cherwell seems to have little concept of this national situation."

Running six councils was 'wasteful and inefficient' it added, and £400,000 per week of savings could instead go towards protecting services.

It came as emails leaked to the *Gazette* also revealed council bosses were putting a devolution bid to claw back powers from Westminster on ice.

Peter Thompson, chairman of Oxford Civic Society, accused local authorities of presiding over 'a shambles' that could see the county miss out on hundreds of millions of pounds.

He said: "There is a desperate

With nothing left to cut, and in an act of sheer desperation they are coming after Oxford City Council, your money and your city

need for councils in Oxfordshire to work together more closely but the unitary council proposals do not have widespread support and now people seem to be jumping ship from the devolution bid."

In an exchange yesterday, seen by the *Gazette*, local authority leaders poured cold water over proposals to seek hundreds of millions of pounds in funding from the Government.

Responding to an email from Oxfordshire Local Enterprise Partnership (OxLEP) chief executive Nigel Tipple, county council leader Ian Hudspeth claimed key figures were now 'casting doubt' over the prospect of future devolution deals.

He referred to comments by Local Government Association chairman Lord Porter, who this month said devolution was 'dead'. Mr Hudspeth suggested delaying 'any expenditure' on the county's bid until the matter was clear.

He was supported by Matthew Barber, leader of Vale of White Horse District Council, who added: "No point committing expenditure until we know for sure."