

Local Government Reform coming this way!

Just before Christmas, the Labour Government published its proposals for reforming the structure and financing of local government, with a White Paper entitled “English Devolution”. There are lots of reasons to welcome reform of local government; our current multi-tier structure can be very confusing and any changes which improve local decision-making and accountability can only be a good thing. However, we have major concerns that the proposed changes could make local authorities less accountable to their residents and electorate and could take decision-making further away from the communities they serve.

District Councils to be Abolished (and possibly also County Councils)

One key proposal is to abolish District Councils completely and to create new Unitary Authorities covering much larger areas of population. (A Unitary Authority would replace the current two-tier structure we have now, where the County Council and the District Council sit at different levels and have responsibility for different matters).

At the time of writing, the Government is proposing that each Unitary Authority should cover an area with a population of around 500k people; as a comparison, the population of South Oxfordshire District Council is around 153k. Each new Unitary Authority would be a member of a new “Strategic Authority” covering approximately 1.5m people, possibly with an elected Mayor at its head (that would be known as a Mayoral Strategic Authority).

For us here in South Oxfordshire, that new Strategic Authority could cover, say, West Berkshire, Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire, matching the structure of the Integrated Care Board, or it could mirror the area covered by Thames Valley Police, which includes all of Berkshire and Milton Keynes as well.

Although the White Paper is called “English Devolution” there are no proposals to devolve powers or funding to regions in the same way that they have been devolved to the Welsh or Scottish Governments; much of the detail is still to be determined, but the Government is hoping to press ahead with the first tranche of reorganisations quickly. This may result in the postponement of County Council elections, due in May. We do not yet know what structure will be proposed for Oxfordshire, so we will aim to keep you informed as plans evolve!

Local Government reform doesn’t usually generate a lot of interest among the general public, whose main concern is that services are delivered effectively and in line with local need and priorities. At SODC we work hard to make sure that our funds are used wisely and in a way that reflects local concerns around housing affordability, waste and environmental management, nature protection and recovery, community well-being and planning policy. But if SODC ceases to exist and, as the Government is also proposing, local communities and elected Councillors lose their ability to object to major planning applications, the implications for our area could be significant. Watch this space!