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| SUBJECT: | Local Government in Buckinghamshire- Exploring Future Options |
| REPORT OF: | Leader of the Council – Councillor Ralph Bagge |
| RESPONSIBLE OFFICER | Mr Bob Smith- Acting Chief Executive |
| REPORT AUTHOR | Mr Bob Smith- Acting Chief Executive |
| WARD/S AFFECTED | All |

1. Purpose of Report

To advise Cabinet on the current developments regarding unitary local government in Buckinghamshire and to authorise and fund joint working to enable the Council to participate fully in the debate.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- That Cabinet supports work with the other Bucks District Councils and any other relevant parties to explore further the potential for unitary local government in Buckinghamshire or other potential governance models.
- To agree to appoint independent consultants, where appropriate in partnership with one or more of the other Bucks Districts, to undertake a detailed feasibility study into the viability of potential changes to local governance in Buckinghamshire including a costed business plan.
- To delegate authority to the Chief Executive in consultation with the Leader to commission such further research or studies as may be expedient in the light of future developments concerning local governance proposals.
- With regard to funding the above recommendations to release up to £50k from reserves.

2. Reasons for Recommendations

To ensure the Council can fully engage with the current discussions concerning local government in Buckinghamshire and fully represent the best interests of its residents and businesses.

3. Background

- 3.1 The debate concerning local government structures in non- metropolitan “two tier” areas has gained momentum over recent months in several parts of the Country including Buckinghamshire, Oxfordshire, Northamptonshire, Hampshire and elsewhere. The national context of this debate has been in terms of The Cities and Local Government Devolution Act 2016 which is a major tool for the Government in putting into practice its devolution agenda, including the devolution of powers to any newly created Combined Authorities. Late amendments to the then Bill gave the Secretary of State considerable new powers which allow the Minister to bring about change to local government structures or boundaries in relation to a non- unitary district council area, if at least one local authority in the area agrees.
- 3.2 Whilst there has been little in the way of a devolution discussion with Government in Buckinghamshire, in other two tier areas discussions have given consideration to the creation of unitary councils as an alternative to having a directly elected Mayor for any proposed combined authorities. However, it currently appears the case for any significant devolution of powers the Government is still requiring agreement to Mayors and with regard to a unitary structure for such proposals to have the support of all the local authorities involved and the relevant local enterprise partnership (s).

3.3 The history of the unitary debate in Buckinghamshire can be traced back to the split in 1997 of Milton Keynes to become a unitary authority, consideration by BCC of a unitary bid in 2007 to be replaced by the 2009 pathfinder initiative involving County and Districts but which later collapsed due to disagreements. More recently Bucks Business First commissioned Ernst and Young to produce a study into options for unitary reorganisation. AVDC subsequently published in 2015 a study of the opportunities arising from a 2 unitary model for Buckinghamshire. In May of this year, Bucks CC agreed to fund the production of an outline business case which explores the benefits of a new single unitary model of local government for the geographical area of Buckinghamshire. The Leader of BCC has since written to the District Council Leaders to invite them to collaborate with the County Council in discussions on how local government in Buckinghamshire might be modernised.

4. Proposals

4.1 It is clear given the national and local picture that Chiltern District Council and South Bucks District Council will need to enter into the debate around local government structures.

4.2 Initial discussions have taken place between the 4 district Leaders and agreement has been reached to work collaboratively to examine the potential options for changing local governance arrangements in Buckinghamshire in the best interests of our residents and other stakeholders.

4.3 Careful consideration has been given to joining with the County Council as suggested by Cllr Tett in his recent letter. However the County's review appears to have a pre-determined outcome of a single unitary council for the whole (excluding Milton Keynes) of Bucks. Given this fact it is not felt to be in our residents' best interests to engage on this basis beyond the open and transparent two-way sharing of financial and other data between the County and Districts

4.4 There will be a requirement to undertake a significant amount of detailed and specialised work over the coming months. It will therefore be necessary to jointly commission consultancy assistance to produce a detailed and costed business plan and analysis which tests the various options for structural change. Given that a change to a unitary structure is not immediately deliverable the opportunity should also be taken to consider alternative changes to local governance which could operate within a 'two tier' model but result in increased efficiency and effectiveness across the County.

4.5 Any recommended option will clearly need to demonstrate how best it serves the interests of our residents for example providing appropriate local democratic accountability, quality of services and cost effectiveness.

5. Options

5.1 The key alternative would be not to engage with the current work around local government structures which would increase the risk of a solution being approved which was not in the best interest of residents, businesses etc

6. Corporate Implications

6.1 there is no current financial provision to fund this activity. Monies would need to be released from reserves.

6.2 the Council has power to jointly commission the proposed report under section 1 of Localism Act (general power of competence)

7. Links to Council Policy Objectives

7.1 This matter is of direct relevance to the Councils' future ability to deliver cost effective, customer focussed services and to their wider ambitions for their respective areas and citizens as set out in the Joint Business Plan.

8.Next Steps

8.1 A procurement exercise will be undertaken with partners to secure consultancy support to assist in the consideration of potential governance changes with a further report on outcomes in the autumn.

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| Background | None other than those referred to in the report |
| Papers: | |