POETS
Planning Oxfordshire's Environment and Transport Sustainably

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Experts urge government to reconsider before proceeding with "half-baked" local government reorganisation

The Government's decision to allow all scheduled council elections to go ahead in May provides an opportunity for a more considered approach to local government reorganisation. That is the view of POETS (Planning Oxfordshire's Environment and Transport Sustainably) in the wake of the Government's U-turn this week.

"Most people are likely to be more concerned about the cost of living or problems in the health service than they are about the structure of local government" says Chris Cousins of POETS. "In current circumstances it would make sense for the Government to avoid any more self-inflicted damage by rethinking its approach.

"The Government says that it is simplifying things by abolishing existing county and district councils and replacing them with unitary councils. However, it is proposing to replace one two-tier system with another – by introducing new, larger so-called mayoral authorities. There is a lack of clarity about precisely what the different authorities will be responsible for and how they will interact."

The Government is currently (until 26 March) consulting on "Areas for producing spatial development strategies". There is a strong indication that these areas may eventually form the basis for the new mayoral authorities. In the consultation Oxfordshire is in an area that includes Bracknell Forest, Reading, Slough, Swindon, West Berkshire, Windsor and Maidenhead and Wokingham.

Chris Cousins added: "There seems to be very little evidence to support the choice of areas. For example, the census data on travel-to-work patterns shows that there is an area centred on Oxford which exerts influence over most of Oxfordshire; however, there is little connection between this area and, say, Swindon or West Berkshire.

"Getting local governance right is important both for democracy and for local communities, and it needs a long-term perspective. If the Government is to avoid yet more reputational damage, it needs to avoid any suspicion that its proposals are half-baked and that it is making things up as it goes along.

"This currently has all the hallmarks of a great distraction, an expensive and time-consuming displacement activity from some of the real issues the government faces, including delivering genuinely affordable housing and a transport system that is fit for the future."

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Notes for editors:

1. POETS are a voluntary think tank of professionals providing analysis, commentary and ideas on sustainable planning and transport for Oxfordshire.
   Further info, incl. POETS Vision for Oxfordshire: www.poetsplanningoxon.uk

2. The Government consultation on the Areas for Spatial Development Strategies runs until 26 March and can be viewed here.

3. The last time a Labour government undertook a comprehensive review of local government – in the 1960s - it established a Royal Commission (under Lord Redcliffe-Maud). This looked at the functions and structure of local government and then recommended appropriate boundaries. The Redcliffe-Maud proposals would have led to a series of "unitary" authorities across the country, responsible for most local government services. In the event, these proposals were overturned by the incoming Conservative government, who introduced the two-tier system which currently exists in Oxfordshire. It has resulted in duplication and confusion, with, for instance, district councils being responsible for waste collection while the county council is responsible for waste disposal.

4. Additional concerns are other actions also going on, largely invisible to the public eye, such as:
   a) De-regulation of the planning system with yet further weakening of the National Planning Policy Framework (see Government consultation running until 10 March – POETS' response available soon)
   b) Pre-emptive setting of a growth agenda for Oxfordshire, irrespective of future local government arrangements – for example, the recent Oxford Growth Commission's Interim Report. POETS' response to this is available here.

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