

Joint Statement to Cheltenham Overview & Scrutiny Committee

We understand that you have requested a view from the other 2020 Vision Partner Councils on the proposals contained within the report prepared for your Committee on Monday 21st September 2015. We understand that the report suggests four possible choices for Cheltenham in response to the 2020 Vision proposals ranging from full commitment (option1) to full withdrawal (option 4). Option 2 suggests the sharing of services but no involvement in governance; Option 3 is, what has been called, 'preferred partner' engagement which could involve observer status at the joint committee with an option to join the committee or a Teckal company at a later stage but meanwhile there would be participation (as currently) in shared services. The report recognises that both options 2 or 3 would require agreement from the partner councils to be implemented and no discussions with partners have taken place.

The Leaders of Cotswold, Forest of Dean and West Oxfordshire, urge all Cheltenham Members to support the recommendations of the Member Governance Board and to join them as full and welcome partners of the 2020 Partnership. It is only by being full, committed and equal partners that Cheltenham can fully influence and realise the full and significant benefits of the 2020 Programme. We believe that any fears about decisions being taken that will adversely affect one partner are ill-founded and there is no evidence of this occurring over our established history of partnership working through GO Shared Services, Ubico nor the 2020 Vision Member Governance Board. We collectively remain committed to the 2020 Vision and partnership.

We think it might be helpful to outline some context and explain the journey the partnership has been on. The recommendations to be put to the four Councils that were unanimously agreed by all members of the 2020 Vision Member Governance Board on the 21st August 2015 were the culmination of a very long and detailed negotiation process involving all four Councils over the last two years. During that process significant changes were made to the proposals, including a number at the request of Cheltenham Borough Council, to help clarify the original 2020 vision, initially agreed by all four partner Councils in June 2014 and then again in December 2014. All four Councils in December 2014 formally agreed to establish a joint committee and to deliver shared services. Consequently a significant financial investment of around £1 million to date has been made by the partners, supported by Government grant, and work has progressed on that basis since then.

On 5th June 2015, the Member Governance Board agreed an outline proposal for consultation with staff and members that set out a partnership structure, the role of the Joint Committee and potential shared services. As a result of some differences in views raised by Cheltenham the Member Governance Board met on 17 July and reached an agreement on how to proceed. As a result of that agreement, the business case and report for approval on 21st August by the Member Governance Board was prepared.

In response to further concerns raised in response to the publication of the Member Governance Board papers, the three other partners discussed the increased risk and implications of CBC withdrawing from the partnership and their response. Their conclusions, which were shared at the Member Governance Board on the 21st August, were that whilst there was a strong desire from Cotswold, Forest of Dean and West Oxfordshire to approve the report and implement the recommendations swiftly it was made clear that Cheltenham remains a valued partner and every support would be given to enable them to remain part of the partnership. The conclusion was that the Cheltenham members, whilst expressing a desire for continued discussions on matters of concern not directly related to the reports for consideration, agreed with the other partner Councils to approve the business case and reports and to recommend a positive decision to all four Councils. It was clear from the discussions and the external feedback from CIPFA there were no reasons why members shouldn't sign up to the business case.

Following informal member briefings a report introducing options for discussion at Overview and Scrutiny has been circulated, which have not been subject to any detailed assessment and evaluation. Consequently, the detailed terms and implications of any new option would need to be understood and evaluated before they could be agreed. Whilst the partner Councils would be willing to undertake this additional work to support Cheltenham, it will be necessary for Cheltenham to fully define their concerns and any alternative option as soon as possible to avoid any delays to the agreed timescales. The partner Councils do recognise the importance of GO Shared Services and the current ICT arrangements and if Cheltenham does decide to withdraw we will work in good faith to establish appropriate arrangements for these services to continue unaffected.

Yours Sincerely,

Lynden Stowe
Leader of
Cotswold
District Council

Patrick Molyneux
Leader of
Forest of Dean
District Council

Barry Norton
Leader of
West Oxfordshire
District Council