

# GORING-ON-THAMES PARISH COUNCIL

---

Old Jubilee Fire Station • Red Cross Road • Goring • Reading RG8 9HG  
Phone: (01491) 874444 • [clerk@goringpc.org](mailto:clerk@goringpc.org) • [www.goringpc.org](http://www.goringpc.org)

*All correspondence to be addressed to the clerk*

Grant Thornton UK LLP  
Local Government Advisory  
5th Floor Grant Thornton House  
Melton Street  
Euston Square, London NW1 2EP

16 June 2016

Dear Sirs/Mesdames

**RE: OXFORDSHIRE UNITARY COUNCIL – CONSULTATION**

We understand your brief from Oxford County Council (OCC) is to undertake an objective, evidence-led review of all options for local government restructuring, including the status quo. We would like to share the views of Goring on Thames Parish Council.

As a branch of local government, we share the desire to provide the best services and value to council tax payers and business rate payers in Oxfordshire. At the same time, we also understand the need to manage costs – particularly with the current budget constraints - to ensure long term viability. We want to ensure, though, that the desire to enhance the quality of the services provided is considered with at least equal weight to the need to save money.

Rationally, we can see a strong argument for either a single Unitary Council or a two-Unitary Council scheme that would separate Oxford City from the more rural areas. The former best addresses the need to rationalise cost and the latter seems to provide some reassurance that the unique needs of rural communities will not be overshadowed by a more populous urban area.

As the most local tier of local government, we are particularly concerned that whichever option is chosen be strongly democratic, with elected officials being held accountable by the public for decisions made. This accountability is critical to maintain the trust and confidence of Oxfordshire residents.

We also want to ensure that local issues are properly addressed. Planning is of particular concern. The District Council system, at least in theory, provides better local understanding of the Planning and Development needs. It lacks, though, the joined-up thinking with infrastructure (currently the responsibility of OCC) that is critical for ultimate planning success. The proposal for a Unitary Council is a strong opportunity to remedy that issue. We ask, though, that it be done by providing strong local powers to determine planning. Perhaps creating a local Planning Board of elected representatives would address this? Or perhaps there are other ideas that could deliver a similar result?

Clerk: Colin Ratcliff

The key, though, is to ensure local and planning understanding with joined-up thinking about infrastructure.

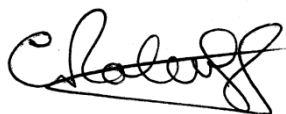
We could also see the devolvement of certain powers, perhaps even further powers, to towns and parishes, parking enforcement being just one example, provided of course that the funding and expertise to provide the service was also devolved at the same time.

Regarding the process to determine the plan to be presented to Government, there are concerns. It is the impression that the current dispute between OCC and SODC regarding a Unitary Council (including two separate, costly investigations) is more about the protection of jobs and power than any real desire to arrive at the best outcome for the people of the County. This needs to be addressed in order to have the confidence of our residents.

Additionally, there are concerns about the current levels of service from OCC and SODC that are worth mentioning. These types of issues will need to be addressed in any plan for a Unitary Council. To-date, there has been very little evidence of either the County Council or the District Councils, despite the increasing frequency of consultations, taking much note of the views of smaller Parishes such as Goring on Thames. We have seen little evidence that the Oxfordshire Together programme is delivering what was intended, mostly because of a lack of follow-up by OCC officers. For example, in an issue regarding Highways and our High Street, a meeting was held at the beginning of the year, with a promise of a response in February. Despite numerous follow-ups, we still await a reply. There are many other examples of poor service in the existing structure.

On a more positive note, the idea for a Unitary Council is indeed a remarkable opportunity for 'out of the box' thinking and creative solutions.

We look forward to our participation in the workshop events scheduled over the coming month and are eager to remain part of the process representing our constituency in this biggest potential change in local government in a generation.  
Yours faithfully



Colin Ratcliff, Clerk  
For and on behalf of Goring on Thames Parish Council

CC: Peter Clark, County Director [peter.clark@oxfordshire.gov.uk](mailto:peter.clark@oxfordshire.gov.uk)  
Cllr John Cotton, Leader, South Oxfordshire District Council  
Cllr Ian Hudspeth, Leader of Oxfordshire County Council