WEST OXFORDSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

Tuesday, 4 November 2025

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COUNCIL

You are summoned to a meeting of the Council which will be held in Council Chamber, Council Offices, Woodgreen, Witney, Oxfordshire OX28 1NB on **Wednesday, 12 November 2025 at 2.00 pm.**

Giles Hughes
Chief Executive

To: Members of the Council

Councillors: Andrew Coles (Chair), Carl Rylett (Vice-Chair), Elizabeth Poskitt, Joy Aitman, Lidia Arciszewska, Thomas Ashby, Hugo Ashton, Mike Baggaley, Andrew Beaney, Michael Brooker, Adam Clements, David Cooper, Julian Cooper, Sandra Cosier, Steve Cosier, Rachel Crouch, Jane Doughty, Genny Early, Duncan Enright, Roger Faulkner, Phil Godfrey, Andy Goodwin, Andy Graham, David Jackson, Edward James, Natalie King, Liz Leffman, Nick Leverton, Dan Levy, Andrew Lyon, Paul Marsh, Martin McBride, Stuart McCarroll, Michele Mead, David Melvin, Rosie Pearson, Andrew Prosser, Nigel Ridpath, Geoff Saul, Sandra Simpson, Alaric Smith, Ruth Smith, Tim Sumner, Sarah Veasey, Liam Walker, Mark Walker, Adrian Walsh, Alex Wilson and Alistair Wray

Recording of Proceedings – The law allows the public proceedings of Council, Executive, and Committee Meetings to be recorded, which includes filming as well as audio-recording. Photography is also permitted. By participating in this meeting, you are consenting to be filmed.

As a matter of courtesy, if you intend to record any part of the proceedings please let the Democratic Services officers know prior to the start of the meeting.

AGENDA

1. **Apologies for Absence**
   To receive any apologies for absence.

2. **Declarations of Interest**
   To receive any declarations from Members of Council on any items to be considered at the meeting.

3. **Participation of the Public**
   To receive any submissions from members of the public, in accordance with the Council's Public Participation Rules.

   The deadline for submission is 2.00pm, two clear working days before the meeting.

4. **Local Government Reorganisation** (Pages 3 - 418)
   Purpose
   To provide the full proposals for the three unitary models covering the entire existing boundary of all Oxfordshire Councils and West Berkshire Council in response to the Government's formal invitation on the 5th February 2025.

   Recommendations
   That Full Council:
   1. Note that since the statutory invitation to all councils in two tier areas, significant work has been undertaken by all Oxfordshire Councils and that West Oxfordshire and Cherwell District Councils' officers have engaged with officers across Oxfordshire and West Berkshire.
   2. Considers and presents views to the Executive on the submission of a full proposal for a two unitary model based on one new unitary council covering the entire existing boundaries of West Oxfordshire and Cherwell District Councils and Oxford City Council, with a working title of 'Oxford & Shires' and a second new unitary covering the entire existing boundaries of South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse District Councils and West Berkshire Council, with the working title of 'Ridgeway'
   3. Note that two other proposals will be submitted, one proposed by Oxfordshire County Council covering the Oxfordshire area and one from Oxford City Council covering the Oxfordshire and West Berkshire area.
   4. Note that Cherwell District Council, South Oxfordshire District Council, Vale of White Horse District Council and West Oxfordshire District Council will jointly submit the full proposal directly to Government in line with the Oxfordshire invitation letter.

(END)

WEST OXFORDSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL	**WEST OXFORDSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL**
Name and date of Committee	**FULL COUNCIL MEETING – 12 NOVEMBER 2025**
Subject	**FULL PROPOSALS FOR LOCAL GOVERNMENT REORGANISATION (LGR)**
Wards affected	ALL
Accountable member	Councillor Andy Graham – Leader of the Council Email: andy.graham@westoxon.gov.uk
Accountable officer	Giles Hughes – Chief Executive Officer Email: giles.hughes@westoxon.gov.uk
Report author	Phil Martin - Director of Place Email: phil.martin@westoxon.gov.uk
Summary/Purpose	To provide the full proposals for the three unitary models covering the entire existing boundary of all Oxfordshire Councils and West Berkshire Council in response to the Government's formal invitation on the 5th February 2025.
Annexes	Annex A- One Oxfordshire Proposal Annex B – Oxford City Council Proposal Annex C – Oxford and Shires and Ridgeway Councils
Recommendation(s)	That Full Council: 1. Note that since the statutory invitation to all councils in two tier areas, significant work has been undertaken by all Oxfordshire Councils and that West Oxfordshire and Cherwell District Councils' officers have engaged with officers across Oxfordshire and West Berkshire. 2. Considers and presents views to the Executive on the submission of a full proposal for a two unitary model based on one new unitary council covering the entire existing boundaries of West Oxfordshire and Cherwell District Councils and Oxford City Council, with a working title of 'Oxford & Shires' and a second new unitary covering the entire existing boundaries of South

	Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse District Councils and West Berkshire Council, with the working title of 'Ridgeway' 3. Note that two other proposals will be submitted, one proposed by Oxfordshire County Council covering the Oxfordshire area and one from Oxford City Council covering the Oxfordshire and West Berkshire area. 4. Note that Cherwell District Council, South Oxfordshire District Council, Vale of White Horse District Council and West Oxfordshire District Council will jointly submit the full proposal directly to Government in line with the Oxfordshire invitation letter.
Corporate priorities	• Putting Residents First • Enabling a Good Quality of Life for All • Creating a Better Environment for People and Wildlife • Responding to the Climate and Ecological Emergency • Working Together for West Oxfordshire
Key Decision	KEY
Exempt	NO
Consultees/ Consultation	

1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1.1 On the 16th December 2024, the Government published the Devolution White Paper. The paper sets out the most significant reforms to local government since the Local Government Act 1972.

1.2 The White Paper indicated the Government's aim to reorganise and simplify the structures of councils in England by replacing county and district councils with unitary authorities (LGR – local government reorganisation) and devolve more powers and funding from national to local government primarily through strategic mayoral authorities covering one or several of the new unitary authorities (devolution).

1.3 On 5th February 2025, the Government wrote to the Leaders of all principal authority two tier Councils in England, including those in Oxfordshire. This was a formal invitation to those Leaders to develop a proposal for local government reorganisation and provided guidance on the development of proposals. The government invited the submission of Interim Plans by 21st March 2025, followed by Full Proposals by 28th November 2025.

1.4 Following submission of an Interim Plan by 21st March 2025, this report proposes the submission of a Full Proposal for a two unitary model based on one new unitary council covering the entire existing boundaries of West Oxfordshire and Cherwell District Councils and Oxford City Council, with the working title of 'Oxford & Shires' and a second new unitary covering the entire existing boundaries of South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse District Councils and West Berkshire Council, with the working title of 'Ridgeway'.

2. BACKGROUND

2.1 The Government has set out its intention to significantly reform, at great pace, local government structures and implement devolution across England.

2.2 The Government wishes to see successor councils emerge from the current two-tier system of district and county councils and that those successor councils and the existing unitary -structured councils of England must join a Strategic Authority.

2.3 The Government has stopped short of instructing places on how to reorganise local government, and arrive at successor councils, but instead has been clear that areas must work together on a proposal/s for the benefit of residents.

2.4 The Government has set out guidance to support local government reorganisation. That guidance includes:

a) Size/council footprint to achieve efficiency saving – new Councils must be a minimum of 500,000 with exceptions on a case by cases basis;
b) The delivery of high quality and sustainable services;
c) Enable devolution to a Strategic Authority;
d) Empower neighbourhoods and;
e) Be informed by a level of engagement.

2.5 All Oxfordshire Councils and West Berkshire Council support the Government's vision for simpler and more sustainable local government structures, where councils are empowered

to respond to the needs of their communities and deliver value for money, efficient and high-quality services

2.6 Following the agreed resolution of the proposed motion in the Full Council meeting on the 26th February 2025, a cross-party working group has been set up and has met on a number of occasions to guide the process of working up the unitary model.

3. UNITARY PROPOSALS

3.1 Whilst five local councils have developed the two unitary model proposed in this report, it should be noted that two other proposals will be submitted in Oxfordshire. Oxfordshire County Council will be proposing a one unitary model covering the whole of the current Oxfordshire county area, leaving West Berkshire Council unchanged. The proposal can be read in full in Appendix 1. Oxford City Council is proposing a three unitary model covering a 'Greater Oxford' area, see Appendix 2, which will cover the existing Oxford City Council area expanded to encompass most of the area currently designated as greenbelt that is in neighbouring districts, a 'Northern' Council area covering the remaining parts of the existing Cherwell and West Oxfordshire District Councils and a 'Southern' Council covering the remaining part so the existing South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse district councils and the West Berkshire unitary area.

3.2 The two unitary model for Oxfordshire and West Berkshire proposed in this report, sets out a clear, evidence-based plan to deliver better, more efficient and more locally accountable public services. It will create two new councils that offer the right balance between efficiency and local identity, each servicing around 450,000 – 500,000 people, meeting the Government's criteria and being large enough to be efficient and stable, but small enough to stay connected to communities. The full proposal developed by Cherwell District Council, South Oxfordshire District Council, Vale of White Horse District Council, West Berkshire Council and West Oxfordshire District Council is attached as Appendix 1.

3.3 The Government has outlined that full proposals need to be submitted by 28th November 2025. They anticipate that statutory consultation could be launched in the New Year and would likely close after the local elections in May 2026. Following this, decisions on which proposal to implement could be announced before the summer recess. Secondary legislation would then be prepared, to be laid in the House after the summer recess. The legislation could then be made, subject to Parliamentary approval. This would allow for shadow elections to the new unitary authorities on 6th May 2027. The new authorities would then go live on 1st April 2028.

3.4 There is consensus among all Oxfordshire Councils in wanting to move at pace towards devolution and local government reorganisation, in the best interests of all our residents, businesses and our respective workforces. The ability of a Strategic Authority to stimulate innovation, sustainable growth and infrastructure delivery at a 'regional' scale, as opposed to a single local authority scale, is identified by Government as the key to long term economic growth and prosperity, and the functions and roles of new unitary councils need to be developed to compliment, rather than compete against this background.

3.5 Delay in progressing devolution and local government reorganisation, and any misalignment of timing, would significantly increase uncertainty and would not offer the clarity and pace that officers believe is essential to support sustainable growth and deliver transformative outcomes for our communities.

4. ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS

4.1 The Council may not wish to submit any proposals to Government in which to reorganise local government. Given Government's stated expectation that all areas should submit proposals by the 28th November 2025, this course of action is not recommended.

5. CONCLUSION

5.1 This report proposes the submission of a full proposal for a two unitary model based on one new unitary council covering the entire existing boundaries of West Oxfordshire and Cherwell District Councils and Oxford City Council, with the working title of 'Oxford & Shires' and a second new unitary covering the entire existing boundaries of South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse District Councils and West Berkshire Council, with the working title of 'Ridgeway'.

6. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

6.1 Local government reorganisation will have financial consequences and require a significant funding commitment from councils to deliver. Whilst it is possible that the Government may make a financial contribution towards council costs, it is more likely that local areas will be required to meet the costs of transition themselves as indicated in the invitation letter. The Government has indicated that in its view, savings from unitarisation in line with its criteria, will be more than sufficient to address these costs. Notwithstanding that view, the councils have indicated in their two unitary model proposal, that should government funding be available to support transition costs it will enable the councils to begin with a firmer financial footing, thus aiding long-term sustainability.

6.2 The Director of Finance is content that anticipated additional costs in the 2026/27 financial year relating to preparing for local government reorganisation can be addressed within existing budget provisions earmarked for transformation, including reserves. Should this position change, a further report will be brought to the Executive, and potentially to Full Council.

6.3 It should be noted that the two unitary model proposal includes a full financial case based on work undertaken by PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC), PeopleToo and CIPFA that supported analysis undertaken by the Section 151 officers from across the five councils who developed the two unitary model.

6.4 Additional work will be required going forward, and it should be noted that the process of local government reorganisation coincides with the fair funding review, resulting in a lack of clarity over future levels of government funding for all councils.

7. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

7.1 The Government has invited any principal authority in the area of the county of Oxfordshire, to submit a proposal for a single tier of local government under Part 1 of the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007 ('the 2007 Act'). The submission of an Interim Proposals by the 21st March 2025 was an essential first step towards developing this Final Proposal, with the requirement of submission to MHCLG being before 28th November 2025.

7.2 The Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007 (the '2007 Act') is the legislative basis for the creation of unitary councils. Under section 2 of the 2007 Act, the Secretary of State may invite either a county council or district council to put forward a proposal for a single tier of local government. This proposal can comprise:

- A single tier of local government for the whole of the county (Type A proposal);
- A single tier of local government for a district (or more) within the county (Type B proposal);
- A single tier of local government for one of the above that also includes one or more relevant adjoining areas (e.g. all or part of an adjoining county area) (Type C Proposal);
- A combination of the above Types B or C proposals.

7.3 Until 25th January 2008, the Secretary of State (SoS) was able to direct principal councils to bring forward a proposal, which meant that the SoS could effectively force unitarisation where proposals were not made voluntarily. However, this provision expired on 25th January 2008. The indications in the White Paper are that the Government will reintroduce this power of direction in due course – although the 2007 Act will need to be amended or replaced to enable this. This outcome is likely to be delivered in the English Devolution Bill, which is expected to come into force sometime in 2026.

7.4 Proposals under section 2 of the 2007 Act do not require a consensus from every authority affected by it. However, where a proposal is made jointly by every authority, the requirements on the SoS to consult are reduced to exclude consultation with every authority affected.

7.5 Subject to consultation requirements, following the receipt of a proposal under section 2 of the 2007 Act, the SoS may implement the proposal, with or without modification under section 7 of the 2007 Act. They may also seek advice from the Local Government Boundary Commission for England ('Commission') who may make an alternative proposal which the SoS may implement with or without modification.

7.6 There are no other specific timescales which the SoS must adhere to when taking a decision, but the SoS must consult with authorities affected by the proposal (other than those which made it) and such other persons as they think appropriate before reaching a decision.

7.7 Proposals regarding the creation of a new authority (unitary) are executive functions. There is a statutory presumption that all local authority functions not reserved to the Council in Regulations will be the responsibility of the executive (section 9(D)(2) Local Government Act 2000).

7.8 Based on the criteria within the invitation letter and White Paper on what proposals must include and what should be avoided, the two unitary model proposed in this report meets the criteria for submission.

8. RISK ASSESSMENT

8.1 There are no immediate risks arising from this report, however reorganisation on this scale will present significant risks and issues. A comprehensive risk register will be maintained as the councils move to the transition phase of LGR, which will gather, monitor and manage a full suite of risk and issues.

9. EQUALITIES IMPACT

9.1 In making decisions the council is required to have regard to its equalities duties and in particular to those set out in section 149 of the Equality Act 2010 to eliminate discrimination, harassment, victimisation and eliminate any other conduct that is prohibited by or under the Act, to advance equality of opportunity between persons who share a protected characteristic namely age, disability, gender reassignment, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, sex and sexual orientation, and persons who do not share it and to foster good relations between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it.

9.2 There are no equalities implication arising from this report, however as the councils move to the transition phase of LGR, an equality impact assessment will be undertaken for each workstream to summarise any implications and the associated actions being taken to mitigate any negative impacts.

10. CLIMATE AND ECOLOGICAL EMERGENCIES IMPLICATIONS

10.1 As agreed with the climate team, the use of the Climate Impact Assessment Tool is not appropriate for a high-level strategy set out in this report. The climate and ecological impacts of each project within the programme as it moves to the transition phase will be assessed using the Climate Impact Assessment Tool as they come forward.

11. BACKGROUND PAPERS

11.1 None

(END)

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One council: One Oxfordshire

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Why One Oxfordshire?

We set out why Oxfordshire works as a footprint for local government reorganisation through a clear analysis of our place, people, partnerships and economy – and how this supports our case for change for One Oxfordshire.

We demonstrate our financial resilience and share what people think of our proposal. We evidence their support as well as show how we will meet people's needs and concerns.

One Oxfordshire provides the strongest opportunities associated with having all the levers of local government at the disposal of one council.

Let's make this happen – let's build one Oxfordshire Council.

Hook Norton

1. Introduction

1.1 Foreword

"Every place is unique, but Oxfordshire is truly special. It is a county of contrasting and connected communities whose ideas and discoveries have changed lives around the world, making it an exceptional place to live and work.

"From world-class universities and cutting-edge science parks to a rich cultural heritage and a highly skilled population of over 760,000, Oxfordshire plays a vital role in driving innovation, job creation and economic prosperity for the region and the nation.

"Connectivity and diversity are key to our county's success. Our internationally renowned campuses such as Bicester Motion, Culham, Harwell and Milton Park, are pioneering new developments in AI, quantum computing, space technology, biomedical sciences and robotics. These are boosted by the exchange of ideas and talent from our academic institutions and businesses – start-ups and global giants.

"However, the county is not without its challenges. An ageing population, rising demand for services, a housing affordability ratio, which is among the highest in England, and a lack of transport connectivity between towns, cities and rural areas are hindering economic growth, and placing services under significant strain.

"The government's call for local government reform is therefore both timely and necessary. We have listened carefully to our residents, partners and stakeholders, and we are ready to lead the way through One Oxfordshire.

"We will deliver a £63 million annual saving by creating a single county unitary. We will reduce duplication, protect our critical services and have the scale to focus and invest in prevention and early help, tackling inequalities and homelessness.

"One Oxfordshire is not just a structural solution; it is a vision for a stronger, fairer and more ambitious future for the county. By bringing together all the levers of local government into a single, resilient authority, we can unlock the full potential of our people and places, drive innovation and deliver the high quality services our communities deserve.

"This is a once in a generation chance to seize the opportunities that public sector reform, together with devolution, offers. One Oxfordshire will provide the scale and stability to withstand future financial shocks, the efficiency to maximise value for money, and the ambition to deliver real and lasting benefits for every resident and business, and for the nation as a whole."

Councillor Liz Leffman,
Leader of Oxfordshire County Council

1.2 Executive summary

The government has laid out its plans for the future of local government, planning and infrastructure, the NHS and the industrial strategy in England. This comes at a time when public finances are under significant strain and councils across England are facing either immediate or future crises as a result. Oxfordshire, while not immune to these challenges, is well placed to respond to them – not least as result of prudent and far-sighted treasury and financial management over many years.

Oxfordshire is a county of national and global significance, renowned for its world-class universities, cutting-edge science and technology clusters, and vibrant communities. Yet, the current two-tier system of local government no longer serves the county's needs. Fragmentation, duplication and inefficiency are impeding Oxfordshire's ability to deliver the scale of transformation, efficiency and resilience required by the government's devolution and public sector reform agenda. Change is needed to enable all Oxfordshire's residents to thrive and for the county to realise its full potential as an economic and innovation powerhouse.

The government's statutory invitation and the English Devolution White Paper have made clear that local government must be large enough to withstand financial shocks, deliver high quality services, and unlock the benefits of devolution. The proposal for One Oxfordshire – a single unitary council for the county – offers a robust, evidence-based proposal that meets and exceeds the government's criteria for reorganisation: scale, efficiency, financial resilience and improved outcomes for residents.

Our proposal for local government reorganisation sets out why One Oxfordshire is the right footprint for the county – one which will deliver stronger, simpler services that are closer to communities, connected and cost effective.

Our case for change

Financial resilience and value for money

The financial case for One Oxfordshire is compelling and independently verified. We will deliver a £63 million annual saving by creating a single unitary council for Oxfordshire, with total net savings of £163 million achieved by year five. These savings are achieved through the aggregation of services, transformation of delivery and the elimination of duplication across six councils.

With transition costs of under £22 million, the payback period is just 1.3 years. Moreover, this proposal does not require ongoing government financial support. One Oxfordshire provides the fastest, cheapest and lowest risk transition to a new council.

Financial modelling demonstrates that only One Oxfordshire has the scale to withstand future funding shocks, including those anticipated from the Fair Funding Review 2.0 and business rates reset, ensuring that services are protected for the long-term.

Service continuity, integration and improvement

Service continuity and improvement are at the heart of this proposal. Oxfordshire County Council already delivers services on a countywide footprint, providing 85 per cent of local government services by expenditure. One Oxfordshire will avoid the costly and risky disaggregation of high-performing services, particularly in adult and children's social care. Our proposal is laser-focused on protecting and improving these critical services, with a proven track record of "good" ratings from Ofsted and the Care Quality Commission.

By integrating upper and lower tier services, One Oxfordshire will enable systematic transformation – unifying waste services, creating person-centred homelessness support and joining up planning, housing and highways. Residents and businesses will benefit from a single front door to all services, simplifying access and reducing confusion.

The risks of fragmentation are clear: disaggregating services would increase costs, reduce standards, and undermine the progress made in areas such as the Oxfordshire Way – a prevention and early intervention programme that has delivered a 67 per cent reduction in adults waiting for social care assessment and a 20 per cent reduction in long-term care needs. A single unitary would also avoid the unnecessary, costly and temporary disaggregation of Oxfordshire Fire and Rescue Service.

Only a single council can safeguard, promote and optimise Oxfordshire's unique asset base, ensuring that high-performing services are not only preserved but enhanced.

Economic growth and national impact

Oxfordshire is one of only four county areas that are net contributors to the UK exchequer, generating £29.3 billion in GVA annually and supporting 430,000 jobs. The county hosts the highest concentration of science research facilities in Western Europe and has attracted over £3.1 billion in foreign direct investment since 2017. Major global firms such as Moderna and BMW, alongside the University of Oxford's spinouts valued at £6.4 billion, underpin a thriving innovation ecosystem.

One Oxfordshire will provide the governance and strategic clarity needed to build a successful Oxford-Cambridge Growth Corridor, unlock housing and infrastructure, and drive inclusive growth – directly supporting the government's Industrial Strategy.

The Knowledge Spine, which connects Bicester, Oxford and the Science Vale, serves as the backbone of Oxfordshire's innovation ecosystem, supporting high-skill employment and enterprise growth. Oxfordshire's economic coherence has long been recognised by central government, and a unified approach through One Oxfordshire will enhance the county's capacity to drive national growth through innovation and expertise. Evidence is compelling that Oxfordshire's economic success, particularly in advanced research and manufacturing, has created significant employment and

growth in other regions of the UK. This could be stalled if economic coherence is lost through disaggregation and reduced scale.

Strategic planning, housing and infrastructure

The current system of local governance has failed to deliver the strategic planning and housing Oxfordshire needs. In the current planning round, Oxford City Council has had its local plan rejected at examination stage for failing to meet the duty to cooperate. The planning inspectorate has also written to Vale of White Horse District Council and South Oxfordshire District Council recommending that their joint-plan is withdrawn, again on the issue of the duty to cooperate.

In addition, the Oxfordshire Strategic Vision – the precursor to the Oxfordshire Joint Statutory Spatial Plan (Oxfordshire Plan 2050) – failed in 2022 on the issue of agreeing housing numbers. These failures demonstrate the urgent need for a fresh start and that scale is essential when making decisions about growth.

One Oxfordshire will create a single local planning authority, streamlining decision-making, resources and governance. This will support faster, more coordinated progress towards housing and development goals, ensuring coordination of infrastructure and a localised and authentic approach to community involvement.

The county's ambitious OxRAIL 2040 strategy and the ability to act as a single point of contact for major infrastructure projects will enable Oxfordshire to respond effectively to national priorities and deliver regeneration at scale. Delivery of sustainable development is critical to the county's economic success and to the government's wider growth agenda.

Partnership, collaboration and devolution

We will operate as a strong partner within a future Thames Valley mayoral strategic authority, enabling coherent regional planning, transport and economic development. One Oxfordshire supports government ambitions for integrated health and care, with pooled budgets and neighbourhood-level delivery in partnership with the NHS and voluntary and community sector. Oxfordshire's extensive network of partnerships and organisations, strengthened after the COVID pandemic, will be leveraged to deliver improved outcomes for residents and businesses.

Our One Oxfordshire proposal is underpinned by extensive engagement with residents, MPs, businesses, public sector providers and our workforce, including focus groups, interviews and a statistically representative residents' survey. Lessons from comparable unitarisation programmes, such as in Buckinghamshire, together with independent research and assurance from sector experts, have informed our transition and implementation plan.

Democratic accountability and localism

One Oxfordshire will strengthen local democracy through robust neighbourhood governance, area committees and closer partnerships with town and parish councils. We will ensure that decision making is brought closer to communities, their local voices heard, with clear accountability and a single set of councillors operating at the heart of their areas. Oxford's city status and identity will be protected through modern charter trustees and dedicated governance arrangements.

We recognise the importance of local identity and a new council will be designed to ensure that the benefits of reform are felt in every community across the county. Residents have made it clear that they want a council that is cost effective, delivers consistent services that are easy to access, and listens and responds to local communities. One Oxfordshire will address these priorities and make local government work better for everyone.

Risk mitigation and deliverability

Risk mitigation and deliverability are central to the One Oxfordshire approach. This is the fastest, lowest risk and lowest cost transition of all three options, building on the firm foundations of existing countywide delivery and minimising disruption for residents and partners. The proposal is grounded in robust financial planning, independent assurance, and a clear implementation framework that balances strategic oversight, operational continuity and comprehensive stakeholder engagement.

The transition plan is structured around clear phases, with dedicated programme governance, risk management and independent assurance to ensure that the benefits of reform are realised safely and effectively. The county council's experience, financial resilience and partnerships provide a strong and robust platform for delivering One Oxfordshire and leading the transition to an ambitious new council.

One Oxfordshire: a compelling, evidence-based solution

One Oxfordshire is the only proposal that fully meets the government's criteria for local government reorganisation. It offers the scale to serve over 760,000 residents; the efficiency to maximise savings and provide the best value for money; the resilience to withstand financial shocks and invest in long-term growth; and the service excellence to protect and improve critical services. It is directly aligned with government policy on public sector reform, devolution and economic growth.

This is a pivotal opportunity to deliver a stronger, simpler and more prosperous future for Oxfordshire and the nation. We can achieve this through a new successor council that can build on firm foundations for modern and effective local government, an institution with the strength and voice to activate exciting and enduring positive change, and one that people can be proud of – a council that is on their side.

Let's build one Oxfordshire Council.

1.3 Options appraisal

We know local government and governance in Oxfordshire needs to change, and we welcome this. Oxfordshire County Council has been an advocate for reorganisation for many years and recognise the benefits it will bring to our residents and wider stakeholders.

This new opportunity for reorganisation has brought a fresh focus for what could work for Oxfordshire and the options available. Based on the statutory invitation issued to Oxfordshire, we have undertaken a robust options appraisal to determine what best meets the government's criteria. We have considered:

1. One council for all of Oxfordshire.
2. Two councils (eastern/western Oxfordshire, northern/southern Oxfordshire and Oxford plus the surrounding county).
3. Three councils (Oxford and two rural authorities).

The criteria tables on pages 162 - 163 summarise which chapters of our proposal demonstrate how we meet each of the government's criteria.

Oxfordshire County Council | LGR proposal | 1. Introduction

The options

A scoring was applied to assess viability against the government's criteria. Our options appraisal shows the demonstrable benefits of one Oxfordshire council.

1	Low score against government criteria
2	Medium score against government criteria
3	High score against government criteria

Government criteria	Option 1: One Oxfordshire council	Option 2: Two Oxfordshire councils	Option 3: Three Oxfordshire councils
Proposals should seek to achieve for the whole of the area concerned the establishment of a single tier of local government	This option will achieve a single tier of local government for the whole of Oxfordshire.	This option will achieve two single tiers of local government for the whole of Oxfordshire.	This option will achieve three single tiers of local government for the whole of Oxfordshire.
	Option covers an established geography and economic area which will help to increase housing supply.	Option breaks the established geography and economic area into two and makes it more challenging to deliver increased housing supply	While Oxford city has a recognised geography, this option breaks the established economic area into three and makes delivery of increased housing supply virtually unattainable
	Option provides an appropriate taxbase which allows for the differences in need (services) and resources (funding) and does not create any undue advantage or disadvantage across the geography.	Option provides two smaller taxbases which could result in differences in need (services) and resources (funding) which would likely create undue advantage or disadvantage across the geography.	Option does not provide an appropriate taxbase to allow for the differences in need (services) and resources (funding) and would create undue advantage or disadvantage across the geography.
Meets government criteria?	**3**	**2**	**1**

Oxfordshire County Council | LGR proposal | 1. Introduction

Government criteria	Option 1: One Oxfordshire council	Option 2: Two Oxfordshire councils	Option 3: Three Oxfordshire councils
Councils must be the right size to achieve efficiencies, improve capacity and withstand financial shocks.	One council would be above 500,000 residents, in line with government requirements.	Two councils would be under the population for new councils required by government.	Three councils would be significantly under the population for new councils required by government.
	Option enables maximum savings for the short, medium and long-term with the optimal payback period.	Option supports some savings; however, these are reduced by the costs of disaggregation.	Option enables the lowest savings, which are mostly offset by the costs of disaggregation.
	The strongest option for future financial resilience.	Creation of two councils, under the population threshold creates councils with reduced resilience to withstand financial shocks.	Creation of three councils, significantly under the population threshold does not create councils with the resilience to withstand financial shocks.
Meets government criteria?	**3**	**2**	**1**
Councils must prioritise the delivery of high quality and sustainable public services to citizens.	Provides continuity of critical services rated 'good' for both adult and children's social care. Provides continuity for SEND improvement programme. The risks and costs associated with disaggregation will be avoided.	Disaggregation of critical services will need to take place. This means additional cost and risk.	Excessive disaggregation of critical services will need to take place. This means additional cost and risk.
	Avoids unnecessary fragmentation of services. creating relative stability for further transformation and public sector reform to take place at pace.	Disaggregation will need to take place for all upper tier services. This option will also include the costs and risk of transferring Oxfordshire Fire and Rescue Service into a highly temporary combined fire authority structure.	Excessive disaggregation will need to take place for all upper tier services This option will also include the costs and risk of transferring Oxfordshire Fire and Rescue Service into a highly temporary combined fire authority structure.
	Provides the opportunity to improve service delivery through consolidation of some services such as homelessness	Provides some opportunity to improve service delivery through consolidation of some services such as homelessness	Provides little opportunity to improve service delivery through consolidation of some services such as homelessness
	Financial headroom offered by one council allows for greater opportunities for investment in prevention, neighbourhood working and ongoing transformation.	Lower levels of financial headroom mean lower capacity for investment in prevention, neighbourhood working and ongoing transformation.	The least level of financial headroom means minimal investment in prevention, neighbourhood working and ongoing transformation.
Meets government criteria?	**3**	**1**	**1**

Oxfordshire County Council | LGR proposal | 1. Introduction

Government criteria	Option 1: One Oxfordshire council	Option 2: Two Oxfordshire councils	Option 3: Three Oxfordshire councils
Proposals should show how councils in the area have sought to work together in coming to a view that meets local needs and is informed by local views.	Councils have worked together to share information.	Councils have worked together to share information.	Councils have worked together to share information.
	Engagement has demonstrated that residents and stakeholders value simplicity and cost effectiveness. This is in addition to a lack of disruption to services.	This option will not deliver the simplicity and cost effectiveness that residents and stakeholders want.	This option will not deliver the simplicity and cost effectiveness that residents and stakeholders want.
	Strong community involvement and an effective neighbourhood working model, supported by financial headroom, are needed to balance the organisation's size.	While two organisations partly address concerns about size, they remain less local than the current two-tier system. Reduced financial flexibility will also limit investment in new neighbourhood models.	While three organisations address concerns about size, they remain less local than the current two-tier system. Limited financial flexibility will also limit investment in new neighbourhood models.
Meets government criteria?	**2**	**1**	**1**
Proposals must support devolution arrangements.	Option unlocks effective devolution to a Thames Valley mayoral strategic authority.	Devolution is possible under this option; however, it weakens the benefits that Oxfordshire can secure by fragmenting the functional economic area.	Devolution is possible under this option; however, it significantly weakens the benefits that Oxfordshire can secure by fragmenting the functional economic area.
	A single council will provide a strong single voice for the complete functional economic area of Oxfordshire.	Creates distinct differences and competing influences for Oxfordshire.	Creates distinct differences and competing influences for Oxfordshire.
Meets government criteria?	**3**	**2**	**1**

Oxfordshire County Council | LGR proposal | 1. Introduction

Government criteria	Option 1: One Oxfordshire council	Option 2: Two Oxfordshire councils	Option 3: Three Oxfordshire councils
Proposals should enable stronger community engagement and deliver genuine opportunity for neighbourhood empowerment.	A single council has the financial headroom and the scale to invest in strong community involvement and an effective neighbourhood governance model that can be sustained long-term. It will also balance the organisation's size.	Two councils have an opportunity to reflect local views and engagement more consistently. Two councils may partly address concerns about size, strong community involvement but an effective neighbourhood governance model is still needed. The reduced financial headroom means that structures which enable strong community engagement may not be sustained in the long-term.	Three councils have an opportunity to reflect local views and engagement more consistently. Three councils address concerns about size, strong community involvement but an effective neighbourhood governance model is still needed. The significantly reduced financial headroom means that structures which enable strong community engagement may not either be developed or sustained in the long-term.
Meets government criteria?	**3**	**2**	**2**
Totals	**17**	**10**	**7**

Other proposals have been brought forward from district councils in Oxfordshire, which include West Berkshire Council to mitigate some of the weaknesses identified in the options appraisal. We have not included West Berkshire in our options appraisal for the following reasons:

- It did not receive the statutory invitation from government on 9 February 2025 as it is not within an existing two tier county area. We have provided an option to government for Oxfordshire in response to the invitation to Oxfordshire councils.
- Any expansion of the area to encompass West Berkshire puts Oxfordshire at additional levels of unnecessary risk given it is currently in receipt of exceptional financial support from government.
- It would create a boundary change, effectively abolishing the ceremonial county of Oxfordshire that has a strong, well established national and international identity.
- It would also create an unnecessary, costly and temporary disaggregation of Oxfordshire Fire and Rescue Service into a new combined fire authority either for Oxfordshire or joining with Royal Berkshire Fire and Rescue Service prior to the creation of a Thames Valley Fire and Rescue Service.

Oxfordshire County Council | LGR proposal | 1. Introduction

In addition, an independent financial options appraisal from PwC – which provides high level estimates of savings and costs from reorganisation (before being refined by any local factors) for two and three councils including West Berkshire – demonstrates that the single council for Oxfordshire still offers the most financially resilient option with the lowest transition costs.

It is, therefore, not in the interests of Oxfordshire residents, business communities or wider stakeholders, to create a principal authority with West Berkshire. There isn't clear evidence to suggest how inclusion of West Berkshire in Oxfordshire's reorganisation would contribute to putting local government in the area as a whole on a firmer footing.

	Gross annual benefit	Additional annual costs	Recurring net annual benefit	One-off transition costs	Payback period	Net benefit after 1 year	Net benefit after 5 year
Single UA for all of Oxfordshire (Excluding West Berkshire)	£27.3m	£0	£27.3m	£23.8m	3.1 years	-£16.3m	£44.3m
2 UAs - Oxford & Shires and Ridgeway	£24.9m	£3.0m	£21.9m	£30.4m	4.2 years	-£24.9m	£16.6m
3 UAs - Greater Oxford, North Oxfordshire and Ridgeway	£20.2m	£10.7m	£9.5m	£32.5m	8.7 years	-£34.7m	-£35.5m

Our options appraisal shows that creating more than one council in Oxfordshire results in a weaker financial position, significant risk and a reduced ability to meet the government criteria.

The geography of one council for the whole of Oxfordshire also makes sense. Oxfordshire is a recognised and significant geography that has been used for successful public service design and delivery for many years. The case for an Oxfordshire footprint is strong and compelling.

As our options appraisal has demonstrated, there is strong alignment for One Oxfordshire with the government's criteria for reform, including its geography.

One Oxfordshire provides the optimal geography for a new council and we will demonstrate this using robust evidence and supporting data. We have considered our historic identity and opportunities to evolve this; democracy; demographics relevant for public service planning and delivery; our economy and connectivity; and our rich partnerships.

2. The case for an Oxfordshire footprint

2.1 Place

Geography and population

Oxfordshire is home to an estimated 763,218 people in 2024 and 31,755 businesses. One Oxfordshire will serve this population meeting the government's criteria for council size and as a single tier of local government.

Population estimates and housing forecasts

Area	ONS population estimates: Mid-2024[2]	2032 OCC housing-led forecasts
Cherwell	170,426	184,000
Oxford	166,034	170,700
South Oxfordshire	156,470	170,100
Vale of White Horse	149,347	166,600
West Oxfordshire	120,941	123,400
Oxfordshire (totals)	**763,218**	**814,700**

Oxfordshire is a predominantly rural county, the least populated in the south-east, covering 260,595 hectares.

It hosts protected national landscapes, areas of strategic value to nature, including national nature reserves and sites of special scientific interest[4], as well as the Thames Path and Ridgeway national trails. There is a strong, interconnected network of thriving villages and market towns, with the historic city of Oxford at its heart.

Oxfordshire's geography supports its coherence and connection. The county is bounded and shaped by natural features like the Chiltern Hills, Cotswolds, the River Thames and its transport infrastructure (A34, M40, rail links, bus network). The county has over 4,200 km of roads and over 4.79 billion vehicle miles were travelled on them in 2024[5]. Major rail and road transport links reinforce internal connectivity, providing a foundation for growth within the new economy, across Bicester, Oxford and Didcot[6]. Oxfordshire is both a ceremonial county and an administrative one with boundaries that are the same.

While Oxfordshire boasts natural beauty, it does pose flooding risks. Local authority responsibility for flood management is currently divided between county and district councils. The Oxfordshire Local Flood Risk Management Strategy[7] identifies flooding from rivers, notably the Thames and its tributaries as the primary source of flood risk. Historically, this means Burford and Witney in West Oxfordshire, Abingdon and Henley-on-Thames in South Oxfordshire, Banbury and Kidlington in Cherwell, and Oxford face particular risk of properties being impacted and damaged from flooding[8].

One Oxfordshire will enable a consistent approach to flood preparedness and response across the whole of the county. We will empower communities to work with local councillors and the council on building local awareness and hyper-local resilience hubs to take action to protect homes and communities most affected. The county council already has countywide experience and strong relationships forged within the Thames Valley Local Resilience Forum to continue to respond to incidents on a small or large geographical scale.

Historic identity and opportunity

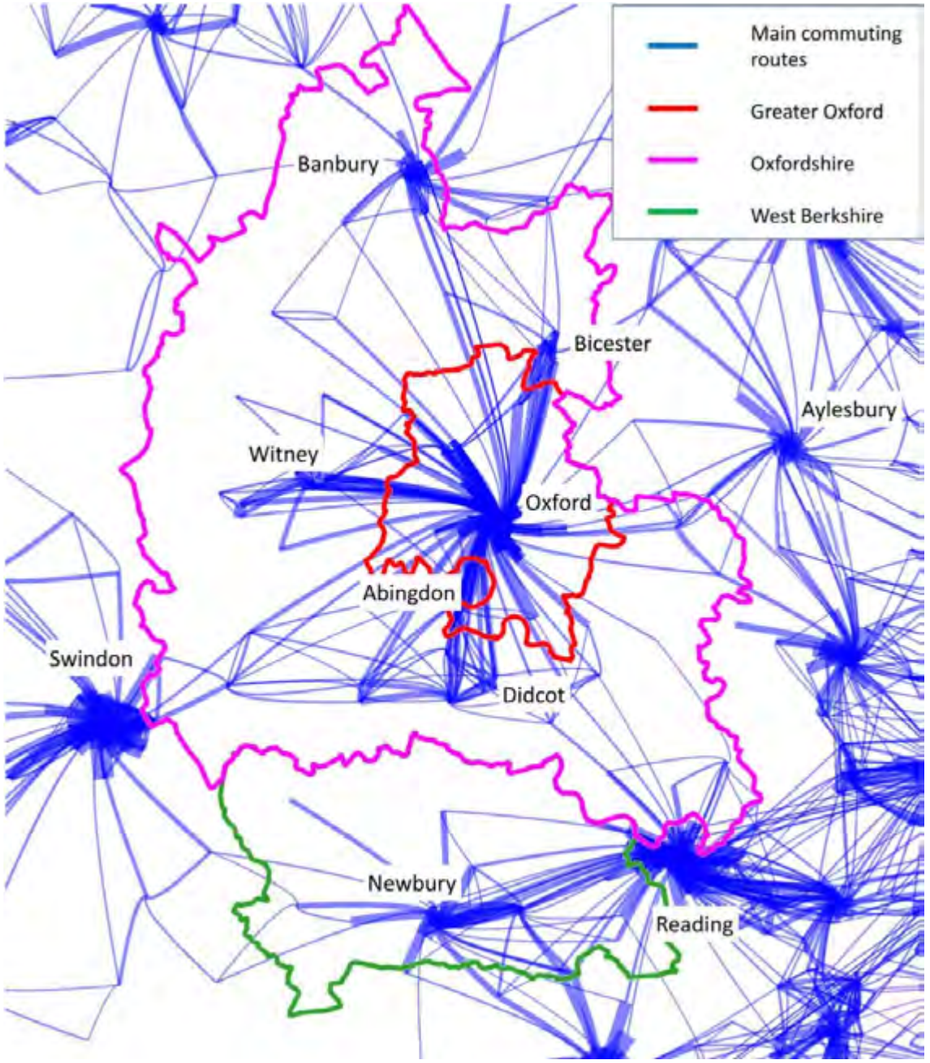
Oxfordshire is bordered by Northamptonshire and Warwickshire to the north, Buckinghamshire to the east, Berkshire to the south, and Wiltshire and Gloucestershire to the west. Oxford city is the largest settlement. Anchored on the Thames, it lies between the Cotswolds to the west, Chilterns and the North Wessex Downs to the south and the Cherwell Valley in the north.

Oxfordshire was first recorded as a county more than 1,000 years ago with Oxfordshire County Council established in 1889. In 1974, the current borders and powers for the county council, the four shire district councils – Cherwell, South Oxfordshire, West Oxfordshire and the Vale of White Horse – were created, as well as Oxford City Council, previously a self-governing county borough.

The northern boundary of Berkshire was historically defined by the River Thames, which flows through the Vale of White Horse and South Oxfordshire. Following the redrawing of boundaries in 1974, communities served by their county town, Abingdon, were added into the administrative county of Oxfordshire. In practical terms, this is the area covered by Vale of White Horse District Council and part of South Oxfordshire District Council.

This incorporation of parts of Berkshire into Oxfordshire was not arbitrary. The Thames and the North Wessex Downs acts as a natural barrier and there is relatively little economic interaction north to south between the Vale of White Horse and West Berkshire. This is evidenced by limited travel to work activity and home to school transport, the latter comprising only 8.8 per cent of origin destination trips compared to 85.6 per cent within the county footprint[9].

Oxford travel to work area[10]



Oxford

Critical to the historic identity of Oxfordshire is Oxford, with the University of Oxford playing a strong role in shaping the growth and development of the city since its foundation – the exact year of which is unknown, but pre-dates 1096[11]. Despite this clear Oxford brand, there are key interactions and connections between the different parts of the county, which enable the city to thrive and perpetuate its global identity.

One Oxfordshire will maintain and strengthen existing connections through a new, single council for all Oxfordshire residents, businesses, institutions and investors. It will maintain the links between our great universities and organisations developing advanced technology, including our science campuses at Begbroke, Culham, Harwell and Milton Park so that our county can drive innovation and inclusive growth across the region.

The county council's groundbreaking research alliances with Oxford's universities (and University College London) are already bridging the gap between research and practice to deliver evidence-based policy making at scale and with impact ensuring that we can test, learn and grow services rooted in what works.

Oxfordshire County Council | LGR proposal | 2. The case for an Oxfordshire footprint

Visitor economy

The county's visitor economy is worth £2.4 billion and sustains 41,000 jobs (11 per cent of total employment in Oxfordshire[12]).

It is home to a wide variety of well-known brands including Blenheim Palace, Bicester Village and the Cotswolds. Established attractions such as Le Manoir aux Quat'Saisons, Henley Regatta and the Wilderness Festival will be joined over the coming years by major new attractions such as the proposed Puy du Fou and the Great Wolf Lodge, bringing even greater visitor numbers to Oxfordshire.

These brands are supported by a wider ecosystem of retail, leisure and hospitality businesses, market towns and natural assets that collectively make Oxfordshire an internationally significant tourist destination.

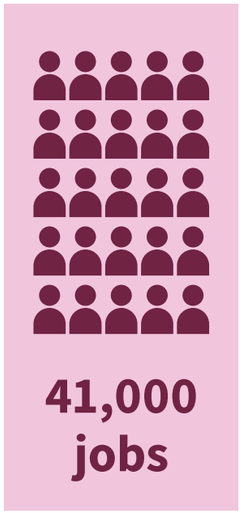
In 2024 alone, Oxfordshire welcomed 25.3 million visitors spending 9.7 million nights in the county, with more overseas visitors (5.3m) than domestic (4.4m). Importantly, Cherwell (home to Bicester Village) received as many visitors (26 per cent of trips) as Oxford city (25 per cent)[13].

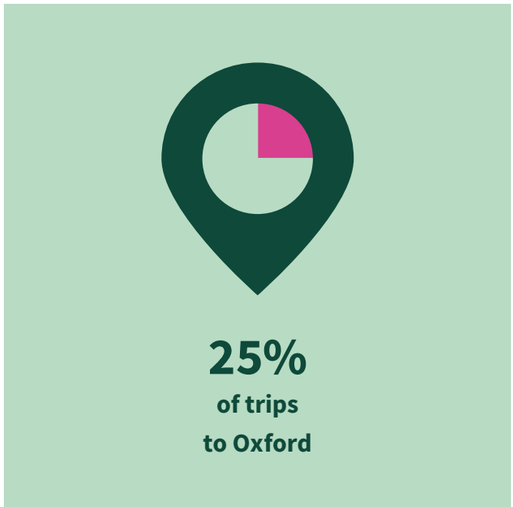
The city supports a tourism industry comprising seven million daytime and staying visitors per year, generating £780 million of income[14] for local Oxford businesses.

In 2021, Oxford was the ninth most visited city from overseas staying visits in the UK. Protecting the image of Oxford and its valued tourism industry is critical to the ongoing economic success of the city. With a large geographic footprint, One Oxfordshire can be more strategic in how Oxford flourishes allowing it to more effectively protect a familiar, globally recognisable image that attracts visitors from around the world.

Support for our visitor economy is currently fragmented across six local authorities and one destination management organisation – which leads to duplicated effort, inconsistent branding and competitive marketing. Experience Oxfordshire's 2023 visitor survey highlighted poor transport links and a lack of awareness of the county's offer as key reasons not to visit[15].

One Oxfordshire will better enable the sustainable growth of the county's visitor economy. We will do this by improving transport integration, delivering economies of scale in marketing, investing at scale in countywide cultural experiences, and targeting support for the whole system through planning, business and employment support. Ultimately, this will enable Oxfordshire to attract and retain more visitors.





"Take away Oxfordshire and you remove a cornerstone of continuity, identity and resilience."

(Oxfordshire resident, investor and business owner)

Democracy

Elections to a council representing Oxfordshire have occurred since 1889 and are part of our democratic tradition and identity, one recognised by Oxfordshire's residents.

The county council's long-standing leadership and delivery of county elections across districts, consolidating efforts into a single Oxfordshire team, is a demonstration of our collective abilities to lead and deliver electoral events at scale.

Since 2017[16], county council elections in Oxfordshire have averaged a turnout of 38.1 per cent. This figure is above the English average for county election turnouts during the same period (35.3 per cent) and represents a comparatively good level of democratic engagement and recognition of county-based democracy. This turnout level exceeds those of all English unitary authorities in equivalent electoral years (35.5 per cent). Building from this strong foundation of democratic engagement, One Oxfordshire will offer streamlined, unified governance that can strengthen this further.

County local election turnout mean averages[16]

Election year	Oxfordshire County Council	All English county local authorities	All English unitary councils
2017	38.5	35.3	37.6
2021	40.1	36.3	34.8
2025	35.6	34.3	34.0
Average turnout	**38.1**	**35.3**	**35.5**

One Oxfordshire will leverage a sense of place through the continuity of a democratic organisation that electors recognise. It provides stability and requires no boundary changes.

One Oxfordshire propels this remarkable county forward through a new council enriched with all local government functions. We will bring residents, businesses and institutions together and strengthen connections to the communities they recognise.

We believe that a governance model that respects and reflects this is more likely to succeed in strengthening democracy in Oxfordshire.

2.2 People

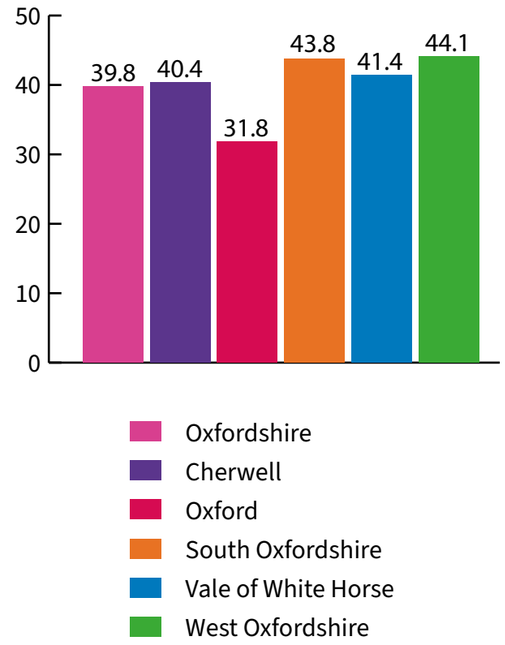
Age profiles

Oxfordshire residents have a similar age profile across district areas with the exception of Oxford, which is substantially lower. This relates to the number of 18 - 22 year olds linked to the city's large student population. There are also a number of Oxford residents under the age of 40 who migrate out of the city into the county's towns and rural areas, which reduces the city's average age[17].

Life expectancy in Oxfordshire is better than national averages. Males in all districts have a statistically significantly better life expectancy than the rest of the country at 79.3 years with Oxford the lowest at 80.6 years through to South Oxfordshire with an average of 82.7 years[19]. Female life expectancy in Cherwell and Oxford is marginally above the England average of 83.2 years, whereas South Oxfordshire, Vale of White Horse and West Oxfordshire all average over 85 years of age[20].

Oxfordshire has a broadly similar population base in terms of age and ethnicity[21] in all districts with the exception of Oxford, which has a younger average population and greater ethnic diversity amongst its residents.

ONS median population age: Oxfordshire and district council areas (mid-2024)[18]



Deprivation

Oxfordshire is the tenth least deprived of 151 upper tier local authorities in England[22]. Only 16.4 per cent of locations in Oxfordshire are within the 50 per cent more deprived locations within England, and of these only 0.2 per cent are within the most deprived category. By comparison, 26.3 per cent of areas in Oxfordshire are in the least deprived group with a further 20.9 per cent in the second least deprived group[23].

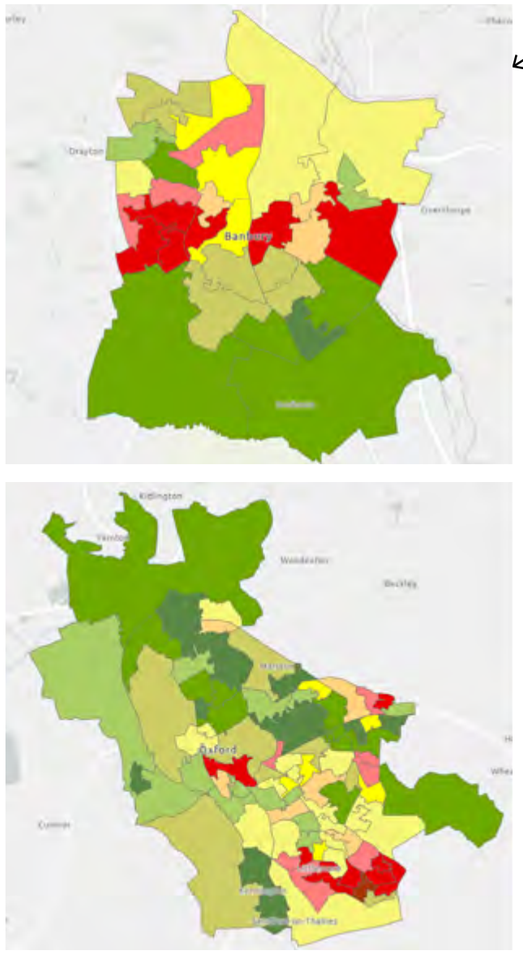
Although there are relatively few areas of deprivation, Oxfordshire has ten communities ranked in the 20 per cent most deprived in England[24] masking deep inequalities across the county.

One Oxfordshire will tackle these inequalities by building on and progressing existing exemplar work led by the county council's public health team, as well as utilising partnerships and new alliances.

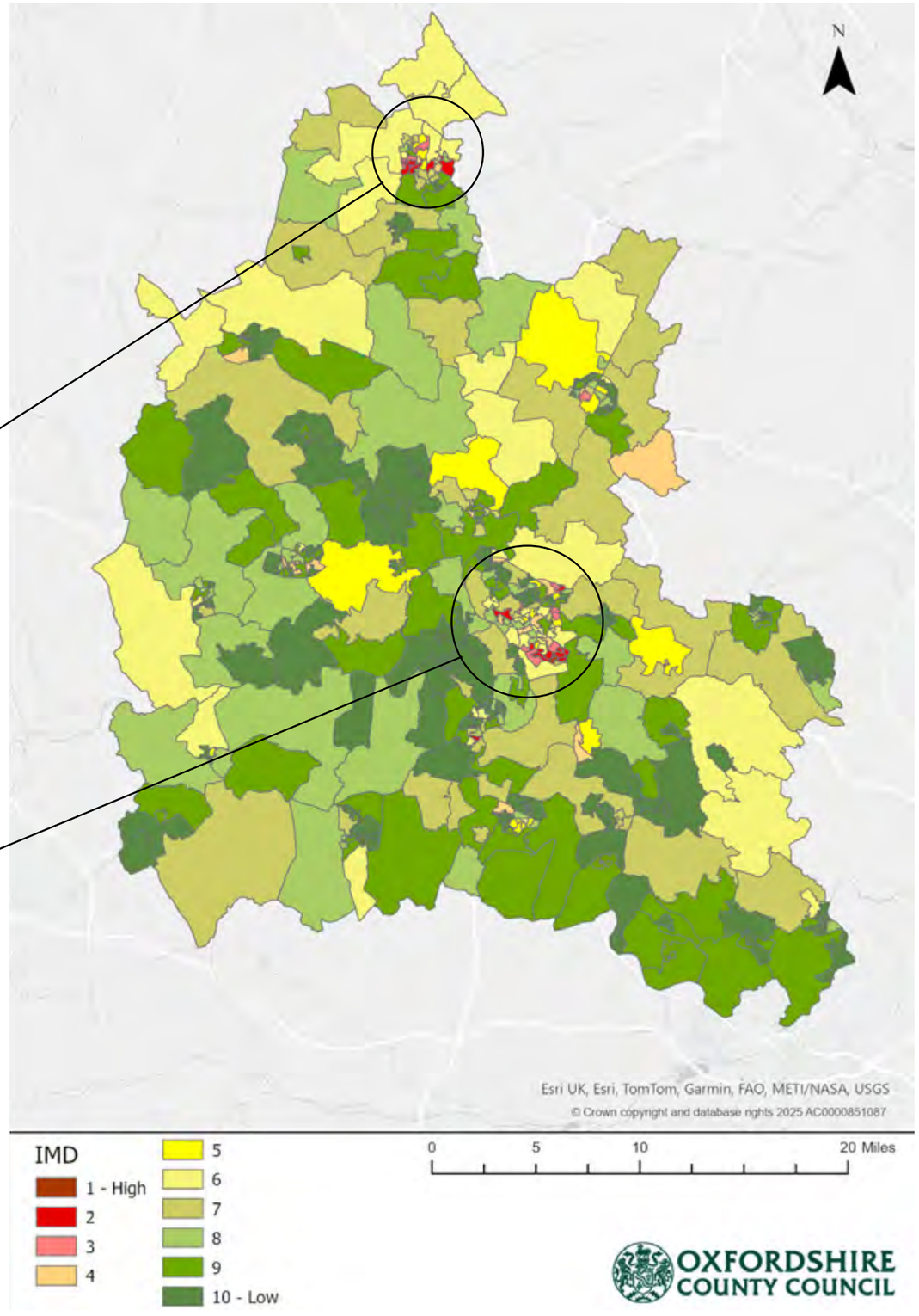
One such alliance is the Local Policy Lab formed in March 2024 between the University of Oxford, Oxford Brookes University and the county council. The lab aims to bridge the gap between research and local policy by building meaningful and long-lasting connections between local public policy makers, communities and academic researchers. It will support evidence-based public policy in key areas, initially focusing on health and climate policy.

Recently, the county council signed up to developing Oxfordshire as a Marmot Place[26] using academic and research expertise to help us better understand what actions will reduce health inequality.

Strategic approaches, such as addressing health inequalities through the Marmot programme, are more efficiently delivered at a county level. A single point of conversation with key partners will lead to more efficient outcomes across a complex health space including public health; adult and children's social care; research partners; contracted services; and national and sub-national bodies such as the Thames Valley Integrated Care Board. One Oxfordshire can build a more diverse range of experiences and develop strategy that can flex for local needs as appropriate.



Deprivation in Oxfordshire[25]



Reducing health inequalities in Blackbird Leys

Oxfordshire, despite its reputation for being wealthy and privileged, is facing stark inequalities.

A child born in Blackbird Leys will live 13 years less than a child born in the richest parts of the county, and residents living in Blackbird Leys often face multiple barriers to living an active life. Thanks to the strength of local partnerships, there is excellent work underway to get more residents active and tackle these embedded inequalities head on.

Sport England has invested £630,000 into Oxfordshire between 2025 - 2028 to enable long-term systemic changes in how inequalities are tackled and physical activity increased. The county council has directly funded Active Oxfordshire to help drive this place-based approach in our most deprived communities. Funding is being used to turbocharge this local work in Blackbird Leys to strengthen connections, share learnings and create even more long-term impact.

Pride in Place

Greater Leys will receive £20 million over ten years through the Pride in Place programme to tackle deprivation and improve quality of life.

The funding will deliver a locally agreed regeneration plan focused on three priorities: community facilities; public spaces; and safety. Planned investments include refurbishing Blackbird Leys and Greater Leys community centres, upgrading play areas and green spaces, and improving cycle and walking routes to connect residents with jobs and services.

High street improvements will support local businesses, while targeted measures will address anti-social behaviour and enhance lighting and CCTV. A neighbourhood board – made up of councillors, MPs and residents – will oversee delivery and ensure projects reflect community priorities. The programme also aims to boost skills and employment through training hubs and partnerships with local employers.

By creating safer streets, better amenities, and stronger community networks, the initiative seeks to make Greater Leys a thriving, inclusive neighbourhood. One unitary council will be able to use the strength of its connections and scale to support such partnership work, making funding work harder and reach wider across communities.

Oxfordshire County Council | LGR proposal | 2. The case for an Oxfordshire footprint

Oxfordshire's Marmot approach[26]

Where people are born, live, grow, work and get older has the biggest influence on health and health inequalities.

The county council has partnered with the University College London's Institute of Health Equity to become a Marmot Place.

This means we've committed to tackling health inequalities and improving health fairness in Oxfordshire by working with local partners across the system.

These include local authorities, communities, public services, businesses, and voluntary sector organisations.

The programme aims to create a fairer and healthier Oxfordshire and is initially focusing on three of the eight Marmot principles:

- Give every child the best start in life.
- Create fair employment and good work for all.
- Ensure a healthy standard of living for all.

Professor Sir Michael Marmot

2.3 Partnerships

Oxfordshire partnerships and organisations

Local government cannot meet the needs of our people alone. Collaboration isn't just an option, it's how we lift everyone across the county. We need effective, long-term partnerships to design and deliver public services and advocate for our shared interests locally, nationally and internationally.

One of the biggest strengths of Oxfordshire's current system is its amazing network of partnerships and organisations across the county strengthened after the COVID pandemic. One Oxfordshire has the opportunity to leverage these relationships to become a partner of choice. We will actively seek and develop mature and purposeful relationships with our strategic partners that drive improved outcomes for the county's residents.

A snapshot of the partnerships and organisations that have a significant role and impact across Oxfordshire include.

Examples of partnerships and statutory organisations working across Oxfordshire:

Experience Oxfordshire

Oxfordshire Association of Local Councils

Oxfordshire Care Partnership

Oxfordshire Children's Trust

Oxfordshire Community Safety Partnership

Oxfordshire Domestic Abuse Service (run by A2Dominion)

Oxfordshire Football Association

Oxfordshire Health and Wellbeing Board

Oxfordshire Homelessness Alliance

Oxfordshire Inclusive Economy Partnership

Oxfordshire SEND Local Area Partnership

Oxfordshire Prevention and Health Inequalities Forum

Oxfordshire Safeguarding Adults Board

Oxfordshire Safeguarding Children Partnership

Oxfordshire System Urgent Care Delivery Group

Oxfordshire Urgent and Emergency Care Board

Zero Carbon Oxfordshire

Oxfordshire County Council | LGR proposal | 2. The case for an Oxfordshire footprint

Other Oxfordshire organisations:

Active Oxfordshire

Age UK Oxfordshire

Aspire Oxfordshire

Citizens Advice Oxfordshire

Community First Oxfordshire

Experience Oxfordshire

Homelessness Oxfordshire

My Vision Oxfordshire

Oxfordshire Community and Voluntary Action

Oxfordshire Community Foundation

Oxfordshire Playing Fields Association

Rural Broadband Oxfordshire

Wild Oxfordshire

These examples of countywide partnerships delivering vital statutory and voluntary services support the need to maintain an Oxfordshire footprint for local government reorganisation using existing networks to create stronger, simpler public services.

> **In 2024, the first single coherent place narrative for Oxfordshire was jointly designed and developed across a number of partners and organisations and was endorsed by the Future Oxfordshire Partnership (now the Oxfordshire Leaders Joint Committee). It provides an excellent framework for system-wide collaboration with all those who have a vested interest in the future success of the county.**

The future of innovative, asset-based and responsive service delivery across a place has to be characterised by a coherent, sustainable voluntary and community sector working collaboratively with a single council.

The creation of small unitaries would lead to unnecessary disruption for our partners, which they have shared with us. This will require charities to readjust to new boundaries and potentially create competition between those in Oxfordshire and Berkshire.

Regional partnerships

There are also many cross boundary partnerships that work beyond Oxfordshire. Examples include Thames Valley Integrated Care Board, Thames Valley Police, Thames Valley Local Resilience Forum and Adopt Thames Valley – a regional adoption agency led by the county council at the request of the Department for Education. The agency covers seven local authorities (Oxfordshire, Swindon and five unitary authorities of Berkshire – not Slough) and two voluntary adoption agencies.

Oxfordshire's strong economy is the southern anchor of England's Economic Heartland (EEH)[27], a sub-national transport body. EEH is a partnership grouping of the principal authority leaders from Oxfordshire, Buckinghamshire, Northamptonshire, Cambridgeshire, Milton Keynes, Luton, Peterborough, Bedford and Central Bedfordshire and wider economic leaders[28]. EEH is credited with making significant and fast progress in bringing together transport authority and former local enterprise partnership areas.

The Oxford Growth Commission was established in spring 2025 by government to review how best to unlock and accelerate growth in the city and surrounding area. Its vision is to support the delivery of infrastructure, housing and employment to unleash Oxford's and Oxfordshire's economic power, accelerating growth in the Oxford-Cambridge Growth Corridor, and across the UK. The commission has been clear on the need for strategic planning on a footprint beyond current districts and its work has been able to focus on opportunities that cross current and potential future boundaries.

In April 2025, the chancellor of the exchequer visited Siemens Healthineers in Eynsham, West Oxfordshire, to discuss the significant economic opportunity presented by the development of a growth corridor between Oxford and Cambridge. She noted that this initiative has the potential to contribute up to £78 billion to the UK economy over the next decade, primarily through the support of science and technology enterprises located along the 66 mile corridor.

Delivery of the Oxfordshire end of the growth corridor, starting with investment in transport infrastructure, stands to benefit from the presence of a single unitary authority for the county. One Oxfordshire offers a streamlined governance structure within a geographic footprint to deliver major transport and other infrastructure for the area[29]. All regional partnerships stand to benefit from the strength and simplicity of a single council for Oxfordshire.

Oxfordshire County Council | LGR proposal | 2. The case for an Oxfordshire footprint

Diamond Light Source - Harwell

2.4 Economy and connectivity

Oxfordshire is one of the UK's most economically resilient and strategically significant regions. At a local authority level, Oxfordshire is only one of four county areas nationally that is a net contributor to the UK exchequer[30]. The county boasts low unemployment, a self-contained labour market and a geographically distributed, highly-skilled resident and enterprise base. This stretches from the north to the south of the county across the Knowledge Spine – the county's central economic corridor for breakthrough businesses and innovation.

The Knowledge Spine

Oxfordshire's Knowledge Spine connects three key growth areas: Bicester (Cherwell); Oxford city; and the Science Vale (South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse), which includes the science and technology parks around Bicester, Kidlington, Oxford, Abingdon, Didcot, Wantage and Grove. This corridor is the backbone of Oxfordshire's innovation ecosystem and a key area for high-skill employment and enterprise growth.

Its internationally significant business footprint includes clusters in life sciences, space, clean energy, and advanced manufacturing, all of which are deeply embedded across the county's geography, contributing to national missions and influencing global markets and supply chains.

Oxfordshire's research and commercialisation capabilities are helping to solve global challenges from pandemic response to climate resilience, while simultaneously driving growth in other UK regions through collaborative projects and technology diffusion.

Oxfordshire's critical economic sectors, assets and growth opportunities[31]

Source: Oxfordshire Local Industrial Strategy.

Cambridge Econometrics

Economic growth

The county is vital to the government's mission to kickstart economic growth – One Oxfordshire plays a critical role in supporting this – simple governance, single strategies.

Headline economic indicators further reinforce Oxfordshire's strategic importance. The county generates £29.3 billion in gross value added (GVA) annually[32] and supports 430,000 jobs[33]. Oxfordshire has demonstrated exceptional economic resilience and growth. It recorded the fastest growing economy of any local enterprise partnership area following the 2008 recession, with GVA increasing over 26 per cent between 2009 and 2015. More recently Oxfordshire's GVA rose by a further 19 per cent between 2020 to 2023[34]. It hosts the highest concentration of science research facilities in Western Europe and has attracted over £3.1 billion in foreign direct investment since 2017[35].

Major commitments from global firms including Moderna, BMW and GIC Singapore have been made to Oxfordshire. One of the county's most established and recognised institutions, the University of Oxford, has spun out over 200 companies through its innovation arm, collectively valued at £6.4 billion and representing 16 per cent of all UK university spinouts. The university joins Oxfordshire's Knowledge Spine, with the Science Vale and science parks, for creating opportunities to strengthen the county's economic growth.

On a national level, Oxfordshire's economic coherence has long been recognised by central government. In 2011, Oxfordshire was designated as one of the few counties to have its own local enterprise partnership, forming the basis for city deals that acknowledged Oxfordshire's unique economic strengths.

A unified approach through One Oxfordshire will support the county's economic foundations and enhance its capacity to drive national growth through innovation and expertise. Evidence is already compelling that Oxfordshire's economic success, specifically through advanced research and development has created significant supply-chain, employment and growth in all other regions of the UK. This could potentially be stalled if economic coherence is lost through disaggregation and reduced scale.

Labour market and employment

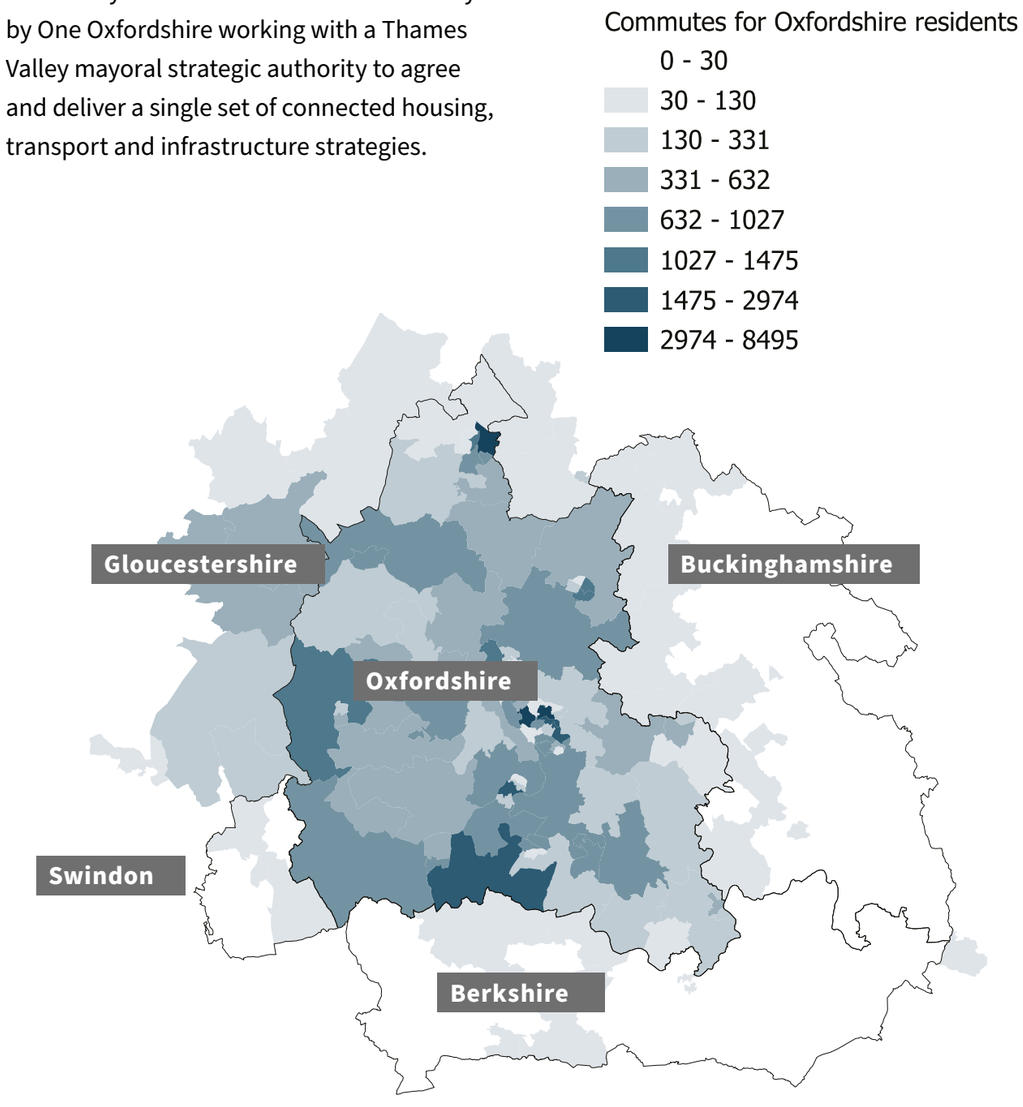
Oxfordshire is, on balance, an affluent county. Like life expectancy, gross median weekly pay is above the national average in all districts with South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse being Oxfordshire's most affluent areas[36].

Oxfordshire's higher than average income is, in part, due to the knowledge and innovation-led ecosystem previously outlined. It is also underpinned by a highly educated workforce, of which over 56 per cent are qualified to degree level or above. The concentration of employment in research and development is four times the national average[37].

Oxfordshire's commuter patterns reveal a highly integrated and self-contained labour market, with Oxford serving as the major employment hub. Census data (2021) shows that 85 per cent of Oxfordshire residents work within the county[38] – well above the Office for National Statistics' self-containment threshold of 75 per cent[39]. Accounting for both inbound and outbound commuting flows, Oxfordshire maintains a net commuter inflow of approximately 9,000 people[40]. These findings confirm that Oxfordshire's labour market is largely self-contained, with only marginal overlaps at its boundaries.

The county's concentration of commuting forms evidence to support a distributed and inclusive approach to growth across the county. This would be served effectively by One Oxfordshire working with a Thames Valley mayoral strategic authority to agree and deliver a single set of connected housing, transport and infrastructure strategies.

Travel to work analysis in Oxfordshire, 2021 Census[41]



Oxfordshire County Council | LGR proposal | 2. The case for an Oxfordshire footprint

Oxfordshire has one of the lowest unemployment rates in the UK. There is only one unemployed person for every 32 people who are working[42] (excluding people who are inactive, including those who are retired, long-term sick and students). Notably almost 50 per cent who are inactive are students.[43]

Following the direct impact of COVID on the employment market, from 2022 onwards the majority of Oxfordshire's unemployment rate has been three per cent or lower compared to the UK average at four per cent or higher. Although the Oxford unemployment rate is the highest amongst district areas, it has remained more than 1 per cent under the England average[44]. As a result of distributed growth facilitating an environment that generates employment opportunity to all residents, irrespective of geography, all areas of the county have significantly stronger employment rates than the national average.

However, labour productivity has declined post-COVID in Oxfordshire. This weakening reflects pressures seen across all local economies – rising housing and land costs, fragmented transport networks, skills mismatches and health inequalities.

Oxfordshire's strong economy is one of its greatest assets, but its value needs to spread more widely and a focus on inclusive growth seized. It also needs to re-establish an upward trend in productivity. To do this requires One Oxfordshire functioning as a single connected system. By providing clear countywide governance, joined up infrastructure delivery and ensuring that transport is embedded in a single set of plans and strategies, stronger levels of productivity can be unlocked across Oxfordshire.

This will undoubtedly turbocharge the unlocking of the productivity puzzle at a mayoral strategic authority level too. We will convert complementary strengths across the Thames Valley into cross-boundary supply chains, deeper labour markets and quicker diffusion of innovation, and with that, a return to sustained productivity growth and, therefore, revenue to UK PLC.

Oxfordshire County Council | LGR proposal | 2. The case for an Oxfordshire footprint

Oxfordshire, as outlined, is one of the UK's most economically resilient and strategically significant counties. We have an abundance of assets and skills but need a strong and viable local government structure to connect and drive further growth and opportunity for Oxfordshire. This means we need a strong, financially resilient council to deliver reform from day one. We need One Oxfordshire to deliver that council. It is the only model that will deliver a financially resilient and sustainable council.

Bicester Village

3. Financial resilience

3.1 Financial overview

Local government reform in Oxfordshire will take place in the context of a decade of austerity, significant service demand and cost pressures, economic vulnerabilities, global uncertainties as well as the Fair Funding Review 2.0. Despite all of this, given the relative budget and proportion of services provided and very strong and consistent financial position of Oxfordshire County Council, One Oxfordshire will be able to manage the existing and future financial challenges for all predecessor councils in Oxfordshire confidently and in full, which many other parts of the country cannot.

One Oxfordshire will also provide the most strategic approach to service delivery enabling investment at scale across the whole of Oxfordshire to drive innovation, public sector reform and devolution ambitions. It is the strongest option in which to confidently manage financial risks in an uncertain future operating environment.

Based on the financial modelling undertaken independently by PwC[45], savings that will be delivered just by creating one single unitary council are estimated to be **£30.1 million** per year. The cost of transition to a new council is estimated to be a one-off sum of **£21.9 million**. There are no ongoing costs or financial asks of government associated with the proposal for One Oxfordshire. Based on the cost/benefit analysis summarised below, **the payback period for One Oxfordshire will be approximately 1.3 years.**

Transformation and future innovation are most successfully achieved when built on firm foundations. The creation of One Oxfordshire will offer clarity and consistency in governance, eliminating fragmentation and leveraging best practices to ensure cohesive and effective service delivery.

One Oxfordshire can create the firmest foundations to develop a highly ambitious transformation and public service reform agenda to enable this place, and our people, to thrive.

Beyond transition, a single unitary council for Oxfordshire will be able to generate further annual savings through transformation of **£33.2 million** a year by year five. One-off costs of transformation are expected to be **£16.6 million**.

Savings that will be delivered by one single unitary council are estimated to be £63.3 million per year with total net savings of £162.6 million by year five.

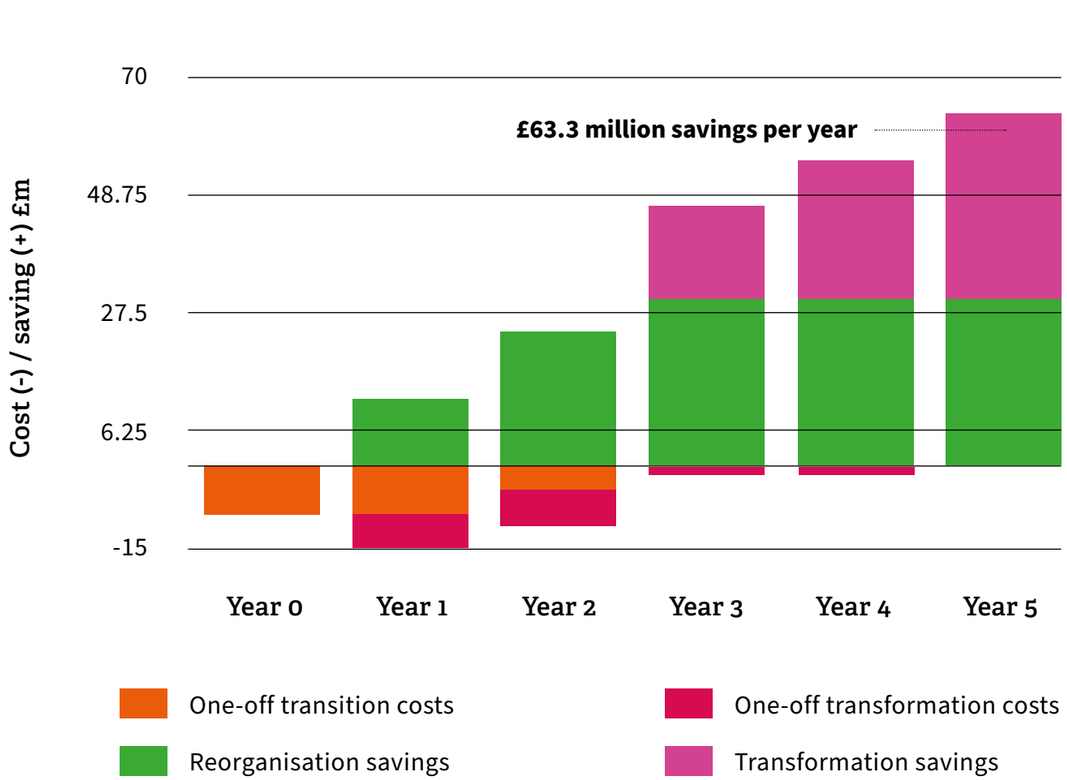
The financial case for a single council across Oxfordshire is clear. It will provide the quickest, greatest savings from reorganisation and public sector reform without the need for complex, unnecessary and risky disaggregation and associated costs.

In comparison to the two and three unitary options proposed for Oxfordshire (and encompassing West Berkshire Council, which has received exceptional financial support from the government in 2024/25 and 2025/26) One Oxfordshire is the most financially resilient option, creating the best opportunity to deliver future transformation savings, able to withstand and manage financial shocks.

We will drive confidence among residents, stakeholders, businesses and investors across Oxfordshire, the sub-region, nationally and internationally, and enable this county to invest at scale in its people and its places.

A financially stable and economically strong council will be well placed to attract investors and harness the potential Oxfordshire has in terms of economic development, regeneration and growth.

One Oxfordshire costs and savings



Oxfordshire County Council | LGR proposal | 3. Financial resilience

3.2 Overall approach, methodology and assumptions

The county council commissioned PwC to undertake the financial case and modelling for One Oxfordshire. PwC is a professional services consultancy experienced in major public sector transformation, including local government reorganisation. PwC used its evidence base to model a top-down review of potential costs and benefits from reorganisation and transformation, as well as assess the reasonableness of the draft financial considerations.

Challenge and assurance have been provided by an independent senior finance professional – previously the shadow section 151 officer for a council that successfully transitioned to become a unitary authority – based on their practical experience of what has been actually achieved through reorganisation. This included reviewing modelling principles, tolerances and an assessment of materiality in determining what was proportionate and should be included.

The financial case for One Oxfordshire, as well as the other Oxfordshire business cases, have used medium term financial strategies for 2025/26 as well as the 2024/25 revenue account expenditure (revenue outturn - RO data) as the basis for its financial modelling. Where relevant, other data sets have been used and these have been agreed across all councils and used consistently.

The county council's RO expenditure, medium term financial strategy and council tax baselines currently include costs and funding for Oxfordshire Fire and Rescue Service. In the longer-term these will sit with the mayoral strategic authority so third party spend and assets for the fire service are assumed to not be addressable.[45]

In line with guidance, the financial modelling has been completed at today's prices, not considering the impact of inflation and not discounting future cash flows.

Each of the individual savings, additional costs and transition costs have been phased by year, based on when it is anticipated these will be realised or incurred. Some transition costs will be incurred ahead of vesting day (these are shown in year 0) and are included in the overall costs, savings and payback period. The financial case has been modelled over a five year period from vesting day.

One Oxfordshire delivers the best value for money for the Oxfordshire taxpayer.

3.3 Financial appraisal

Financial baseline

The indicative budget for 2027/28 based on existing medium term financial strategies that will form the revenue baseline for One Oxfordshire in April 2028 is £907 million.

There is an overall anticipated deficit of £9.6 million by vesting day. Additionally, there is currently a planned use of one-off contributions from reserves or general balances of £15.5 million to balance budgets ahead of vesting day. The expectation is that action will be taken to set budgets that are balanced, robust and deliverable by each council ahead of vesting day.

Expenditure	**2027/28**
Pay	£275.4m
Non pay	£631.2m
Total	**£906.6m**
Funding (before funding reform)	**2027/28**
Council tax	£661.3m
Non-ringfenced grants	£83.2m
Business rates	£137.0m
Total	**£881.5m**
Deficit	**£25.1m**
Use of reserves and balances	£15.5m
Remaining deficit to manage	**£9.6m**

Oxfordshire County Council | LGR proposal | 3. Financial resilience

Reorganisation savings

Financial modelling shows that recurring revenue savings of **£30.1 million** will be achieved by a single unitary council for Oxfordshire as a direct result of local government reorganisation. These savings fall into four categories.

Savings	
Employees	£20.4m
Third party spend	£4.2m
Democracy	£2.1m
Property	£3.4m
Total	**£30.1m**

Employees:

Leadership:
A reduction in senior leadership costs as a result of reducing duplication of senior posts (savings realised in year one).

Delivery:
The benefit arising from the removal of duplication of front office, back office and service delivery roles (savings realised years one to three).

Property:

Benefits from reduced property expenditure arising from the rationalisation of office, depot and vehicle assets (savings realised years one to three).

The achievement of savings will be phased based on expected realisation as set out below.

Third party spend:

There are benefits from the reduction in addressable spend through the aggregation of contracts. This is assumed to be mainly from spend where there is duplication of existing spend across the existing councils (savings realised years one to three).

At this stage no direct savings from adult or children's social care are assumed as the existing level of expenditure for both services is relatively low compared to Oxfordshire comparator councils.

Democracy:

The largest benefit is from a reduction in election costs and member allowances as a result of needing a reduced number of overall councillors in a single unitary council (savings realised year one).

	Year 1	**Year 2**	**Year 3**	**Year 4**	**Year 5**
Recurring reorganisation savings	£12.0m	£24.1m	£30.1m	£30.1m	£30.1m
Phasing	40%	80%	100%	100%	100%

Transition costs

One-off transition costs needed to create One Oxfordshire are expected to be **£21.9 million**, the details of which are set out in the table below.

One-off transition costs	Total
Programme management costs	-£2.7m
IT and systems costs	-£5.2m
External transition, design and implementation support costs	-£4.1m
Shadow democratic and legal costs	-£1.8m
Redundancy costs (30% of estimated employee savings)	-£6.1m
Contingency	-£2.0m
Total	**-£21.9m**

Oxfordshire County Council | LGR proposal | 3. Financial resilience

Some of the transition costs will be incurred ahead of vesting day (year 0) with further spend in year one and two. The phasing of these costs is set out in the table below.

	Year 0	Year 1	Year 2	Total
One-off transition costs	-£8.8m	-£8.8m	-£4.3m	**-£21.9m**
Phasing	40%	40%	20%	

While these one-off costs will be repaid through reorganisation savings, Oxfordshire County Council has already committed £10 million from earmarked reserves, which can be used towards the cost of local government reform and devolution (£1.2 million of which will be used for devolution). It is expected that the year 0 transition costs will be met from this reserve. Therefore, recurring savings from reorganisation will start in year one.

	Year 0	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Year 4	Year 5	Total
Transition costs	-£8.8m	-£8.8m	-£4.3m	•	•	•	**-£21.9m**
Use of earmarked reserves	£8.8m	•	•	•	•	•	**£8.8m**
Reorganisation savings	•	£12.0m	£24.1m	£30.1m	£30.1m	£30.1m	**£126.4m**
Adjusted reorganisation savings	•	**£3.2m**	**£19.8m**	**£30.1m**	**£30.1m**	**£30.1m**	**£113.3m**

Transformation and public service reform

The establishment of Oxfordshire Council will provide the opportunity to transform service delivery models. Transformation and economic growth opportunities will be delivered by integrating upper tier and lower tier services in a systematic way.

We will unify distinct waste services, create a person centred homelessness service and connect planning, housing and highways. We will connect leisure with public health and drive innovation by using data and insight from benefits to provide targeted early help and prevention.

Estimated recurring revenue savings of **£33.2 million** through transformation can be achieved by year five. A very prudent level of savings has been assumed to reflect the savings programmes already planned by existing councils ahead of vesting day, the expected funding reductions as a result of the Fair Funding Review 2.0 and business rates reset, as well as evidence from previous reorganisations.

There is the ability to stretch the potential savings from transformation to achieve £40.6 million per annum by year five, taking total annual savings to £70.7 million. But for the reasons set out above, this has not been assumed in this proposal.

Transformation savings are expected across the following areas:

Transformation saving	
Front office employees	£2.7m
Service delivery employees	£2.9m
Back office employees	£3.4m
Third party expenditure	£21.0m
Income generation	£2.1m
Assets – running costs	£1.1m
Total	**£33.2m**

To enable the transformation savings to be achieved, it is anticipated that there will be one-off delivery costs of £16.6 million as detailed in the table below.

Transformation costs	
Delivery resource	-£6.9m
Investment costs (eg IT and software)	-£5.5m
Redundancy costs (set at 30% of employee savings)	-£2.7m
Contingency at 10%	-£1.5m
Total	**-£16.6m**

These costs can either be met from the savings from reorganisation or offset against the future transformation savings. By year three there will be an annual net saving of £14.9 million rising to £33.2 million by year five.

Forming a single unitary authority by merging the county and district councils gives the greatest balance sheet stability.

	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Year 4	Year 5 and beyond	Total 5 year cost (-) / saving (+)
One-off transformation costs	-£6.6m	-£6.6m	-£1.7m	-£1.7m	•	**-£16.6m**
Transformation savings	•	•	£16.6m	£24.9m	£33.2m	**£74.7m**
Net cost (+) / saving (-)	**-£6.6m**	**-£6.6m**	**£14.9m**	**£23.2m**	**£33.2m**	**£58.1m**

Further opportunities for savings through wider public service reform, have not been taken into consideration at this stage. However, by driving place shaping prospects and expanding transformation efforts beyond local government to include our partners such as the NHS, Thames Valley Police, our voluntary and community sector, as well as national organisations such as Homes England, additional savings could be realised. The pre-transition period will be used to explore these opportunities together with our partners.

Only One Oxfordshire has the scale to manage any further financial volatility.

Fair Funding Review 2.0

The government has recently proposed changes to the distribution of funding for local government through the Fair Funding Review 2.0 consultation. This includes proposed changes to the formulae behind the Settlement Funding Assessment for each council and adjusting for the level of resources available from council tax funding, as well as a reset of business rates funding. The proposal is to implement these changes from April 2026. The impact on individual councils and arrangements for phasing the impact, will not be known until the Provisional Local Government Finance Settlement for 2026/27 is published in December 2025.

Oxfordshire councils have relatively high resources from the council tax base. As a result they are collectively expected to lose between £35 million and £55 million annually from implementation of the Fair Funding Review. In addition to the county council, four out of the five district councils in Oxfordshire are also expected to lose funding. Cherwell District Council will be particularly impacted as it has experienced strong growth in business rates.

The statutory invitation from government is clear that new councils must be large enough to withstand financial shocks. Oxfordshire has a duty to protect all of its places as part of local government reform.

While the assumption is that all councils will manage the funding reductions and set a balanced budget each year up to vesting day, only One Oxfordshire has the scale to manage any further financial volatility.

One Oxfordshire presents the firmest foundations to protect and enhance public services across the whole of Oxfordshire for current and future generations.

Rationalisation of assets

The estimated net book value of operational assets held by the existing councils in Oxfordshire is £2,137 million. There are also surplus assets valued at £19 million.

As ongoing service delivery must be maintained, the scope for rationalising operational assets is expected to focus largely on office buildings, depot facilities, and potentially fleet vehicles. There is also an opportunity to consolidate and rationalise other assets including the sharing of premises with health and other partners.

Rationalisation of assets will generate recurring revenue savings from reorganisation of £3.4 million and one-off capital receipts totalling £11.4 million, which could be used alongside the surplus assets of £18 million to help invest in growing the local economy. In the longer run, further capital receipts will be expected as a result of transformation.

Total borrowing and debt servicing costs

At vesting day, it is estimated that combining the balance sheets of the councils in Oxfordshire will result in Oxfordshire Council holding general long-term liabilities of £1,258 million plus £586 million relating to Housing Revenue Account liabilities and £528 million short-term liabilities. Fixed assets for the new council will be £4,232 million plus Housing Revenue Account assets of £1,339 million. The annual cost of financing the general fund debt from revenue is £56.5 million which is **6.2 per cent** of One Oxfordshire's estimated budget at vesting day.

The wider debt position and the impact of financing on budgets is clearly shown through the CIPFA Financial Resilience Index 2024, set out in the table below. This demonstrates that forming a single unitary authority by merging the county and district councils gives the greatest balance sheet stability, given the variation in assets and liabilities across the councils.

Key L Low risk M Medium risk H High risk

Indicators of financial stress	Oxfordshire County Council	Cherwell District Council	West Oxfordshire Council	South Oxfordshire Council	Vale of White Horse Council	Oxford City Council
Level of reserves	L	L	L	L	L	H
Change in reserves	L	H	M	M	L	H
External debt	L	H	L	n/a	n/a	H
Social care	L	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
Income and funding	L	H	M	L	L	H

Oxfordshire County Council | LGR proposal | 3. Financial resilience

Special educational needs and disabilities (SEND)

Like most councils with responsibility for SEND, Oxfordshire County Council has a deficit on the High Needs Block of its Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG). At the end of 2024/25 the cumulative deficit was £92 million. This is expected to increase to over £150 million by the end of 2025/26.

Since 2020/21 the CIPFA Code of Practice on Local Authority Accounting has required councils with upper tier responsibilities to hold negative high needs DSG balances in an unusable reserve. The existing statutory override was due to end on 31 March 2026 but as part of the Fair Funding Review 2.0 consultation, the government announced that this will be extended until 31 March 2028.

The anticipated white paper setting out details of SEND reform is now expected to be published in early 2026. The government is expected to set out further details on supporting local authorities as they transition to a reformed SEND system as part of the Provisional Local Government Finance Settlement for 2026/27.

Oxfordshire County Council has budgeted for an annual contribution to an earmarked reserve to ensure that overall, earmarked reserves will not be negative at the point at which the statutory override ends on 31 March 2028, and the deficit returns to the local authority balance sheet.

If the high needs deficit has not been addressed before vesting day, the accumulated deficit will return to the local authority balance sheet. In the event that the decision is to create more than one unitary council for Oxfordshire, this deficit will need to be apportioned to the new constituent councils based on the number of education, health and care plans.

Financial sustainability and economic growth opportunity

The payback period for a single unitary council in Oxfordshire will be approximately 1.3 years of reorganisation from vesting day. There will be a net saving from reorganisation of £3.2 million by 2028/29 and an ongoing benefit of £30.1 million from 2030/31, which will help to manage the potential impact of funding reform.

By achieving reorganisation savings from 2028/29, One Oxfordshire will have the financial headroom to be able to invest in, and deliver, its transformation programme, which will drive further savings from 2030/31 of £16.6 million with ongoing savings of £33.2 million by 2032/33.

The overall benefit, including reorganisation and transformation costs and savings, is summarised in the table on the next page.

The forecast savings mean that One Oxfordshire will be the most financially resilient council for Oxfordshire and more able to manage future demographic changes, funding risks and financial shocks.

One Oxfordshire can better grow the council tax base and business rates through strategic planning and investment. A unified council with strong finances, relatively low levels of debt, opportunities from the release of assets and associated capital receipts, all underpinned by strong economic growth, will be well-positioned to attract investors and drive Oxfordshire's future development.

Total savings of £162.6 million will be achieved by 2032/33.

Oxfordshire County Council | LGR proposal | 3. Financial resilience

	Year 0 2027/28	**Year 1** 2028/29	**Year 2** 2029/30	**Year 3** 2030/31	**Year 4** 2031/32	**Year 5** 2032/33 and beyond	**Total 5 year cost (-)/ saving (+)**
One-off transition costs	-£8.8m	-£8.8m	-£4.3m	•	•	•	**-£21.9m**
Reorganisation savings	•	£12.0m	£24.1m	£30.1m	£30.1m	£30.1m	**£126.4m**
Net cost (-) / saving (+) from aggregation	**-£8.8m**	**£3.2m**	**£19.8m**	**£30.1m**	**£30.1m**	**£30.1m**	**£104.5m**
One-off transformation costs	•	-£6.6m	-£6.6m	-£1.7m	-£1.7m	•	**-£16.6m**
Recurring transformation savings (base)	•	•	•	£16.6m	£24.9m	£33.2m	**£74.7m**
Net cost (-) / saving (+) from transformation	•	**-£6.6m**	**-£6.6m**	**£14.9m**	**£23.2m**	**£33.2m**	**£58.1m**
Overall net cost (-) / saving (+)	**-£8.8m**	**-£3.4m**	**£13.2m**	**£45.0m**	**£53.3m**	**£63.3m**	**£162.6m**

3.4 Council tax harmonisation

A consideration for the new council will be the level of council tax it requires and how this affects what residents will be required to pay in the future. Currently, council tax band D differs between Oxfordshire's five districts. As part of local government reform in Oxfordshire, the combined current council tax band Ds for district councils and Oxfordshire County Council will need to be harmonised to a single set of charges for the new unitary authority within seven years after vesting day.

Until rates are harmonised there will be a degree of difference in the increases to council tax between the old district council areas within the new unitary area. It will be for the new authority to decide which approach it takes to harmonise council tax; however, modelling has been undertaken to illustrate the options available. This indicates that applying the harmonisation of council tax based on the weighted average approach is the most beneficial approach financially.

Using this approach in year one will ensure total council tax is materially unchanged from the baseline. This produces a harmonised Oxfordshire Band D charge of £2,415.80. This would result in council tax variations between the old district council areas, ranging from £59 more in West Oxfordshire to £186 less in Oxford.

Most newly created unitary authorities have chosen to harmonise council tax over the shortest possible period on the weighted average council tax method to ensure the maximum council tax is available to fund services. Other options will need to be considered by the new council, but this will lead to a shortfall in income compared to the base position, which means that some of the savings that have been identified will need to be set aside to cover this.

3.5 Financial risks

The overall financial case and baseline needs to be considered in the context of the following ongoing key financial and other risks ahead of vesting day:

Achieving a balanced medium term financial strategy

It is assumed that prior to vesting day, each of the existing authorities will continue to set balanced budgets that are robust and deliverable.

It is also assumed that the existing authorities will continue to effectively manage their budgets and deliver planned savings.

A failure to do so will put at risk the assumptions and savings set out in the financial case.

Funding formula changes

Outcomes from the Fair Funding Review 2.0 consultation are outstanding and will impact the funding available to local authorities from 2026/27 onwards. Analysis indicates that this could result in a significant reduction in funding within the county and this is likely to not only affect funding in the longer-term but could also impact on the ability to fund significant transition costs while facing additional pressure on core spending.

Management of demand for critical high-cost services

Action continues to be taken to manage demand for adult social care through the Oxfordshire Way, which aims to help people remain independent and well at home for longer.

However, demand for children's social care, sufficiency of places and cost of provision of care continue to be risks that could increase costs ahead of vesting day – although it is expected that any increase in costs will be addressed as part of the budget each year ahead of the formation of the new council.

Special educational needs and disabilities (SEND)

There is a risk that if a solution to the accumulated SEND high needs deficit is not in place by 31 March 2028 when the statutory override ends, the debt transfers back to the balance sheet. This will have a significant impact on the overall level of earmarked reserves at the point a new authority is created.

Shared service arrangements

It has been assumed for the purposes of the financial case that current significant shared service arrangements will continue. This includes Oxfordshire County Council's arrangements with the Hampshire Shared Services Partnership (IBC) to deliver payroll, accounts payable, accounts receivable and other transactional finance services. If this is not the case, there will be additional costs associated with disaggregation.

Achievability of future savings

A very prudent approach to reorganisation and transformation savings has been included in the financial case given the risk of significant funding reductions from the implementation of the Fair Funding Review and a reset of the business rates baseline. Therefore, there is low risk of the full savings set out in this proposal not being achieved.

Oxford Housing Revenue Account (HRA)

The Oxford HRA Business Plan to 2031 is borderline affordable and does not provide sufficient financial capacity to respond to emerging pressures. Actions are being taken to reach a healthier baseline. However, there are still risks to long-term viability.

We have provided a strong case for One Oxfordshire, for one council with a countywide footprint that is financially resilient. However, it is people that make places. We need to build a council in partnership that listens to our communities, one that they can connect with and meets their needs. So we asked people what they thought of One Oxfordshire. When every voice matters, every place thrives.

High Street, Witney

4. One Oxfordshire engagement

4.1 Engaging on One Oxfordshire

One Oxfordshire is grounded in comprehensive engagement with both residents and stakeholders – shaped by their real, lived experiences; responding to their priorities; building on what they see as the benefits of one council and addressing their concerns.

We heard that local places matter, that people want clear and accountable decision making that is closer to communities; strong financial resilience; and simpler access to fairer, more responsive services that are cost effective and connected.

One Oxfordshire is designed to respond to these and strives to make local government in the county work better for everyone.

Delivering comprehensive engagement across Oxfordshire

Throughout the summer of 2025, we prioritised actively engaging and listening to residents, partners and businesses using a mix of approaches[46].

We ran a digital communications awareness raising campaign about local government reorganisation and One Oxfordshire; asked 1,344 residents what they thought in our countywide, statistically representative residents' survey; ran nine focus groups with adults; and four sounding boards with young people.

We also engaged partners in public services, Oxfordshire's 318 town and parish councils, the voluntary and community sector, and academia and businesses. We invited them to learn more about local government reorganisation and to share their views through targeted communications, town hall meetings, talking table events and meetings.

Our engagement programme was underpinned by robust research. This included qualitative research to inform the development of Oxfordshire County Council's strategic plan 2025 – 2028 and comprehensive stakeholder and resident research to inform the development of the 2023 Oxfordshire place narrative – highlighting the county's distinctiveness and unified identity as a leading centre for business, innovation and sustainable growth.

Legacy research such as a 2017 representative survey commissioned as part of a previous local government reorganisation bid found that 70 per cent of participating residents supported local government reorganisation and 70 per cent preferred a single council for Oxfordshire.

We heard from
1,203 people
through our commissioned countywide, statistically representative annual residents' survey.

We put residents centre stage reaching
284,128
people through our digital communications awareness raising campaign.

63
people participated across nine commissioned in-depth focus groups.

1,344
people took part in our open online survey.

81 young people
shared their views through four sounding board discussions held in secondary schools as part of our commitment to actively involving young people in shaping their future.

If you've got one council then there's not going to be the different opinions coming right, left and centre of what's more important and they can just focus on what they think needs focusing on.

(Focus group participant)

4.2 Key themes from our resident engagement

From our resident focused activity – our representative and open residents' surveys, focus groups and sounding boards – a number of common themes emerged.[46]

Clear decision making matters

Decision making was a dominant and consistent theme in our group discussions with residents and young people.

Clear and accountable decision making was rated top in both our residents' surveys as the most important attribute of any local authority created through local government reorganisation.

It achieved a mean score of 8.63 out of 10 in our statistically representative residents' survey.

One Oxfordshire opportunities:

We will simplify services for residents, businesses and investors and make them stronger with clear accountability. We will have one set of councillors, one chief executive and one senior management team. Elected councillors will operate at the heart of their communities within a new neighbourhood governance structure to support local decision making.

Local areas matter

Our annual representative residents' survey shows that 71 per cent of residents feel they belong strongly to their local area; 21 per cent feel this very strongly.

A dominant and consistent concern across all our resident engagement was that a single council for Oxfordshire would struggle to address specific local issues effectively, that their area would be overlooked as the council struggled to balance different needs, and there would be a loss of local knowledge and general disconnection from communities.

One Oxfordshire opportunities:

We will bring local government closer to communities, fostering civic participation and active involvement in shaping services. A new neighbourhood governance structure will ensure local issues are heard and acted on together with locally elected councillors who will represent their communities and places.

We can all be in unison across Oxfordshire.

(Young person in a sounding board discussion)

Local representation is important

Respondents to our surveys felt that partnering with town and parish councils to bring decision making closer to communities is a very important attribute of any local authority created through local government reorganisation.

This drew a mean score of 8.27 out of 10 in our statistically representative residents' survey.

Our discussions with town and parish councils sought to explore sector views on the devolution of services (with emphasis on local control, capacity and funding); community asset transfer; place shaping and neighbourhood governance; the importance of flexibility and tailored approaches for different councils; mechanisms for local influence and accountability; and the need for early, clear consultation and practical pilots.

One Oxfordshire's recognition of towns and parishes as central to local democracy was well received by local councils and seen as a meaningful step forward.

One Oxfordshire opportunities:

We will create strong neighbourhood governance and ensure the continuity of Oxford city's status and governance. We will bring decision making closer to communities through a stronger partnership with town and parish councils, a set of area committees, a communities unit and the development of modern charter trustees.

Residents value local government services

Our recent representative residents' survey demonstrates how highly residents' value local government services and how the work of councils impacts their quality of life daily.

A common concern from residents across our summer engagement activities was service disruption, including the potential for reduced services; services being cut or reorganised as part of local government reorganisation; and the importance of services not being disrupted through the transition to any new administration, especially if they are currently performing well.

Residents also identified that bringing areas under one Oxfordshire council could potentially positively impact on services. For example their consistency and equitability across the county in terms of service, planning and funding.

One Oxfordshire opportunities:

We will protect and improve critical services such as adult and children's social care, SEND and homelessness now and in the future. By bringing other services together under one roof we will also improve them, including waste and recycling; housing, planning and growth; community safety; and climate.

Generating savings and financial resilience are important

Survey respondents identified reducing duplication and running costs and generating savings from streamlining services as important factors of local government reorganisation. This resulted in mean scores of 8.30 out of 10 and 7.90 out 10 respectively in our statistically representative residents' survey.

Across our engagement mix, residents spontaneously recognised the potential of One Oxfordshire to offer strong financial resilience and greater cost efficiencies. Respondents to our statistically representative residents' survey gave this a mean score of 8.31 out of 10.

They described the potential for reduced duplication, head count and time wastage, improved coordination, and a more joined-up approach to governance; and were appreciative that this should result in greater cost efficiencies, ultimately creating more budget to fund key services.

One Oxfordshire opportunities:

We will provide the fastest, cheapest, lowest transition to a new council that is available in Oxfordshire – ready to transform on day one. Bringing services together under one council offers the best value for money for residents and will save **£63 million** per year with total net savings of **£163 million** by year five – ultimately benefitting every resident at a time when every penny counts.

"Merge duplicated departments to save money. Improved planning and execution with everything being in one house."

(Open survey respondent)

Minimising disruption to services is important

Minimising any disruption to services caused by separating them was rated the top most important area of focus of local government reorganisation in both our representative survey (mean score of 8.35 out of 10) and in our open survey.

One Oxfordshire opportunities:

The county council already delivers services on a countywide footprint, providing 85 per cent of local government services by expenditure in Oxfordshire. We will fully avoid disaggregation and the unnecessary fragmentation of critical services already performing well. We will protect and further improve these services – including adult and children's social care and SEND.

One Oxfordshire could deliver simpler access to services

Residents felt One Oxfordshire could deliver simpler access to services, that people would know who to contact better and would benefit from having one point of contact for services. This would streamline and simplify interactions for everyone.

Easy access for residents to council services was important to our survey respondents when considering how any further council should operate in Oxfordshire, with a mean score of 7.77 out of 10 in our representative residents' survey.

One Oxfordshire opportunities:

We will simplify services by having one front door for people to access all services and support – from social care, to housing, public health, community safety, waste, planning and everything in between. We will have one set of IT and customer contact systems and one portfolio of buildings, infrastructure and assets.

Much simpler to interact with one over-arching system, for things like school applications etc.

(Open survey respondent)

Oxfordshire County Council | LGR proposal | 4. One Oxfordshire engagement

4.3 Key themes from our stakeholder engagement

A wide range of stakeholder engagement has taken place with a variety of individuals, groups and organisations to share and refine One Oxfordshire.

Local businesses: Local government reorganisation business engagement session, virtual town hall, written correspondence.

Local MPs: Joint meeting for all Oxfordshire MPs, one to one meetings and written correspondence.

Local councils: Oxfordshire Association of Local Councils talking tables session; meetings with individual town councils; a workshop for larger town councils and the Oxford parishes; and letters to neighbouring councils.

Voluntary and community services: Virtual question and answer session hosted by Oxfordshire Community and Voluntary Action with representatives from all three Oxfordshire proposals present, and one to one meetings.

Public sector providers: Meetings with Thames Valley Office of the Police and Crime Commissioner; written communication with integrated care boards and local hospitals; regular briefings with Oxfordshire Fire and Rescue Service's chief fire officer and the county council's statutory directors for adult social care and children's services.

Education providers: Letters, joint briefings with heads and chairs of Oxfordshire and one to one meetings.

Oxfordshire county councillors: Three all councillor briefing sessions; two meetings of the Place Overview and Scrutiny Committee; one meeting of the Audit and Governance Committee; regular briefings of political group leaders and within political groups.

Employees: Sessions with our inclusion networks, managers forum, colleague forum and news updates using internal communication channels.

Oxfordshire County Council | LGR proposal | 4. One Oxfordshire engagement

Stakeholder feedback on One Oxfordshire

Stakeholders	Priorities	Concerns	One Oxfordshire opportunities
Businesses	▶ Simplicity of one council ▶ One vision for the whole of Oxfordshire ▶ Single planning authority	▶ Ensure no loss in democratic deficit	▶ We will create a new council size to reflect additional responsibilities of councillors ▶ We will create area committees to add greater democratic participation for residents and place councillors at the heart of their communities ▶ We will create a single, effective planning authority for all of Oxfordshire
Town and parish councils	▶ Simplicity of one council	▶ Needs to have a stronger local focus ▶ Need to be able to make contact and get issues resolved ▶ Don't wish for assets and services to be 'dumped on' town and parish councils ▶ Recognise that there are distinct places and neighbourhoods within Oxford	▶ We will develop a town and parish framework building on the existing charter ▶ We will create area committees to add greater democratic participation for residents and place councillors at the heart of their communities ▶ One Oxfordshire will work with all those local councils who have the capacity and capability to do so

Oxfordshire County Council | LGR proposal | 4. One Oxfordshire engagement

Stakeholders	Priorities	Concerns	One Oxfordshire opportunities
Education providers	▶ One vision for the whole of Oxfordshire	▶ Needs to protect the Oxford brand	▶ We will ensure that Oxford's city status is not lost ▶ We will agree modern charter trustees with the resources and influence to be a focal point for city issues ▶ We will consider a community governance review with Oxford stakeholders to explore robust and distinct governance arrangements for Oxford and its neighbourhoods, if needed ▶ We will continue to protect the Oxford brand locally, sub regionally and nationally, and ensure that a future mayoral strategic authority does that too
Employees	▶ Less disruption ▶ More opportunities for career development	▶ Too big ▶ Employees in people facing services work flexibly across the county to meet demand. If there's a split, there could be workforce challenges	▶ The county council already delivers services on a countywide footprint, providing 85 per cent of local government services by expenditure in Oxfordshire ▶ One Oxfordshire represents the quickest, lowest risk and lowest cost transition for local government reorganisation ▶ Oxfordshire County Council is already delivering services rated "good" and managing demand well
Trade unions	▶ Not applicable	▶ Not applicable	▶ We will maintain ongoing, transparent dialogue throughout the process

Oxfordshire County Council | LGR proposal | 4. One Oxfordshire engagement

Stakeholders	Priorities	Concerns	One Oxfordshire opportunities
Councillors	▶ Simplicity of one council ▶ Geography makes sense	▶ Fewer councillors ▶ Needs to protect the Oxford brand ▶ Need to strengthen parish and town council relationship ▶ Council will be too big	▶ We will create a new council size to reflect additional responsibilities of councillors ▶ We will agree modern charter trustees with the resources and influence to be a focal point for city issues ▶ We will continue to protect the Oxford brand locally, sub regionally and nationally, and ensure that a future mayoral strategic authority does that too
Public sector providers	▶ Simplicity of one council ▶ Limited disruption ▶ Geography makes sense ▶ Maintains large pooled budget of £0.5 billion	▶ Too big ▶ Employees in people facing services work flexibly across the county to meet demand. If there's a split, there could be workforce challenges	▶ We will further strengthen and integrate our health and care services working with our NHS health and care partnership and NHS colleagues maximising our pooled budget arrangement ▶ We will work in partnership to create a prevention focused council
Voluntary and community (VCS) sector	▶ Limited disruption ▶ Cost effective council for the long-term more likely to create stable funding ▶ Clear geography ▶ Removes unnecessary competition with VCS in West Berkshire	▶ Needs to be a new council – ensuring the opportunity to reset is seized	▶ New council will have a new way of working, vision and culture ▶ The Oxfordshire Advisory Board will be established to guide transition – being a critical friend to a future council and ensuring commitments within the proposal are not just met but embedded

Oxfordshire County Council | LGR proposal | 4. One Oxfordshire engagement

Stakeholders	Priorities	Concerns	One Oxfordshire opportunities
MPs	▶ Simplicity of one council ▶ Clear geography ▶ Strong financial model for new council	▶ Council will be too big ▶ Loss of focus on Oxford	▶ We will continue to protect the Oxford brand locally, sub regionally and nationally, and ensure that a future mayoral strategic authority does that too ▶ We will agree modern charter trustees with the resources and influence to be a focal point for city issues ▶ Area committees for Oxford and its neighbourhoods will be established

What we will deliver

As one council, we will set out how we will maintain and improve critical and wider public services by seizing the opportunities for public sector reform and the transformation that devolution will activate across our region.

One Oxfordshire will bring all of the county's assets together to not only meet the considerable local government challenges ahead but to significantly improve outcomes for our people, place and economy.

We will do this using the firm foundations of "good" critical service delivery already established.

One Oxfordshire offers a financially resilient council across a footprint that works to deliver better public services and improved outcomes for our people and our place.

All Oxfordshire councils, and local government as a whole, have faced significant challenges to service delivery with rising costs, inflation and energy bills – exacerbated for so many of our communities who needed us the most throughout the COVID pandemic. This has increased the volume and complexity of demand on services across our place. All councils have coped but within a sub-optimal and constrained two-tier system of governance and leadership.

We have a once in a generation opportunity to change this. By seizing the opportunities for public sector reform, Oxfordshire can bring together all of its assets – its people, its places and its economy to hit the challenges head on and create a brighter future for all.

Occupational therapy, adult social care

5. Improved outcomes for people and place

5.1 Our people

For decades, public service policy in the UK has been attempting to 'get upstream', intervene positively and early, and give our people and our communities the tools necessary to create independent, resilient and fulfilling lives. This is never easy, but One Oxfordshire will finally enable us to do this and prove what is possible. The evidence is compelling – bringing all services and all resources together within one council is the only way to reduce the costs of high demand services and sustain improved outcomes for our residents and stakeholders over the medium to long-term.

Building a prevention council

Preventing ill health, homelessness and worklessness are complicated public policy challenges, but they present a combined threat to population health and wellbeing across the country, and Oxfordshire is not without its challenges. Transforming life chances in childhood and young adulthood is critical.

Through the continuation of critical service delivery alongside reform to integrate currently fragmented services across district councils, the alignment of the whole public service system (NHS, Department for Work and Pensions, and Thames Valley Police) with One Oxfordshire enables us to work upstream tackling the causes of ill health earlier or design them out completely. It will enable a much more comprehensive and effective approach to prevention, including addressing the drivers of demand. This will help improve outcomes for residents, including vulnerable children and adults.

The implementation of the NHS 10 Year Plan presents a significant opportunity to strengthen the integration of place-based wellbeing offers with NHS health services at neighbourhood level across Oxfordshire. By aligning our collective efforts, we can ensure that the health and social care needs of our diverse communities are addressed in a cohesive, targeted and sustainable manner.

Oxfordshire Council will be responsible for social care, public health, housing, homelessness, planning and leisure services, enabling a truly integrated approach to population wellbeing. By focusing on prevention, One Oxfordshire can effectively coordinate efforts across all sectors, ensuring that our businesses and, most importantly, communities fulfil their potential.

One Oxfordshire will:

- Invest long-term and at scale in community assets and initiatives such as family hubs that tackle the wider determinants of health, reduce inequalities and tackle child and family poverty head on.
- Bring together wider public health services such as leisure facilities, benefit support and environmental health to make it easier for people to get help early.
- Create more inclusive, child and dementia-friendly public spaces.
- Be financially resilient to plan and deliver services for the long-term – crucial for a prevention and early intervention approach. We will invest, including using our Housing Revenue Account, at scale in good quality housing and skills programmes that support sustainable inclusive growth.
- Deliver a single partnership strategy with the voluntary and community sector to ensure that hyper-local expertise is harnessed, not lost in a larger structure. We will ensure that services are delivered closer to communities and support the vital role these groups play in building social connection and identifying risks early.
- Adopt a population health management approach with our NHS partners, underpinned by the robust use of shared data and research partnerships that will identify inequalities, unmet needs and their root causes. This will enable early tailored interventions to take place. Linking multiple, currently disparate, services together builds a stronger evidence base and connections into communities to help prevent issues escalating.
- Maximise our pooled budgets with the NHS - enabling more strategic and effective use of resources, reducing duplication and ensuring decisions are made jointly with our partners.
- Harness the value of multi-disciplinary teams working side by side with partner organisations, in co-located buildings to deliver services locally that design out poor health outcomes or intervene early.
- Design and deliver services that are better coordinated and more responsive to residents' needs. This will improve outcomes, support earlier intervention and encourage preventative care, enabling people to live independently for longer using limited resources more effectively.

Oxfordshire County Council | LGR proposal | 5. Improved outcomes for people and place

A neighbourhood NHS health and care partnership

Neighbourhood working is not new and it is a central part of One Oxfordshire's plans to build on our firm foundations to further integrate with the Thames Valley Integrated Care Board (ICB) and its existing health and care partnership.

Health and care partnerships (HCPs) bring leaders together to join up services, accelerating this integration, and find new ways to use resources collectively to offer better value and more targeted care.

HCPs focus on prevention and reducing inequalities. They make choices and prioritise actions and interventions to deliver three shifts of change, moving care from treatment to prevention; acute to community; and analogue to digital.

One Oxfordshire will streamline governance across Oxfordshire to drive better outcomes in health and care for our people. We will leverage the pooled budget of £0.5 billion to do this as well as use the 18 integrated commissioning posts the county council and Thames Valley ICB already share. This pooled budget is the largest of any system outside of mayoral strategic authorities in England.

One Oxfordshire, together with the HCP, will ensure we will have a single conversation that meets the needs of all Oxfordshire and provides critical enablers to deliver stronger, simpler services, particularly those in clear need of greater equity such as homelessness.

These enablers include using the significant financial headroom we have to invest for the long-term, co-locating clinical, population and community health teams from a single public estate and using our shared data and insight. Put together, this will create sustainable services that support the management of long-term health conditions across the county reducing demand on acute services.

"There is an urgent need to transform the health and care system. We need to move to a neighbourhood health service that will deliver more care at home or closer to home, improve people's access, experience and outcomes, and ensure the sustainability of health and social care delivery[47]."

Oxfordshire Way

Oxfordshire has one of the lowest costs of adult social care provision across the country. Not only are we low cost, but we deliver great outcomes as our results from working in the Oxfordshire Way demonstrate.

Oxfordshire County Council developed Oxfordshire Way, an approach that supports people to live well and independently within their communities for as long as possible. Working in partnership with health and care organisations and our voluntary and community sector, we have delivered tangible and significant results.

These outcomes are not coincidental; they are the direct result of operating at scale across the county.

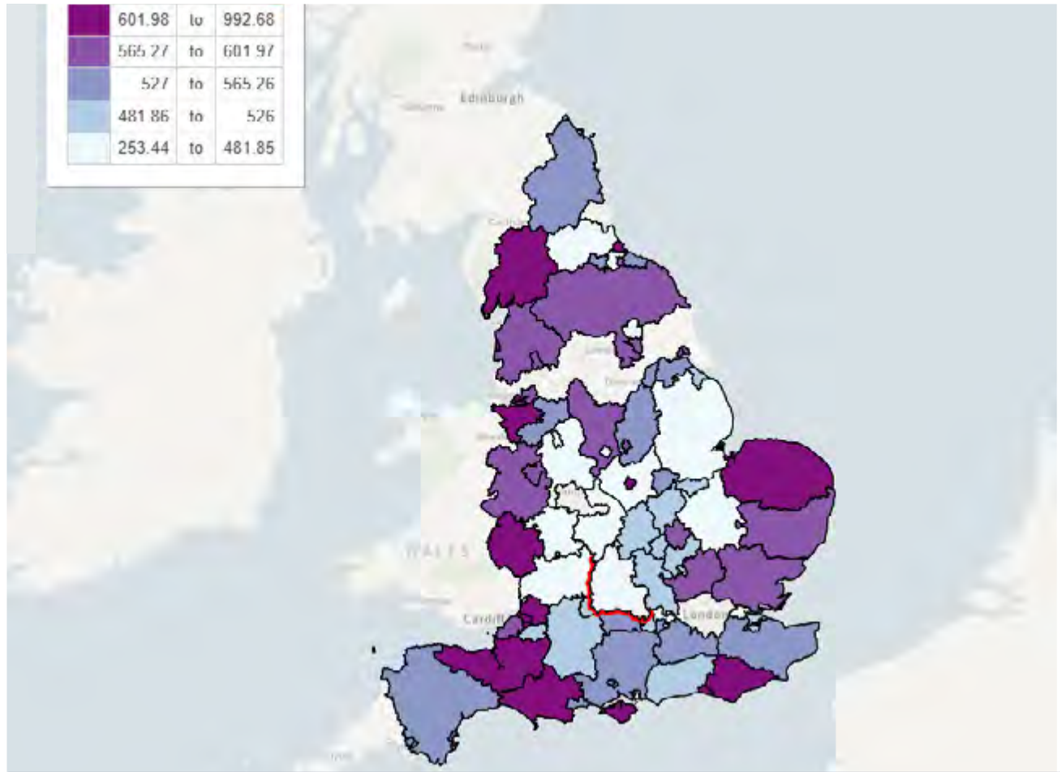
The model relies on the ability to plan, invest in, and manage preventative services – such as the countywide Live Well Oxfordshire Community Links services – at a scale that makes them viable and impactful.

Since the implementation of our approach to adult social care we have achieved a **67 per cent reduction in the number of people waiting for a social care assessment since April 2021**.

Furthermore, by focusing on prevention and independence, the growth in the number of people requiring long-term care has been cut by 20 per cent against demographic projections, meaning 150 more people are living independently in their own communities than would otherwise be expected.

Not only are we delivering high levels of quality care, we are doing this as one of the most cost effective upper tier councils in England.

Counties and unitaries adult care spend 2024 - 25[48]



Oxfordshire Result	Oxfordshire result	England average (2022/23)	Performance vs national
Overall satisfaction of people who use services	68.5%	64.4%	Better
Permanent care home admissions (65+) per 100,000	337.8	560.8	Better
Older people still at home 91 days after discharge	86.3%	82.3%	Better
People who use services who feel safe	74.6%	69.7%	Better
Adult social care providers rated good/outstanding	90.3%	83.2%	Better

Well Together

The Well Together programme aims to address the wider determinants of health by tackling health and social inequalities at their roots.

It is delivered in partnership by Oxfordshire Community and Voluntary Action and Community First Oxfordshire (CFO) and is funded by the NHS.

To support this programme Oxfordshire County Council **allocated £1 million to CFO to work with the ten most deprived communities in Oxfordshire**.

We were able to convene a single, unified conversation with the majority of voluntary sector groups, allowing us to co-produce preventative interventions tailored to tackle the underlying drivers of health inequalities.

This work has had a significant impact, reaching nearly 12,000 vulnerable people in a short space of time[49].

It has helped those from our most deprived communities become physically active. It has significantly reduced the need for our statutory health services as a result of people becoming more active and has improved their health and wellbeing.

This achievement was recently recognised nationally, with Oxfordshire being shortlisted at the Health Service Journal national awards as exemplars for achieving substantial positive impact through partnership working. Oxfordshire County Council is planning to scale up these efforts across the county to maximise impact.

Health Inequality Forum

Community health development officers work locally to co-produce solutions and strengthen engagement by linking statutory services, voluntary organisations and community groups together.

This work is coordinated through a countywide Health Inequality Forum, supported by joint funding from multiple partners, including health services. Oxfordshire's scale for efficiency is used while retaining flexibility for local needs.

There are plans to roll this successful, partnership-driven approach out across the county's communities.

Oxfordshire County Council | LGR proposal | 5. Improved outcomes for people and place

Protecting our critical services

Our work with Newton Europe has demonstrated that we are able to contain our future people based demand[50] through One Oxfordshire with a continued focus on early help, prevention and transformation.

Our critical services (or defined in the statutory invitation as crucial services) are highly complex and subject to high demand, and will be both protected and improved with One Oxfordshire.

There are critical services that follow children and adults across their life and form a significant portion of expenditure for Oxfordshire County Council.

We will continue to deliver these services without disaggregation. These are:

- **Children's social care:** safeguarding, corporate parenting for care experienced children and care leavers, early help, family support, youth offending services and the responsibility for the regional adoption agency.
- **Education:** school place planning, school improvement, admissions and legal attendance, home to school transport and access to high quality early years provision.
- **Special educational needs and disabilities (SEND):** health, education and care for children and young people with additional needs.
- **Adult social care:** support for older people, people with physical disabilities and neurodiverse people, and those with mental health needs.
- **Homelessness:** statutory service for those who need accommodation.

Adult and children's social care

Oxfordshire County Council delivers "good" adult and children's services (as recognised by Ofsted and the Care Quality Commission). The greatest risk to these services will be fragmentation through unnecessary and / or excessive disaggregation, which will adversely impact outcomes and performance. Demand and the resources to address this have been built up countywide and are not evenly distributed.

That risk has been raised nationally by the Association of Directors of Children's Services in a letter to the minister on 23 June 2025. This letter made clear that the extent of risk to quality care for vulnerable children is not just a consequence of disaggregation, but of the degree of disaggregation below the principle of population thresholds of 500,000 set out in the government's white paper.

Similar points were echoed in the Association of Directors of Adults' Services letter to the minister dated 14 August 2025. Specifically, the "need to ensure diverse communities with a mixture of health, wealth and age profiles are needed to avoid creating highly concentrated units of need – this will help to ensure that any new councils have a good basis on which they can balance demand for services with the ability of local populations to help pay for them".

Oxfordshire County Council | LGR proposal | 5. Improved outcomes for people and place

Special educational needs and disabilities (SEND)

Our SEND improvement journey has been a key strategic priority for Oxfordshire's Local Area Partnership and for the county council since 2023 following an inspection of services. We have worked closely with our integrated care board, local health providers, schools and settings, and our parent carer forum to develop services and improve outcomes for children and young people and in line with the regulatory framework.

We are proud of the progress we have made to improve the timeliness and quality of support for children. The county council has improved the quality and timeliness of education, health and care plans (EHCPs) and needs assessments, operating above national statutory deadlines. Our stock-take and deep-dive evaluations from the Department for Education have evidenced strong and sustained improvement across all key indicators for children and young people with SEND.

This improvement work will continue – particularly with the anticipated SEND white paper and our high needs deficit management plan. Splitting services risks destabilising this important progress.

Homelessness

As housing costs rise across England and in Oxfordshire, more families are facing housing challenges and homelessness. Rents in Oxfordshire's private market have continued to climb[51] and temporary accommodation use is also rising quickly, straining council budgets and negatively impacting households and children across Oxfordshire. Authorities in Oxfordshire owed nearly 3,000 prevention and relief duties in the last year, indicating the scale of the challenge in the area.

Oxfordshire County Council is already delivering homelessness services for vulnerable post 18 year olds – a more consistent and joined-up approach is already proving itself across Oxfordshire. Expanding this approach under One Oxfordshire will unlock the greatest benefits to all those experiencing homelessness.

The priority for One Oxfordshire will be for a safe, legal and confident transition of employees and records to ensure a seamless continuity of services for vulnerable people who use them and focus relentlessly on reducing homelessness.

Improving critical services

One Oxfordshire will:

- Create a single housing authority with the ability to leverage a housing revenue account (HRA) across the county, providing great housing solutions at scale – removing all costs associated with coordinating and leading work across five district councils.
- Speed up decision making using single systems and streamlining engagement with partners such as the NHS, the Department for Work and Pensions and Thames Valley Police.
- Build a single front door for homelessness services – one website for people to access help and support; and one way of working to make the best use of resources.
- Work together with the Thames Valley Integrated Care Board (ICB) to create one joined-up way of planning and funding health and wellbeing services. With a single council, we can look at the bigger picture and see how things like temporary accommodation for homeless people affects other costs, such as health services and transport for children with special educational needs.
- Review the whole Oxfordshire one public sector estate (land and buildings). This will help make sure communities have what they need for the future. Where possible, we'll free up sites so they can be used for temporary accommodation, affordable housing, parks and leisure, and commercial space.
- Strengthen its confident and experienced workforce delivering "good" highly complex critical services in high demand across Oxfordshire that can flex to the needs of communities within a new unitary, at scale and at pace.
- Align benefit services to strategic priorities, such as early help and prevention, to support earlier identification of families who may be falling into financial difficulty.
- Control funding levers across all housing-related funds (Better Care Fund, Disabled Facilities Grants etc), from discretionary housing payments to funding for supported housing to enable smarter, long-term investments that benefit the whole public sector in Oxfordshire.
- Create one team focused on preventing homelessness early, before people reach a crisis point. By combining several housing teams into one, Oxfordshire can have more employees available to help with, for example, mediation for families with 16 - 17 year olds; working with landlords; and resolving benefit problems for people at risk of losing their homes.

Oxfordshire County Council | LGR proposal | 5. Improved outcomes for people and place

- Guarantee everyone, regardless of where they live, has access to the same services creating fairer service delivery. We will make sure the rules for who can get help are the same everywhere in Oxfordshire so people at risk don't miss out on support when they need it most.
- Use our strategic partnership with Homes England to invest in infrastructure and unlock and accelerate housing delivery. As a strategic sized authority, we will be in the best position to attract and use more funding for homes working through existing and new wholly owned companies and joint ventures. We will leverage the Housing Revenue Account, grant from the Social and Affordable Homes Programme, Section 106 contributions, prudential borrowing and private sector investment.

The out of hospital team

The out of hospital team is made up of social workers, housing officers and clinical staff. Its focus is supporting hospital discharge for people who cannot be sent home due to a housing related issue. Although this group of people is far smaller than those in hospital waiting for a social care package, their discharge can be delayed for far longer.

The multi-disciplinary team works across systems to achieve solutions, which includes helping Oxfordshire achieve one of the lowest delays in the region.

In 2017, Oxfordshire was among the worst performing local authority areas in the country for hospital discharges. However, **Oxfordshire is now in the top quartile for discharge performance nationally (2025).** This is an example of how multi-disciplinary working can solve problems that cut across different systems and organisations.

The team improves outcomes for people experiencing homelessness by providing coordinated person-centred care that addresses health, housing and social needs as a whole. It also helps people access services, maintain continuity across them and builds up trust between agencies and vulnerable people.

5.2 Our place

To invest in people, and improve outcomes, we also need to invest in places – the dividends are shared success.

Since the influential Lyons Inquiry[52], the responsibility for place shaping and place making has been felt keenly by local government across the country.

Creating the conditions for a place to flourish, to amplify its assets confidently on a regional, national and international stage is not desirable, it is essential.

The delivery of a high performing, inclusive and balanced economy in Oxfordshire is not just pivotal for output and productivity, it is the most effective way of improving the social determinants of ill-health, reducing inequalities and childhood poverty levels across the county.

The stakes could not be higher. The key is to connect these unrivalled growth opportunities that One Oxfordshire brings to all of our people, across all of our places.

Anything less than this continues the unproductive and unequal patterns and adverse impacts of the past.

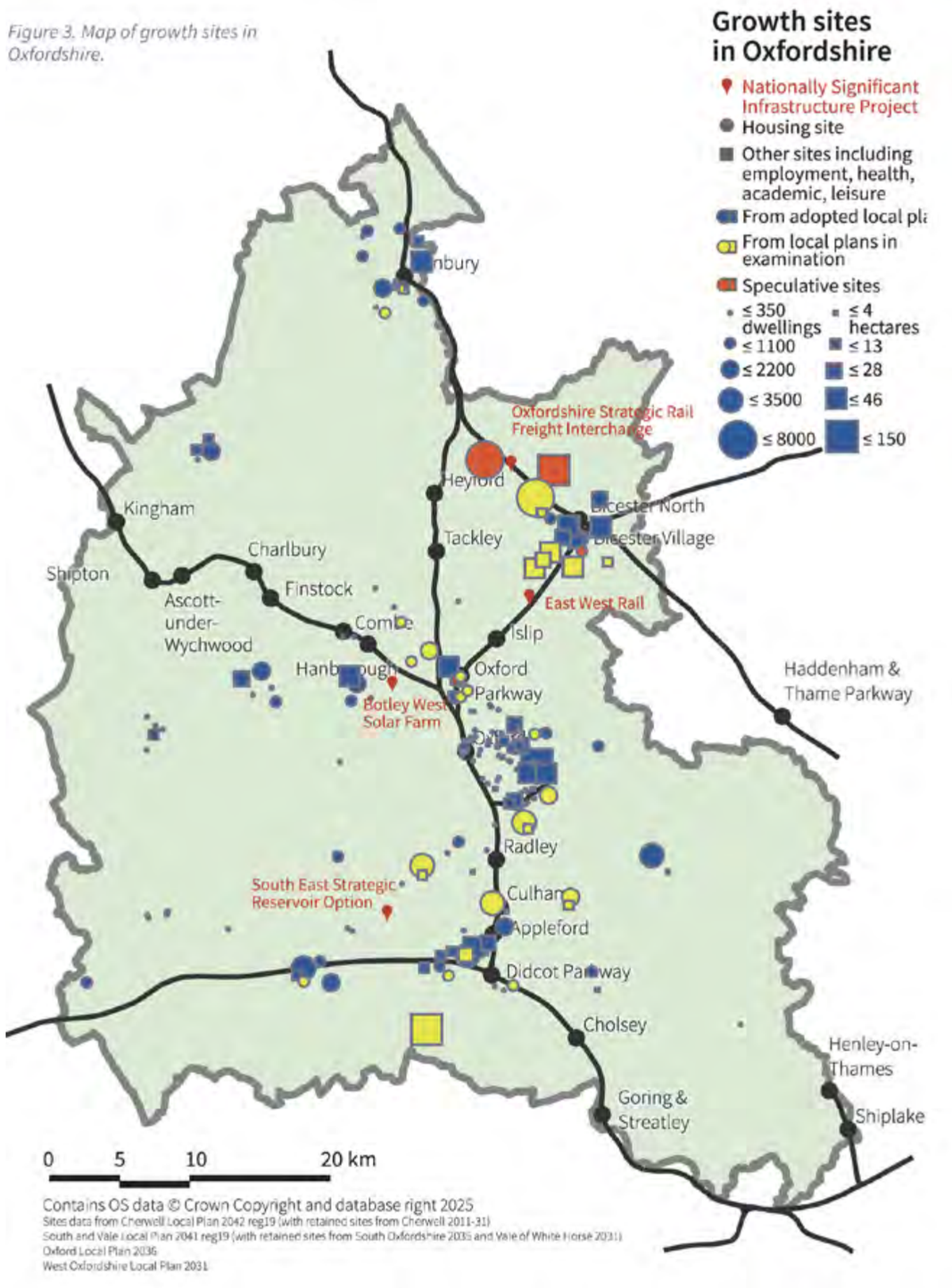
"Sustained economic growth is central to this government's Plan for Change and is the only way to increase the prosperity of our country and improve the living standards of working people[53]."

Oxfordshire County Council | LGR proposal | 5. Improved outcomes for people and place

Making planning work for our county and country

Growth sites in Oxfordshire[54]

Figure 3. Map of growth sites in Oxfordshire.



As well as delivering high quality public services we need to plan effectively for the future. Oxfordshire will play a significant role in delivering the government's Industrial Strategy with strong capabilities across six of the government's eight growth-driving sectors: digital technologies, life sciences, clean energy, advanced manufacturing, defence, and creative industries.

Great opportunity to deliver exists – for example, the first AI Growth Zone in the UK is at Culham Campus in Abingdon, part of the Science Vale area, which is an internationally recognised concentration of these industries.

Nearby Harwell brings together academia, hosting teams from over 30 UK universities, national science assets and industry to drive scientific and technological breakthroughs. But progress has been slow in other areas. One Oxfordshire will accelerate this progress.

Strategic planning and infrastructure

In 2021, all councils agreed the Oxfordshire Strategic Vision – the precursor to the Oxfordshire Joint Statutory Spatial Plan (Oxfordshire Plan 2050). The production of this plan was linked to government funding for the Oxfordshire Housing and Growth Deal in 2018 – for supporting infrastructure and affordable housing, and to accelerate delivery of 100,000 new homes in the county.

The plan failed in 2022 on the issue of agreeing housing numbers. It has impeded the ability to take a strategic approach, such as being able to focus on development around transport corridors. The failure demonstrates that scale is essential when making decisions about growth.

The Oxfordshire Infrastructure Strategy (OxIS) identifies and prioritises the infrastructure needed to support sustainable development; the current barriers to delivery and gaps in future infrastructure provision; as well funding opportunities up to 2050.

By assessing all infrastructure needs from energy to transport, the strategy outlines the overarching approach needed to facilitate sustainable, inclusive growth for Oxfordshire.

One Oxfordshire is designed so we can still represent our communities but are capable of making strong plan-led decisions at scale. We will, with a mayoral strategic authority (MSA), coordinate and unlock infrastructure investment and economic growth opportunities to meet the Oxfordshire's needs, including housing and transport, while protecting our environment and ensuring access to green spaces for all our communities.

Supporting growth and improving vital transport connectivity requires a council to provide and deliver new and improved infrastructure.

Due to the risks and challenges with construction, including market inflation volatility, One Oxfordshire is of a scale that is capable of managing cost and programme variances and absorb financial pressures if and when required.

Oxfordshire County Council | LGR proposal | 5. Improved outcomes for people and place

As the county grows, the need for cohesive transport solutions has never been greater to shape how people, goods and services flow across our county. Transport planning must consider a broad geography, ensuring that strategic transport interchanges - bus, coach, rail, and even digital platforms - are inclusive and accessible.

One Oxfordshire, with an MSA, can ensure strategic transport planning and delivery takes place across the whole of the county. We will provide a single, clear view on the mobility needs for Oxfordshire, and the capacity and capability to manage our connected network in a seamless fashion.

Integrated transport is not simply a matter of convenience; it's key for Oxfordshire's economic success, environmental stewardship and social inclusion – unlocking opportunity while future-proofing the county against the challenges of growth, climate change and evolving patterns of movement.

OxRail 2040

The county council's ambitious OxRAIL 2040 strategy will support sustainable growth in emerging areas such as Begbroke, Culham, and Wantage and Grove. It will radically improve connectivity between high productivity sites and the wider region via the Cowley Branch Line.

Leveraging rail infrastructure in this way enables coordinated, transit-oriented growth that supports climate resilience and revitalises communities. Plans for enhanced stations and new ones (at Ardley, Bagbroke, Oxford Cowley and Littlemore, and Wantage and Grove) also create opportunities for sustainable growth around these locations and a wider, more connected Oxfordshire. Electrification will deliver more sustainable, higher capacity services and enable our Oxfordshire Metro idea for joined up connections between rail, bus, active travel and new rapid mass transit options. This includes for the Oxford - Witney - Carterton corridor.

The county council is proposing to invest up to £7.5 million into the Cowley Branch Line, in addition to future investment in connectivity to the two new stations. Alongside the contribution of other partners, this commitment will unlock this £120 million scheme that will expedite the delivery of 6 - 10,000 homes and support the creation of up to 10,000 new jobs.

This will connect both Oxfordshire's highest performing science and innovation sites and provide a vital new transport link for our most deprived communities. It demonstrates the ability and benefits that an authority that operates at scale can offer.

Local plan making

Oxfordshire has a history of struggling to co-operate on planning across boundaries. In the current planning round, Oxford City Council has had its local plan rejected at examination stage for failing to meet the duty to cooperate. The planning inspectorate has also written to Vale of White Horse District Council and South Oxfordshire District Council recommending that their joint plan is withdrawn, again on the issue of the duty to cooperate.

As a result of slow planning and delivery, with no strategic approach, Oxfordshire and the UK is missing economic growth opportunities. Development will also come forward that is less productive and sustainable.

The challenges around plan making will likely continue with any combination of multiple unitary authorities in the county – scale is necessary for decision making in this space.

We need a fresh start for plan making – we can only do that with One Oxfordshire. It is imperative that sufficient scale is achieved in this round of local government reorganisation as history tells us it could take multiple generations to change it again.

Housing

A priority for strategic and local planning is housing. Oxfordshire has the potential to meet countywide housing needs by delivering homes near key employment sites and in connected locations - reducing travel demand and supporting vibrant, well-connected communities. The majority of journeys are internal to Oxfordshire, which emphasises Oxfordshire as a connected ecosystem – where people work and live in different parts of the county. It is critical that transport is planned on a wider geography to effectively maximise public transport, cycling, wheeling and walking opportunities.

Successful strategic planning for long-term economic and housing growth in the county will only be possible with One Oxfordshire.

The projected growth scenarios are between approximately **123,000** and **134,000** additional homes across Oxfordshire between 2024/25 and 2049/50[55].

The housing growth figures for Oxfordshire districts detailed on the next page represent an annual target of **5,300 homes per year for five years** as determined by the National Planning Policy Framework. This is a level significantly above the existing annual requirements of adopted local plans and current delivery rates and very significantly above the previous standard method planning assumptions.

The average annual delivery of homes across Oxfordshire ranges from 3,638 homes per annum (over a 15 year period) to 4,759 homes annually (based on the latest three year average delivery rate)[55]. Housing delivery peaked in 2018/19, 2019/20, and 2022/23, when more than 5,000 homes were delivered per year.

Analysis of recent delivery trends demonstrates a significant increase in housing delivery since 2016/17, with the three year average being 30 per cent higher than the 15 year average. Locally, the highest levels of housing completions have been achieved in the Vale of White Horse, followed closely by Cherwell and South Oxfordshire. Housing delivery has reduced considerably across the county in the last two monitoring years[55].

The identification of Heyford Park as a flagship new town by government is recognition of the county's potential to be a contributor to net housing growth above local housing targets. The ability to look strategically at Oxfordshire and develop a new town in a sustainable, connected area that can serve the needs of the city and county as a whole, is a strong model to follow – but infrastructure must come first.

One Oxfordshire offers a transformative solution. We can fully leverage the county's strengths in high-growth sectors such as AI and life sciences, while delivering well connected communities supported by seamless transport networks.

One Oxfordshire will enable the county to respond effectively to national infrastructure priorities, unlock stalled sites and deliver regeneration at scale. Delivery of sufficient and sustainable development is critical to the delivery of our economic success; without this, we are continuing to constrain the innovation and entrepreneurial advantages we have across the county for the benefit of UK PLC.

Area	Annual requirement of adopted local plan expressed as a yearly average	Three year average delivery	2023-24 delivery	Previous annual housing standard method (pre Dec 2024)	Housing standard method (as at Dec 2024)
Cherwell	1,362	1,104	805	706	1,118
Oxford	544	500	365	762	1,087
South Oxfordshire	981	1,104	978	579	1,242
Vale of White Horse	1,138	1,246	1,168	633	949
West Oxfordshire	797	805	683	594	905
Total	**4,822**	**4,759**	**3,999**	**3,229**	**5,301**

One Oxfordshire will:

- Develop a single local plan for Oxfordshire adopted on accelerated timescales by the end of 2028/29. This will be with the support of government giving us the tools such as continuing authority status; meeting existing reorganisation timescales; prioritisation with the planning inspectorate; and committing to mayoral elections in 2027 to ensure alignment with the development of a spatial development strategy.
- Act as a single point of contact to work with the mayor and the mayoral strategic authority to develop a spatial development strategy, which brings single strategies that cover housing, growth, infrastructure and transport together.
- Form a single local planning authority – streamlining decision-making, resources, plans and governance through planning committees for the whole county. This will support faster, more coordinated progress towards housing and development delivery, ensuring coordination of infrastructure and a connected and authentic approach to community involvement using area committees.
- Use the Ox Place[56] model of social and affordable housing delivery to its full potential – shaping a whole Oxfordshire approach, demonstrating the strengths of municipal housebuilding and active management of the local affordable and social rent housing market.
- Create one local authority landowner for the county – able to take a strategic review of all land and land types with a clear focus on housing.
- Create a single integrated digital operational system for plan making, engagement, development management and enforcement. This will deliver significant economies of scale but also a more customer friendly interface.
- Use its collective scale and standing to drive through strategic housing schemes, unblock stalled developments, champion inclusive growth that supports health, education and employment outcomes and ensure all communities benefit from future nationally significant infrastructure projects.
- Provide a single front door for investors and developers, with a standardised policy and approach across developments.

Oxfordshire County Council | LGR proposal | 5. Improved outcomes for people and place

Oxfordshire Developers Forum

The Oxfordshire Developers Forum is organised and facilitated by Oxfordshire County Council and includes developers, landowners, investors, advisors and other stakeholders across the county, alongside all Oxfordshire councils.

The forum provides open and constructive dialogue between all Oxfordshire councils, property owners and developers to facilitate more joined-up growth and development delivery in Oxfordshire.

It provides a strategic platform for dialogue on growth, housing and development across the county, to address common issues such as utilities and infrastructure, to share best practice and to champion a long-term, place led approach to development.

OX Place

In 2016, Oxford City Council established OX Place[56] as its own housing company to create high quality, genuinely affordable homes in the city. It builds homes that local people need and profits are invested back into the city for essential services, and into building more homes for people who need them.

OX Place offers homes to buy outright and shared ownership, which gives people the chance to get onto the property ladder by buying a share of a home and renting the rest.

OX Place also builds council owned rented homes for those who need a safe, high quality, affordable rental home in the city. In some cases, these are for people who can't afford to buy, in others, providing affordable homes for key workers – nurses, doctors, university researchers and local school teachers who may need to live in the city while they're training, but then move away.

Delivering connected public services across Oxfordshire

Making planning work for our county and country will enable us to strategically plan and deliver high quality connected public services.

The move to Oxfordshire Council and how we design and deliver the full breadth of public services for our people will accelerate the effective and ongoing shaping of our place for a really bright future for everyone.

Given the county council already delivers services on a countywide footprint, providing 85 per cent of local government services by expenditure in Oxfordshire – including adult and children's social care, some education services, public health, fire and rescue, libraries and museums, roads and transport, trading standards, waste disposal and recycling – there is a strong case to maintain stability and avoid disaggregation of services.

One Oxfordshire is the only proposal that removes this risk, allowing service delivery that really changes people's lives to be prioritised and further improvements to be made. We will be able to retain the strengths of these services and build from the firm foundations they provide, deepening integration and operating at scale.

Oxfordshire County Council | LGR proposal | 5. Improved outcomes for people and place

Oxfordshire Fire and Rescue Service

A key service area strongly affected by both local government reform and devolution is fire and rescue. In the Thames Valley, three fire and rescue authorities operate:

1. Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes Fire Authority (combined fire authority)
2. Royal Berkshire Fire and Rescue Service (combined fire authority)
3. Oxfordshire Fire and Rescue Service (county council).

Those in the traditional Thames Valley footprint operate independently but have a strong programme of public sector innovation, which includes the handling of 999 calls, mobilising of fire engines, procurement, fire investigation and operational response. Oxfordshire Fire and Rescue Service delivers effective operations throughout the county, now geographically aligned with the neighbourhood police area for Oxfordshire.

If local government reorganisation results in multiple councils in Oxfordshire, a combined fire authority will need to be established to govern fire and rescue. This would be a temporary structure until a mayoral strategic authority and the mayor is in place to discharge those functions. This will create avoidable cost, including resource to implement this change, and possible risk to service delivery.

One Oxfordshire will:

- Retain Oxfordshire Fire and Rescue service offering a straightforward transition to a future Thames Valley Fire and Rescue Service – avoiding unnecessary structural change, ensuring operational consistency prior to devolution arrangements being put in place.
- Work seamlessly and in a unified fashion with our police and NHS partners to identify houses at risk of fire, delivering preventative interventions.
- Provide continued alignment of local government with police, fire and health – vital for the Thames Valley Local Resilience Forum, local and regional partners – and central government to enable the most efficient response to emergencies.

Public and community safety

Thriving high streets and vibrant market towns are not just about economic growth, they are also drivers of how safe and satisfied residents feel about their local area.

These assets foster a pride of place – recognised in the government's draft Local Government Outcome Framework and its Pride of Place Strategy.

Community safety in Oxfordshire is coordinated at a county level by the Safer Oxfordshire Partnership with district-led community safety partnerships providing a local coordination role.

For people to have confidence in their public services, we also need to be prepared for emergencies. The UK Government Resilience Framework calls for a whole of society approach to resilience, emphasising:

- Clear leadership and accountability across local and national levels.
- Integrated risk management, especially for emergency situations.
- Efficient coordination across agencies and sectors.

The county council is a category 1 responder for emergencies. Our joint Oxfordshire resilience team delivers a number of statutory duties across the county to plan, train, and run exercises for emergency response, business continuity and community resilience. We work in partnership with multiple agencies both in Oxfordshire and regionally, as part of the Thames Valley Local Resilience Forum, on emergency preparedness and response. We are experienced at operating locally and providing mutual aid at scale.

The same holds true for the longer-term emergency of climate change. According to the Climate Emergency UK's (CEUK) 2025 Scorecard, Oxfordshire County Council is the best county council in England on climate action[57]. We play a leadership role on a national and regional stage and actively share the innovative work that Oxfordshire is doing with other councils.

We have developed a climate vulnerability assessment[58], which maps the current and future risks posed by climate related hazards linked to infrastructure; health, communities and the build environment; the natural environment and assets; and business and industry at a local level across the county.

This is a powerful tool to enable a whole of society approach to resilience. It allows local communities to identify priority actions and also gives a strategic overview of the ever-increasing risks of overheating and flooding to our vulnerable residents, providing the baseline to build preventative work on.

Oxfordshire County Council | LGR proposal | 5. Improved outcomes for people and place

One Oxfordshire will:

- Consolidate countywide and district led community safety partnerships and align regulatory services for environmental health, building control and trading standards, delivering more efficient resources to coordinate consistent action together with area committees.
- Use local data and intelligence to detect emerging issues in communities to predict and prevent criminal activity, coordinated and shared with multiple agencies.
- Work collaboratively with area committees to ensure all our communities – urban and rural – understand flood risk and support them to prepare and protect those impacted most.
- Build community resilience to climate impacts by linking services such as development, planning and housing within a single authority.
- Drive a unified emergency planning response across Oxfordshire, reducing duplication and gaps in coverage, providing national assurance.

Trading standards tackling illegal tobacco and vapes

Criminality on our high streets is undermining our neighbourhoods and acting as a symbol of national decline. This concern prompted Oxfordshire County Council to undertake targeted work to tackle illegal tobacco and vapes. The sale of such products, sold at 'pocket-money prices', drives health inequality, by keeping people smoking and smoking more, helps recruit the next generation of smokers, brings organised crime into our communities and undermines legitimate businesses.

Since 2019, our trading standards team has seized nearly 800,000 illegal cigarettes, 189 kilos of illegal rolling and shisha tobacco, and over 13,000 illegal vapes. This has led to dozens of successful prosecutions, with one recent defendant being ordered to pay £400,000.

More recently, our officers are regularly seizing illegal nicotine pouches at the same locations as those selling illegal tobacco and vapes – often hidden in sophisticated 'hides' within the premises.

Leisure, culture and heritage

The pandemic showed us how much the public value open spaces and how the limitations placed on people's freedom was a source of huge strain for many of our communities. From parks and open recreation spaces right through to culture, leisure and libraries, these services are essential to building and maintaining a sense of place. They enhance social capital and experiential learning especially for young people, and promote better health, wellbeing and community cohesion.

Council of Sanctuary

In March 2025, we became the first county council to be accredited with Council of Sanctuary status following independent assessment.

Being a Council of Sanctuary means working in partnership through the Oxfordshire Migration Partnership to ensure a warm welcome for all new arrivals, embracing integration and supporting independent living for those staying in the county.

To drive strong community cohesion, we have created inclusive opportunities to promote cultural celebration events through our libraries and the Oxfordshire Museum.

We are also part of the Warm Welcome Network, which brings communities together to share stories, while also providing shared warm spaces and drinks across the winter.

These kinds of activities encourage social mixing and help to connect people with different cultures and beliefs. This is essential for dispelling myths, creating an inclusive society and developing a more consistent approach to supporting all of our communities.

Oxfordshire County Council | LGR proposal | 5. Improved outcomes for people and place

One Oxfordshire will:

- Join up, streamline and integrate leisure, culture and heritage services with public health, adult and children's social care and SEND, enabling better coordination and more efficient delivery.
- Reduce inequalities of service provision across the county, particularly for leisure, and create inclusive spaces and service access for all, reducing any stigmas for protected and vulnerable groups of people.
- Invest at scale and for the long-term in libraries, museums and cultural venues as vital community assets ensuring fair access to all across Oxfordshire.
- Promote festivals, arts, and heritage initiatives countywide to drive a culture of localism and support community cohesion.
- Empower area committees to have oversight of services including leisure, culture and parks, allowing decisions to reflect community priorities.
- Connect and complement our heritage and cultural assets across Oxfordshire including collaborating with the Arts Council England's prioritised National Portfolio Organisations in the county.

Waste management

Crucial to a sense of pride in our places, is how we look after them. Oxfordshire's residents care about waste and how it's managed. It is a cornerstone service that residents have high expectations of from a convenience, environmental and public health perspective.

The county council's recent consultation (July - August 2025) on the future of our household waste recycling centres received record high levels of engagement with just under 5,900 responses to our survey. However, waste management in Oxfordshire is confusing. It is split across the two-tiers of local government with the city and district councils collecting waste and the county council disposing of it. Recycling responsibilities are split across the county and district councils.

The total spend on household waste management in the county[59] is around £68 million per year, about £33 million by the county council and £35 million collectively by the five districts. All district councils operating services are delivered by the private sector, in house or through a wholly owned company of the local authority.

Serving nearly 320,000 households and handling approximately 300,000 tonnes of household waste per annum, **Oxfordshire has, for the last 11 years topped the recycling league table for counties**, with a recycling rate at over 56 per cent. These are firm foundations to build on.

Oxfordshire has a network of seven household waste recycling centres[60], which are managed by the county council mainly through a single contract. One Oxfordshire will continue to provide this efficiently for the county.

We have developed a circular economy plan, which has been adopted countywide and focuses on the power of integrated environmental strategies, strong leadership and positive changes to residents and business behaviours.

Our circular economy has the potential to deliver significant economic benefits – estimated at £400 - £500 million annually for Oxfordshire businesses and up to 7,000 new jobs, while also supporting community wealth building and local supply chains. Circular approaches foster resilience to global resource shocks, reduce waste management costs, and help protect biodiversity and public health.

Local government reorganisation offers huge potential for waste and recycling operations across Oxfordshire. It requires operational efficiency at scale.

One Oxfordshire will:

- Design and deliver a single waste collection and disposal service for all Oxfordshire, removing duplication, streamlining service delivery and enabling the needs of waste management to be effectively incorporated into wider plans and policies.
- Deliver greener waste collection routes by reducing the number of rounds by around 10 per cent (helped by the removal of internal boundaries) saving on carbon, vehicles, congestion and costs. This would also extend to litter, street cleansing and bulky waste collections.
- Offer improved commercial waste collections by working at scale and from multiple locations with a single set of collection schedules and standards, reducing confusion, improving compliance and generating income to help offset costs.
- Deliver targeted neighbourhood level campaigns (eg reduce, reuse and recycle) through area committees, community action groups, developing a clear sense of localism, civic activism and pride of place through a shared connection to our environment.

How we will deliver

To deliver One Oxfordshire, we need to have a clear way of working locally, countywide, regionally and nationally. We demonstrate how we will deliver better outcomes in a future landscape, unlocking devolution at scale through a mayoral strategic authority.

We illustrate how we will ensure the empowerment of communities and neighbourhoods through new area committees and strengthened democracy for residents and partners. We also set out how we will deliver a new council with supported and skilled councillors and through an operating framework that prioritises operational excellence, place shaping and prevention.

We clearly set out our transition plan and who should lead it. We demonstrate how One Oxfordshire offers the quickest, most cost effective and safest route to a safe, legal and confident new council, one that is ready to transform from day one.

One Oxfordshire presents the opportunity to fundamentally transform outcomes for residents, and provides a single connected access point for businesses, institutions and investors in the county. These changes will not take place in isolation; a new single unitary council will be working in a wider system of public service reform – supercharged by a mayoral strategic authority, new models for working with neighbourhoods as well as wider policy changes. It will be the strongest partner to other public sector organisations in the county, such as police, health and education, and the voluntary and community sector.

Henley-on-Thames, Oxfordshire

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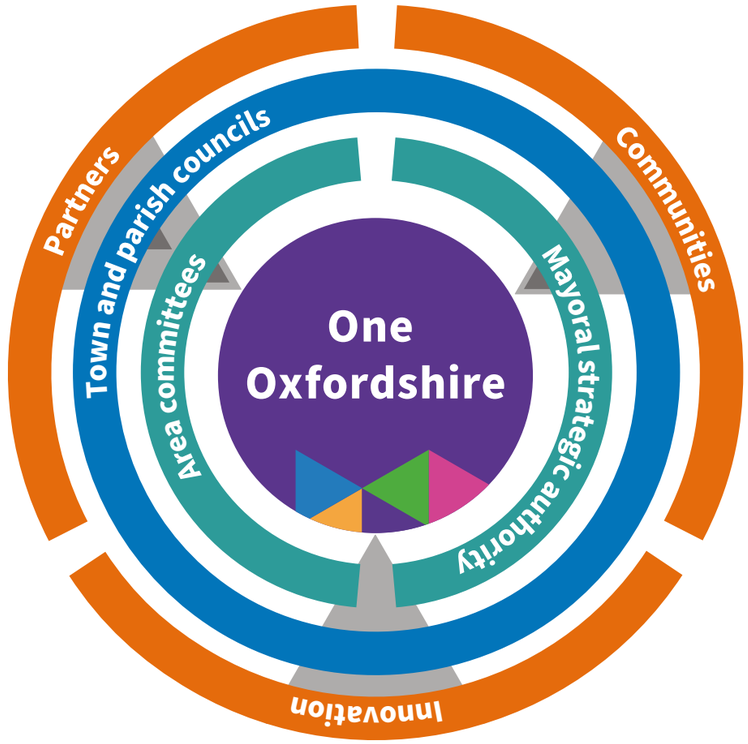
6. Our future operating framework

6.1 A new public service landscape



We have a once in a generation opportunity to grasp the benefits that our new public service landscape offers. One Oxfordshire does just that. Our framework for how we will work is underpinned by the strength of democratic representation in Oxfordshire. It puts our elected councillors at the centre, giving them a clear role from the most local to regional level as representatives of the communities and places they serve.

Delivering stronger outcomes for Oxfordshire relies on our ability to share data and insights between different organisations in this future way of working. Data and knowledge from our communities and partners will directly shape how we deliver services, as well as influence decisions taken at the mayoral strategic authority level. Together, we will turn local knowledge into countywide advantage.

Thames Valley mayoral strategic authority

Oxfordshire is working with authorities in Berkshire on the establishment of a Thames Valley mayoral strategic authority (MSA). This aims to harness the collective strengths of the urban centres, and its wider geographies, to unlock unparalleled opportunities for inclusive and sustainable growth through devolution of functions, powers and associated funding. It provides a unique opportunity to shape the place and places within the Thames Valley – urban and rural – ensuring lasting benefits for current and future generations.

Oxfordshire has established cross border partnerships with Buckinghamshire Council to advance economic growth across our two counties, which we will use as part of ongoing discussions with Berkshire councils on the development of an MSA. We continue to have discussions with Swindon Borough Council on its possible future membership within a Thames Valley MSA.

An MSA, working in alignment with Oxfordshire Council, will unlock better outcomes by enabling more coherent policy making across strategic transport, housing, skills, economic development and investment strategies across these high-performing but disconnected areas. This simplified dual delivery model creates the clearest division of responsibilities between local and regional governance. Oxfordshire Council with all the capacity and capability for the whole county in one place creates a strong and stable partner for an MSA.

The proposed Thames Valley MSA will be able to leverage sectoral strengths – such as digital and professional services in Berkshire; and life sciences and advanced manufacturing in Oxfordshire – into a unified and distributed growth model that connects this place, boosts housing, supports innovation and drives productivity.

By collaborating with member councils, the MSA will accelerate progress in solving the productivity challenge across the Thames Valley. **Together, we will use our complementary strengths to create integrated supply chains, expand labour market opportunities, and speed up innovation – driving a sustained return to productivity growth and increased revenue for UK PLC**.

Pan-regional plans such as a spatial development strategy and local growth plans with joint operating principles offer a structured and long-term strategic planning environment that provides stability and clarity to businesses, developers and the investment community.

Co-ordinating the transition to a new single unitary and an MSA at the same time will avoid repeated disruption to services, particularly for Oxfordshire Fire and Rescue Service. A shadow MSA and an Implementation Executive – a group that will be set up to govern the reorganisation – will play a key role in ensuring a smooth transition, developing strategic plans, governance structures and financial frameworks before powers are transferred. One Oxfordshire will significantly limit disruption at a time when the MSA is being established with Berkshire councils joining as existing unitary authorities.

Oxfordshire County Council | LGR proposal | 6. Our future operating framework

MSA geography

Leaders across the region have discussed the governance model of a combined county authority. **Overall the combined population of the two areas is approximately 1,740,000 – Oxfordshire at 763,218 and Berkshire at 979,000**. This meets the government's criteria for a population exceeding 1.5 million. The precedent has been set for where a large authority is joined in an MSA alongside many smaller authorities to create a sensible population size ratio, especially in the West Midlands and Greater Manchester.

An informal member working group has formed to consider voting parity across the region and representation on a proposed Strategic Authority Board. The importance of balancing county representation against several smaller unitary councils in Berkshire has been recognised. Equally, so has the need to balance representation on the board between the urban city and rural areas of Oxfordshire.

While voting arrangements have yet to be defined by the Devolution Bill or in discussions with the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, the intention is clear that the identity of Oxfordshire should be represented at regional level.

One Oxfordshire is the only local government reorganisation proposal for the county that advocates for the whole of Oxfordshire, a recognised functional economic area. It supports the government's wider devolution goals.

One Oxfordshire will:

- Speak and act coherently, confidently and competently at the MSA table – generating the confidence of stakeholders including the investor community and government partners such as Homes England.
- Offer the strongest and clearest possible governance to drive an increase in productivity and revenue for UK PLC through a single local growth plan and spatial development strategy, collaborating with partners for collective economic benefit.
- Offer a financially resilient and economically strong council for partners across the region, government and the commercial sector to collaborate with.
- Provide a clear and recognisable anchor institution for inter-regional initiatives such as the Oxford-Cambridge Growth Corridor and England's Economic Heartland.
- Offer a single front door for engagement with government, investors, and strategic partners – clarity is vital for MSAs, which require strong local partners to deliver devolved powers effectively.
- Be best placed to support the creation of a Thames Valley Fire and Rescue Service accountable to a Thames Valley mayor, supporting devolution arrangements.

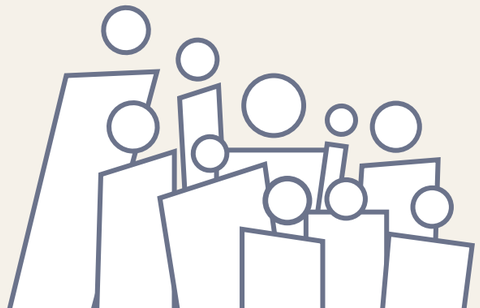
East Midlands strategic skills plan

The East Midlands Combined County Authority Adults Skills Fund (ASF) Strategic Skills Plan[61] illustrates how the devolved ASF is being used to align national programmes with local priorities.

It demonstrates the importance of embedding skills planning across transport, housing and economic development strategies. Fragmented approaches risk undermining coherence and delivery. At a time when Oxfordshire is undergoing unitarisation, fragmenting the engagement with education providers on housing, transport and planning policy could inhibit good skills planning and impact the development of skills policy at a regional level.

CLAIRE WARD
MAYOR OF THE
EAST MIDLANDS

East Midlands Combined County Authority



6.2 Building One Oxfordshire

One Oxfordshire presents the clearest opportunity to harness the benefits devolution offers. We will build a new and ambitious way of working from firm foundations, designing a future council delivering high quality public services that is closer to its communities, connects our people and our places and is cost effective.

Communities and partners will be at the heart of how it operates, working collaboratively to listen, learn and drive innovation for the county.

One Oxfordshire will be designed by innovation, driven and shaped by our experienced and skilled workforce, partners and communities – rural and urban – and their needs. We will optimise on the opportunities afforded by partnership working, economies of scale and technology and a strong financial base.

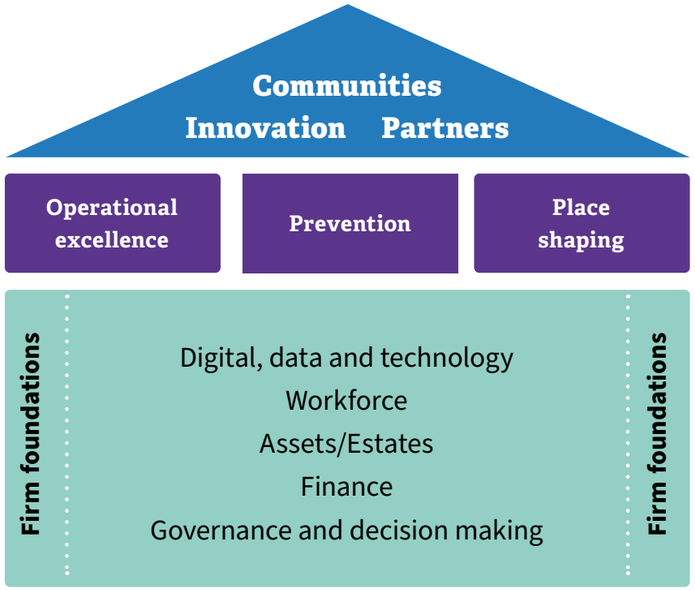
Innovate Oxfordshire

Innovate Oxfordshire is Oxfordshire County Council's self-funded innovation service, working in cutting edge partnerships to deliver better public sector services for residents, driven by their need and experience.

Approximately 150 projects have been delivered over a decade, supporting organisations to test, refine and scale new ways of working or ideas using advanced technology to bridge the gap between innovation and business as usual. This has helped to position Oxfordshire at the forefront of UK innovation.

One leading area is connected and autonomous vehicles, where 28 projects have been delivered, including Innovate UK-funded MultiCAV[62] – the first electric autonomous bus to operate on the public highway. Oxfordshire fosters innovation, delivering tangible economic, technological and societal benefits at scale.

Our strategic focus



One Oxfordshire will have a strategic focus across three areas:

Operational excellence	Prevention	Place shaping
We will get the basics right for our residents and businesses. We will prioritise effective operational services – delivered on time, to expectation, every time. One Oxfordshire will use the best in class technology and ways of working to ensure processes are slick and efficient, freeing up resident, councillor and employee time to focus on where they can add the greatest value.	We will leverage our financial position to invest in prevention across all our services. By combining local and strategic perspectives, we will create places where communities in the county thrive. We will draw on operational data and strategic insights to get ahead of demand, harnessing innovation to develop different approaches that prevent needs escalating.	We will draw on all local government powers and partnership influence. We will adopt a long-term view, building our capabilities through data, insights and community feedback. In partnership, we will set out a bold vision for our places, developing and delivering better and more affordable housing, transport and work opportunities for all in safe, welcoming environments.

Our commitments

Our firm foundations across our places, people and partnerships create the optimal conditions for One Oxfordshire to succeed. From these, we will make a number of commitments.

We will shape governance and decision making which puts communities at its heart.

We will:

- Combine local knowledge with a strategic experienced perspective to make the right decisions in a timely way based on what our communities need.
- Work together with our area committees to drive a culture of localism through elected councillors, residents and stakeholders.
- Be well governed and well led, making decisions in the public interest with a clear vision for Oxfordshire.
- Leverage our research and evaluation partnerships with the University of Oxford, Oxford Brookes University and University College London and others to operate a unique ‘test, learn and grow’ community motivated to deliver transformative public services.
- Listen to and actively involve residents, communities and partners in shaping services.

We will maintain strong levels of financial sustainability through a focus on good financial leadership and management.

We will:

- Be a financially sustainable council for all Oxfordshire, protecting the county from future financial shocks.
- Give confidence to our partners such as the voluntary and community sector and investors to work with us for the long-term.
- Be responsible with public money but seize opportunity by taking appropriate risks that drive community benefit.

We will use our assets to be closer to communities, drive collaboration with partners and support inclusive growth.

We will:

- Deliver a service focused asset strategy that reflects good public value, while enabling residents to access services where it makes sense for their communities.
- Have buildings that communities can be proud of that are warm and welcoming for employees, residents and partners.
- Share our buildings with communities and partners, enabling improved coordination of outcomes through the co-location of services and workforces.
- Be based in buildings across the county – providing visibility of employees and the council across the places of Oxfordshire.

We will have a workforce committed to public values and delivering the best for Oxfordshire.

We will:

- Be customer focused and always aim to exceed expectations.
- Be an employer of choice, attracting, retaining and engaging the best talent from within and outside of the sector that reflects our communities, offering a diverse range of career pathways and opportunities.
- Embed a values-based culture where employees work side by side with others including the NHS, Thames Valley Police and our voluntary and community sector sector to achieve common goals.
- Ensure that employees are confident and competent users of digital tools and AI to drive efficiency and productivity so that they can focus on delivering the most value for residents.
- Embed continuous improvement and best practice from other councils to continually do better.

We will invest in digital, data and technology, recognising the role this plays as the foundation for our future ways of working.

We will:

- Invest in technology and data to drive digital ways of working that increase the understanding of our people, communities and places to enable 21st century services.
- Streamline processes and deliver efficiencies that will enable investment in the human contact our vulnerable residents need.
- Promote a digital-first customer experience, with an emphasis on 'getting it right first time' and foster a culture of digital innovation and capability.
- Use data and insight to inform what we do and how we do it – meet residents' immediate and long-term needs, acting on feedback and anticipating changing requirements.

6.3 Neighbourhood governance

One Oxfordshire will be tested by its ability to engage and empower the voice of all its communities in the creation of a council that embraces local knowledge as part of designing and delivering innovation in public service delivery.

While Oxfordshire Council will be able to comfortably operate at scale, regionally and nationally, through One Oxfordshire, we will also foster a culture of localism. We will work with our partners, residents, town and parish councils and elected councillors to bring the council closer to its communities.

A localised approach to delivery

Oxfordshire's identity is rooted within all the different places that, put together, form our remarkable county. From urban spaces to historic towns, rural and semi-rural villages, these places form the basis of our communities and a sense of localism. One Oxfordshire's operating model is purposefully anchored in this sense of place, recognising that meaningful public service must be shaped by our partners and communities to ensure we design and deliver innovative public services that meet the needs of each locality.

With 763,000 residents, localised delivery is essential. It enables Oxfordshire to operate at scale while remaining deeply connected to the people and places it serves. As the council grows in its delivery, it will be hardwired to feel more present, responsive and embedded in the everyday lives of our communities.

We will build this from the firm foundations of existing delivery arrangements across our district councils, as well as in adult and children's services and public health. We will also respond to emerging national drivers and opportunities, continuing to deliver a neighbourhood NHS health and care partnership to enable better outcomes for our people. **This will be amplified by having a strong presence across the county to visibly deliver services from – co-locating with our public sector partners making best use of our public estate, wherever possible, to share learning and drive innovation**.

This is how the new council will ensure that scale strengthens, rather than dilutes, its connection to place. A key delivery mechanism for delivering at a local level is through a network of area committees and through town and parish councils.

This localised approach is not just about governance – it is a direct expression of a preventative and place shaping approach. By unlocking the value of local assets such as green spaces and community centres, One Oxfordshire will enable the use of area committees and town and parish councils for health promotion, social connection and lifelong learning. Done collaboratively and in partnership with local stakeholders, this model supports people to live healthier and more connected lives.

Area committees

Oxfordshire has active and engaged communities – built up over hundreds of years – and spanning the length and breadth of the county. Some areas, however, have more

civic resource than others and a new council must harness this to provide the conditions to foster and deliver a strong culture of localism.

The Centre for Governance and Scrutiny undertook exploratory work[63] to outline opportunities for localising One Oxfordshire.

"A huge variety of arrangements exist for neighbourhood and community activity, some of it supported by principal authorities but much of it not. Arrangements will need to maintain the ecosystem of neighbourhood governance where it is already strong and bolster it where it isn't – reflecting our earlier findings on asymmetry. The focus will need to be on the strengthening of the connective tissue associated with neighbourhood-based activity rather than necessarily "doing more" of that activity – thereby increasing community resilience. This is why we see this work strengthening and deepening the commitments made by councils across the area through the Oxfordshire Charter."

(The Centre for Governance and Scrutiny, 2025)

Its work highlighted that elected councillors must play a greater role in civic life by acting as "community convenors". Councillors must bring together local residents, town and parish councils, businesses and partners to shape services locally. They will encourage community involvement and action, especially in places and for people that need extra help to thrive. Empowerment at the grassroots means progress for all. Councillors will need ongoing support to do this consistently well.

A set of shared principles will guide the design and implementation of these committees.

One Oxfordshire's area committees will:

- Align with health, policing and transport units to facilitate sensible and meaningful liaison between different public sector agencies.
- Serve as forums to bring together stakeholders and elected councillors to develop key priorities for local service or infrastructure improvements.
- Develop their own priorities, recognising that different neighbourhoods will have different needs.

This neighbourhood focus will visibly empower frontline councillors, residents and communities to make local decisions through area committees. It will help residents feel more involved and have a bigger say in what happens in their local area, while also connecting our people and our places better across the county.

Structures and governance

One Oxfordshire proposes the creation of 15 area committees to share in the design, delivery and stewardship of local priorities, services and assets.

These committee geographies provide a healthy balance between being reflective of the places of Oxfordshire and offering a sustainable, cost effective method of delivery and alignment to existing public sector boundaries. They offer the greatest opportunities for the potential alignment of future integrated neighbourhood teams with our NHS to deliver health and wellbeing services formed from established relationships, shared data and a common understanding of local needs.

The final number, name, geography and design – including any decision making, budget and grant giving functions – of area committees will be subject to early engagement and consultation with residents, town and parish councils and public sector partners. It's essential that One Oxfordshire gets this right from the start to create a lasting structure and way of working.

We expect that area committees will be built around our market towns, larger villages and neighbourhoods within the city.

A worked example of 15 area committees could be structured around the following geographies:

- Abingdon, Kennington and Radley
- Banbury
- Bicester
- Burford, Carterton and surrounding villages
- Chipping Norton and surrounding villages
- Didcot, Cholsey and Wallingford
- Faringdon, Grove and surrounding villages
- Harwell, Shrivenham and Wantage
- Henley, Goring, Watlington and surrounding villages
- Kidlington, Yarnton and Begbroke
- Oxford – central
- Oxford – east
- Oxford – north and west
- Thame, Wheatley and surrounding villages
- Witney and surrounding villages

We expect that on occasion, an Oxford Committee, drawn from the three area committees covering the city, may need to meet about cross-city issues. A similar arrangement can also be used for all other committees.

We have heard that our residents want to see a council that is cost effective, and our partners want to streamline engagement across councils in Oxfordshire. It is important to emphasise that through these committees we must reduce, not add to, current levels of governance across the public sector.

The work of our area committees will be run in an effective, efficient and data led way. Area profiles would be created to better understand our places and our people, which will allow for targeted work to take place on local initiatives. This will drive better outcomes for residents and secure investment.

As a result of the strong financial resilience offered by One Oxfordshire, a single council can create, embed and, above all, sustain these structures and ways of working for the long-term.

We have heard accounts of similar structures across the country reducing in size, scale and impact as a result of budget cuts – this can impact how much people trust their democratic institutions and can create a story of loss, instead of a story of localism. One Oxfordshire will change that story.

Area committees future management possibilities:

- parks and green spaces
- community development and cultural activities
- business and economic development
- tourism
- social housing estate management, where appropriate.
- community transport
- community centres
- recycling
- cemeteries and churchyards
- public toilets
- leisure
- markets
- climate change resilience
- community safety / neighbourhoods
- loneliness / volunteering
- street naming and numbering.

Communities unit

A range of officers across the county and districts currently play a role in supporting co-production, community action and locality working. One Oxfordshire will create a new communities unit that will draw on (and better coordinate) some of this existing activity, boosting it with resource to support and grow community-based activity. We will "develop the connective tissue" that the Centre for Governance and Scrutiny outlined in its research report for Oxfordshire.

Councillors and their area committees will get the support they need from the communities unit with an officer aligned to each committee. The goal is to build strong working relationships between councillors, council employees, local communities, and other partners. The communities unit will have a visible presence within communities and on the council's website.

The communities unit will:

- Assist accessing external funds to support local activity.
- Help to link up complementary activity to support local people in different neighbourhoods and areas.
- Support town and parish councils in areas.
- Help build new user-centred services and facilities.

Relational constitution

"There is the need, at the local level, to be able to specify what the relationships should be between traditional governance arrangements and new systems for deliberation, co-production and co-design. All councils are obliged to agree a constitution to set out the way that it will function as an institution. We have suggested an evolved model – a "relational" constitution – that seeks to explore and define how the council will work with its partners, and the local community – setting out clear, consistent and transparent rules and arrangements. A relational constitution would therefore not just be about how the council makes decisions but about how people from across the area (and public service partners) come together to deliberate and decide."

(Centre for Governance and Scrutiny, 2025)

The county council has many best practice examples of two-way empowered engagement delivered with residents and its stakeholders, including democratic involvement of Oxfordshire's residents and communities in influencing policy and decision making.

These will be built on and embedded into the design of Oxfordshire Council's new constitution. This will set out this "relational" approach with our residents and stakeholders to ensure that the new council will listen and work with people to design and shape services.

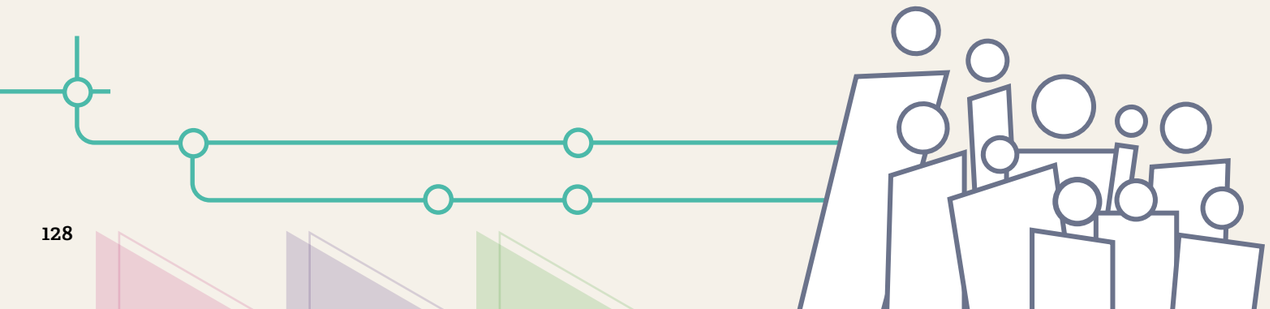
Citizens' assembly

In February and March 2025, the county council's first ever citizens' assembly took place to explore a complex challenge: how Oxfordshire's transport system could support people's health, the local economy and the environment by 2050.

The county council commissioned Mutual Gain to design and deliver the assembly with 34 residents recruited to be broadly representative of Oxfordshire. After over 45 hours of structured learning and deliberation, the assembly developed 20 ambitious and deeply considered recommendations. Sixteen of the recommendations secured over 80 per cent support from assembly participants (a measure used to give confidence for similar support from a wider population).

The county council agreed the assembly's recommendations in July 2025 and allocated funding to support any follow-up work. We are committed to continuing to work with assembly members in the future. We have already engaged members on proposals for a temporary congestion charge and OxRAIL 2040 (the council's plan to improve rail transport).

> **"Oxfordshire's citizens' assembly on travel and transport marks a significant moment in local democratic engagement. MutualGain would like to thank Oxfordshire County Council for its continued commitment to embedding the citizens' assembly process into its decision-making. This approach reflects good practice in deliberative democracy and supports more inclusive, transparent, and community-informed policymaking."**
>
> (MutualGain, 2025)



Oxfordshire County Council | LGR proposal | 6. Our future operating framework

Community wealth building

Oxfordshire's approach to community wealth building focuses on rebuilding the connection between the people and the places that create wealth and those who benefit from it. Community wealth building works with local communities to make financial power work for them, encouraging fair employment and progressive procurement.

The county council has worked with partners and communities to build a deep understanding of Oxfordshire's local economy. This has included working with the Centre for Local Economic Strategies (CLES) to produce a report around spending in Oxfordshire. This report is directly influencing our work on progressive procurement, which aims to maximise the economic, social and environmental benefits associated with our spending power.

Town and parish councils

Oxfordshire's town and parish councils (local councils) are the first tier of local government. They are integral to continued democratic and community engagement and local delivery as they are now – delivering services on behalf of district councils and the county council. Building on the firm foundations of the existing co-produced Oxfordshire Councils' Charter, there is an opportunity to strengthen the relationship between the first tier and Oxfordshire Council.

Connected councils

Some of our parishes and towns are well established and have the right capacity and capability to do more, and some less so. Some are concerned that they will have assets and services 'dumped' on them. One Oxfordshire will embed deeper working with town and parish councils as a key partner to design and deliver Oxfordshire Council.

By working more closely with local councils, elected county councillors and officers can get early insights about local issues and can develop a deeper understanding of local priorities. We can also, together, act quickly to prevent problems from getting worse. Oxfordshire Council will be designed to listen – the insights from local councils are essential to this so we can together design and deliver innovative public services that connect with residents.

To do this, we will work with all parishes and towns within the new area committee arrangement to support them to participate, as much as they want to, in the success of their places. One Oxfordshire will ensure that town and parish councils have a clear, dedicated point of contact within our communities unit.

Local councils also play a critical role in shaping the future of their places. The new area committees will give them a chance to work together with neighbouring local councils, rather than competing against each other, when planning new housing developments and community programmes. Working together like this will help build a spirit of localism.

One Oxfordshire will ensure that assets and services can be devolved to a hyper-local level where it makes sense to do so. We will work more closely with Oxfordshire Association of Local Councils to share resources. This includes the design and delivery of a learning and development programme and creation of an advice hub for technical matters, such as websites and information governance.

Oxford and modern charter trustees

Oxford is a city in its own right with 166,034 residents. It has a dynamic economy with globally recognised universities. In 1974, Oxford's status was changed to a district council but was named Oxford City Council as it held the city status by royal charter.

The creation of Oxfordshire Council requires significant care and respect to ensure the city, and its identity and brand, is maintained for current and future generations.

Oxfordshire County Council | LGR proposal | 6. Our future operating framework

While the majority of the city is unparished, parts of it are served by four parish councils and a network of civic and neighbourhood organisations that embed the collective spirit of the city into social action.

One Oxfordshire will ensure that the city status of Oxford is not lost and will appoint charter trustees to hold civic responsibilities. The charter trustees would elect a lord mayor for Oxford on an annual basis. However, this role needs to be more modern and more purposeful beyond its current form.

Modern charter trustees must play a strong, visible and supported role in the new council. They need to work closely with future committee chairs and the council's cabinet to provide a point for community, ceremonial, inward investment and economic issues within the city.

These arrangements will ensure Oxfordshire Council can meet the needs of the city and be custodians of it for future generations.

While government has been clear that councils must think carefully about the establishment of new town and parish councils, Oxfordshire Council, together with the modern charter trustees and the existing Oxford parishes – Blackbird Leys; Risinghurst and Sandhills; Littlemore and Old Marston; neighbourhood forums and Oxford Civic Society – will continually engage on democracy and participation at a city level. If needed, One Oxfordshire will request a community governance review for any further parishes or a town council for Oxford.

"The charter will help shape how Oxfordshire councils work together in partnership to support better service delivery and outcomes, and to work together to ensure thriving local democracy across the county[64]."

6.4 Elected community representation

Council size

We currently have 288 councillors in total across all six Oxfordshire councils. The creation of a single unitary authority in Oxfordshire presents a rare opportunity to reshape local governance around the needs of residents and the realities of councillor workloads. With the consolidation of services into one authority, councillors will take on a broader portfolio of responsibilities. The size of the council must reflect this shift, ensuring that elected councillors can remain accessible, responsive and effective. And crucially, operate closer to communities at their heart through the development of area committees.

In coming to a view on the number of councillors for the new council, we have taken account of the Local Government Boundary Commission for England (LGBCE) guidance and had informal discussions with them.

We recognise, in full, the need to get as close as possible to the 'true' council size before a boundary review – which would be undertaken by the LGBCE in the first term of the new authority. However, as we have had a recent electoral review of Oxfordshire County Council, with new divisions elected to in May 2025, it is very challenging to achieve a fair and equal distribution of the electorate across the existing divisions until this boundary review takes place.

In the short-term, our preference is for 138 councillors representing 69 unitary wards, which would be fulfilled by the election of two councillors to each of the 69 county council divisions.

We believe it is better to accept a slightly larger council for the first term on the understanding that a boundary review will likely deliver a council represented by a little over 100 councillors at the following set of elections.

If the government was minded to ensure a council size of less than 138 for its first election, a council size of 119 is achievable, but not preferable, as some wards would only be served by one member with a larger portfolio of responsibilities. This sets out our initial thoughts only and we are committed to working with government, and with the support of LGBCE, to reach a firmer position.

This approach will guarantee continuity of service during the transition to a unitary authority and provides time to embed the new governance arrangements. It will allow the shadow authority to operate effectively from day one, with councillors able to engage with residents, manage casework and develop a greater understanding of the workload of the new council.

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Council size assessment for a single unitary authority in Oxfordshire[65]

No. councillors	Electorate (2029)	Electorate per councillor
69	581,560	8,428
108	581,560	5,385
119	581,560	4,887
138	581,560	4,214

Election cycles

Council	Electoral cycle
Oxfordshire County Council	All councillors, every four years
Cherwell District Council	By thirds
Oxford City Council	Half of all councillors, every two years
South Oxfordshire District Council	All councillors, every four years
Vale of White Horse District Council	All councillors, every four years
West Oxfordshire District Council	By thirds

The election cycle for the new authority will play a key role in shaping its effectiveness. Currently, Oxfordshire's councils operate on a mix of electoral cycles.

The creation of a single unitary council will streamline this process and become more cost-effective, moving to whole council elections every four years. This makes local government easier for residents to understand, lowers administrative costs and enables councillors to focus on long-term planning and delivery rather than short-term issues.

To support the delivery of One Oxfordshire and to transition to a newly designed council, we are requesting continuing authority status for Oxfordshire County Council. We believe this offers the quickest, most cost effective and safest route to a safe, legal and confident council, which is ready to transform from day one.

This is especially relevant to our devolution ambitions. Managing both reorganisation and devolution programmes in an integrated way from a single point, allows for clarity of direction and control. These are highly interdependent, high risk change programmes central to the delivery of the government's policy objectives. Continuing authority status is vital to achieve these objectives, allowing for a seamless transition for residents and stakeholders.

Parsons Street, Banbury

7. Transition plan and delivery

7.1 Overall approach

Who will deliver?

The county council already delivers services on a countywide footprint, providing 85 per cent of local government services by expenditure in Oxfordshire. We take our responsibility in this space seriously as we move through local government reorganisation. As such, we wish to be the continuing authority to lead and deliver the transition to a new and ambitious council. We will not remain static in this space but deliver transformation at pace and in partnership. Oxfordshire Council will be a new council.

We have the experience, financial resilience, "good" services and partnerships to lead One Oxfordshire. We will be able to retain the strengths of these services and build from the firm foundations they provide, deepening integration and operating at scale.

One Oxfordshire is the only proposal that removes the risk of disaggregation and fragmentation of services for Oxfordshire residents, allowing high quality service delivery to be prioritised and further improvements to be made.

One Oxfordshire offers undeniable financial resilience to do this. We will be able to absorb and withstand market and infrastructure cost fluctuations better than smaller unitary authorities, enabling the confident and continued delivery of good services, growth and investment.

The county council also has an experienced and flexible workforce, one that already operates locally, countywide, regionally and nationally. As well as critical and larger service delivery, we provide essential wraparound local services together with partners, such as personalised care, public health and schools. We have also operated within a joined up strategic partnership with Cherwell District Council.

This direct experience, knowledge and understanding of local services will be used for learning and developing a **new unified council** that can deliver both for the whole of Oxfordshire and at a hyperlocal level.

Acting as a continuing authority will provide the strongest, simplest route to delivering One Oxfordshire while maintaining service quality (especially for critical services) and mitigate system wide risk through enhanced controls and visibility.

We will build on firm foundations, using both the county council and district councils' strong service track record to successfully transition to Oxfordshire Council. We will also ensure we take full advantage of the opportunity local government reorganisation presents to transform our collective service offer for residents and together create a new council.

Our focus will be on a safe, legal and confident transition to vesting day that brings all councils across Oxfordshire together to create Oxfordshire Council.

Local government reorganisation and devolution are complex and interdependent programmes of change to deliver, especially against the backdrop of wider policy reforms across critical services. It is fully understood that an effective and collaborative set of change management programmes is essential to the successful launch of the new council and to realising the benefits outlined in this proposal.

Where needed, independent assurance will provide external scrutiny ensuring delivery remains on track and risks are identified and addressed early. By challenging assumptions and validating progress, independent assurance strengthens transparency and will build confidence among our stakeholders. This approach also supports continuous improvement and helps safeguard service continuity.

We fully recognise the scale and complexity of the challenge – delivering a fundamental transformation while maintaining high quality, uninterrupted services for residents across Oxfordshire.

Oxfordshire County Council | LGR proposal | 7. Transition plan and delivery

Resource

We will build on the already established programme governance for both local government reorganisation and devolution – scaling as appropriate following the government's 'minded to' decision. We have already appointed a programme director for local government reorganisation and a programme director for devolution demonstrating our seriousness to move at pace and with certainty towards creating a new future for Oxfordshire.

We expect to scale up existing in-house expertise, capability and capacity for implementation, complementing this with use of a delivery partner to get to vesting day with maximum levels of certainty. We are keen to work collaboratively with district and city colleagues, change networks and structures, establishing joint programme and project management arrangements as soon as possible.

The county council has already developed an internal network of local government reorganisation and devolution ambassadors across its services. This will ensure a movement of change across the county council to understand and deliver change at all levels. We expect to replicate this across all councils so everyone is involved in the design and delivery of the new council.

Our approach will also be informed by learning from, and the experiences of, other newly established unitary councils, drawing on both best practice and lessons learned to shape a robust and resilient transition and change programme.

We are keen to work collaboratively with district and city colleagues, change networks and structures, establishing joint programme and project management arrangements as soon as possible.

Implementation framework

To successfully transition, we will adopt a structured yet adaptive framework that lays a solid foundation for transformation. This practical framework is informed by recent government guidance, sector expertise and best practices from ongoing local government reorganisation experiences in England.

By embedding these principles from the outset, Oxfordshire can create a resilient, responsive, and future-ready council capable of delivering better outcomes for residents, businesses, employees and partners.

The framework will:

- Balance strategic oversight to guide long-term vision and effective decision making.
- Ensure operational continuity to safeguard critical services.
- Have governance alignment to ensure clarity and accountability throughout the change.
- Include comprehensive stakeholder management and engagement practices to build trust and consensus.

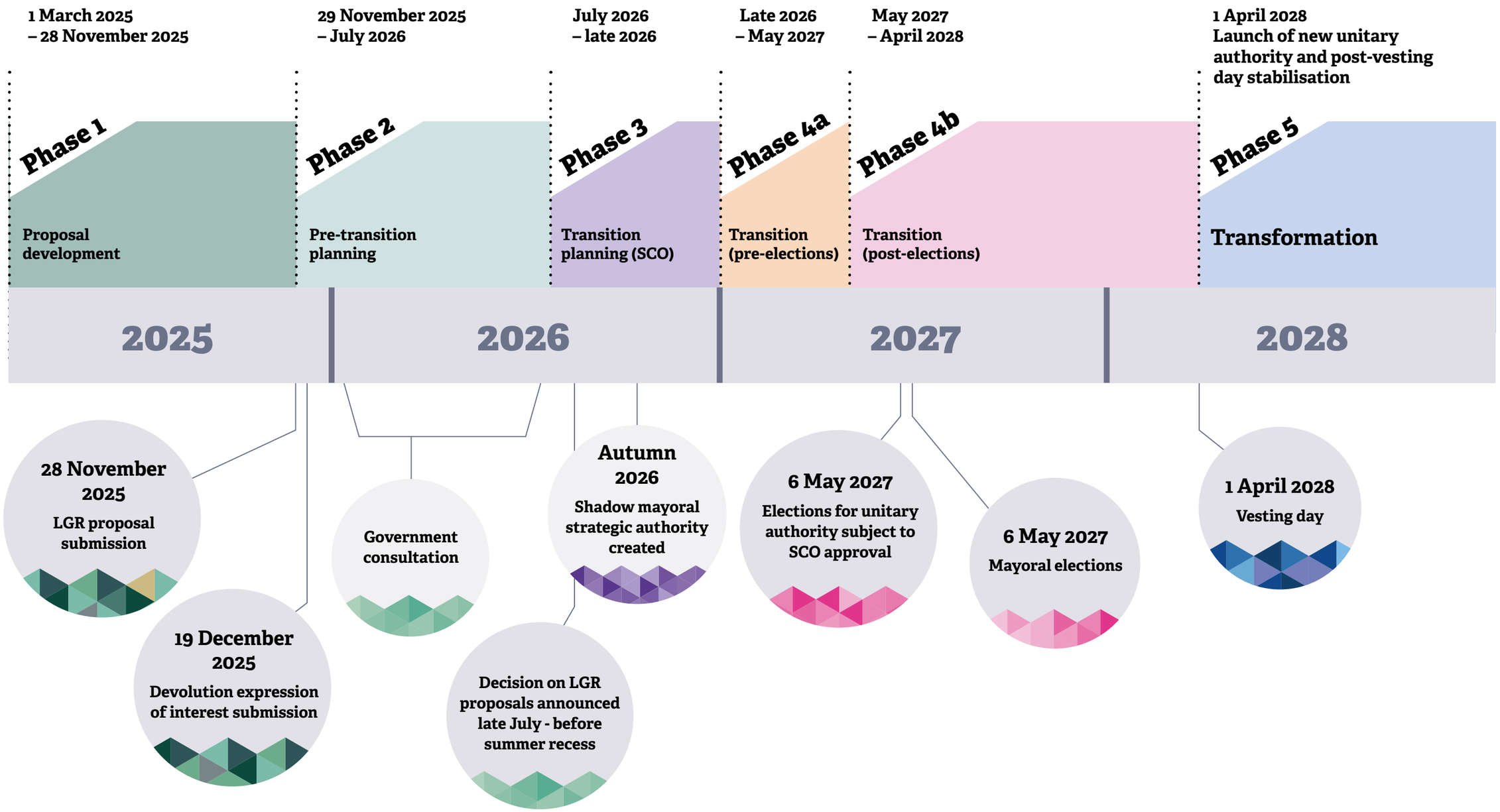
We will use the following implementation framework that illustrates four key pillars of activity for effective change:

Phases of change	Cross-cutting workstreams	Service level change	Managing risk and realising benefits
Phase 1 Proposal development	Vision and culture	Design subject matter expert led	Governance and decision making
Phase 2 Pre-transition planning	Organisational design	Tailoring consolidation by service requirements	Dedicated programme management office
Phase 3 Transition planning (structural changes order—SCO)	Service delivery models	Building on existing competence	Independent assurance
Phase 4a Transition (pre-elections)	People and HR	Effective governance	Risk management framework
Phase 4b Transition (post-elections)	Processes	Stakeholder communication and engagement	
Phase 5 Transformation	Digital, data and technology		
	Finance and commercial		
	Property and assets		
	Communication and engagement		
	Legal and governance		

Oxfordshire County Council | LGR proposal | 7. Transition plan and delivery

7.2 Transition phases

Each phase of transition will be supported by a clear and robust governance including programme boards, gateway reviews and reporting. This means we have the ability to scale up or down as required throughout the programme and be independently assured as needed. This robustness will enable us to make the best use of our resources throughout the programme and ultimately realise the benefits of this proposal. The high level timetable for the phases of change is shown below.



Phase 1 – Proposal development

Up to submission, 28 November 2025

During this phase, already underway, we have taken the time to understand the course of transition and transformation and started detailed mapping for the required phases.

We are using the insight, relationships and networks formed during our comprehensive stakeholder engagement that informed this proposal to foster further cooperation and engagement across Oxfordshire for all phases.

Collaboration with city and district council chief executives and officers has been good to date but requires strengthening to position us well for continued success in the future.

Phase 2 – Pre-transition planning

December 2025 to July 2026

Councils will agree the principles for working in a collaborative, open and transparent way ensuring successful continuation of services during transition. These principles will apply to all employees involved in any work associated with local government reorganisation and devolution.

The pre-transition planning phase will provide an opportunity to get ahead – understanding risks to a greater extent, exploring new ways of working / pathways with partners in time for the government's decision. This work will be done in an outcome agnostic way together with city and district colleagues.

Specifically, further data collection, baselining and the mapping of deliverables for vesting day will take place in areas including finance, staffing establishment, contracts, IT systems, estates and the wider service portfolio of our district councils.

Our focus will be on readiness and enabling a smooth shift into the transition planning phase by understanding the opportunities, risks and mitigations.

A programme and project management structure with a dedicated programme management office (PMO) will be designed and agreed. It will have the capacity and capability to lead and manage the interdependent programmes for reorganisation and devolution.

This structure will hold responsibility for overseeing and driving the future change,

providing essential assurance across both programmes. This team will be built from the talent that exists across all Oxfordshire councils ensuring the success of both programmes from day one and beyond. It will consist of change and transformation experts, project, programme managers, PMO specialists and business analysts.

Subject matter experts provide crucial institutional knowledge and expertise and will form an integral part of the design of the programme and project management structure. Colleagues seconded into the PMO or project teams will be backfilled where necessary, with a likely need for external capacity and recruitment throughout the lifecycle of the programme. Workstreams and governance arrangements will be identified and designed.

Each workstream will have a clear remit and defined lead with teams drawn from county and district councils. These workstreams will deliver essential outputs, including plans, new systems and transitional arrangements to ensure Oxfordshire Council's effective launch and ongoing transformation.

Work within all existing authorities will be reviewed to identify activities that can be paused or stopped, enabling existing resource redeployment. Additional technical capacity and a delivery partner may be required during the various elements of the programme. The implementation costs will be met through internal resources.

The work covered in this phase will conclude with the development of a transition plan.

Phase 3 – transition planning

Government decision to structural changes order expected to be end 2026

The focus in this phase will be on working with the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government to shape the structural changes order (SCO), establish parameters for the transition and confirm our desire to have continuing authority status. We will continue to work with partners on the transition plan, the design and resourcing of the PMO and its governance.

Once we know the government's decision, we will begin the process of establishing an Implementation Executive to govern the transition and make the necessary decisions associated with transition to a future council. The full membership of that committee will be determined by the SCO.

We will also establish a time limited independent Oxfordshire Advisory Board made up of key stakeholders, including representatives from businesses, civic, voluntary and community organisations and educational institutions. This will provide critical friend challenge to the Implementation Executive on the design and implementation of the new council.

This maintains continuity while addressing potential risks, particularly for partners, and activates improvement opportunities. This phase will ensure clarity on change leadership so we can move safely and at pace, laying the foundations for standing up workstreams towards the transition phase.

Phase 4a – Transition (pre-elections)

Structural changes order to elections May 2027

We will work closely with the Implementation Executive mandated by the SCO, who will be integral in setting our ambitions for vesting day and beyond. It will direct the core activities, including spending controls, laying foundations for new strategies, plans and policies, and communicating to colleagues and residents.

During this phase, we will also provide leadership in policy formulation, strategic planning and business case development to ensure the range of opportunities offered by our proposal are fully realised by the new council.

We will stand up a number of workstreams to design, plan and deliver the new arrangements. They will prioritise service continuity to ensure effective delivery of services and maintain excellent performance.

Workstreams will be split into two broad categories, corporate (cross cutting) workstreams and service specific workstreams.

Phase 4b – Transition (post-elections)

2027 election – Day prior to vesting day 2028

The planning work started in previous phases will continue but the elections will now provide an opportunity for key decisions to be taken, for example, around appointing senior officers, agreeing strategies and budgets. These will be identified, planned and delivered from within the workstreams outlined in phase 4a.

New member governance will support a smooth transition towards a safe, legal and confident vesting day and provide a clear future vision for Oxfordshire Council. The key planning strategies perfected in the previous phases will be adopted by the future authority.

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Phase 5 – Transformation

Vesting day onwards

On vesting day, Oxfordshire Council will be formally established through a systematic programme, embedding new services, transforming services and developing long-term strategies to support continuity and resilience, and aligning to the new operating framework.

IT systems and workforce structures will build on existing strengths, supporting continued service delivery and realising the opportunities offered by establishing a single authority. Empowering our communities, promoting a customer-focused approach, driving service effectiveness and efficiency through digital and other forms of innovation, and developing efficient support service arrangements will help drive radical change at pace while protecting delivery of frontline services.

7.3 Workstreams

Cross cutting workstreams

The successful transition to Oxfordshire Council will depend on the coordinated delivery of a wide range of cross-cutting and enabling workstreams. These workstreams represent the core building blocks of the new organisation and must be carefully scoped, sequenced and integrated to ensure a coherent, resilient and future-ready transformation.

Each workstream is interdependent and must be managed in alignment with the overall programme roadmap.

The approach will be to treat these workstreams as strategic enablers of change, ensuring that transition and subsequent transformation is not only technically sound but also culturally embedded and operationally sustainable.

The workstreams on the following pages will guide how services are designed and delivered, how people and systems interact and how the new council defines its identity and purpose.

Vision and culture

Embedding a new unified culture and strong leadership ethos will be critical to shaping the identity and effectiveness of the new council.

Our focus:

- **Values and behaviours:** Co-creating shared organisational values that reflect the vision of Oxfordshire Council.
- **Cultural integration:** Building on the legacy, strengths and identities of the organisations coming together, while building a cohesive and inclusive culture.
- **Bottom-up engagement:** Empowering our employees to shape the new culture through dialogue, involvement and ownership.
- **Leadership development:** Equipping our leaders at all levels to inspire, guide and support teams through the changes.

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Organisational design

The organisational structure will be designed to support both the immediate needs of transition and the long-term ambitions of the new council.

The creation of a new council requires the design of a fit for purpose operating model along with an organisational design and structure that supports strategic leadership, operational delivery and democratic accountability.

Our focus:

- **Leadership and governance model:** Defining and filling senior roles (as required) and establish governance structures to lead and oversee the new council.
- **Neighbourhood governance:** Establishing the new council's democratic framework and neighbourhood governance ambitions.
- **Functional alignment:** Grouping services into coherent directorates or portfolios based on strategic priorities and operational synergies.
- **Spans of control:** Establishing clear lines of accountability, decision making authority and reporting relationships.

Service delivery models

Service delivery models will be developed iteratively, with a focus on continuity, quality and innovation. Our initial focus will be on safe, legal and confident transfer of services for vesting day, with transformation taking place on day one and beyond.

Each service area will require a tailored delivery model that reflects its statutory obligations, operational complexity and community impact.

Our focus:

- **Map existing services:** Understanding delivery arrangements across current councils.
- **Assess integration opportunities:** Identifying where services can be aggregated or streamlined.
- **Design future state models:** Developing high level service blueprints that define scope, delivery channels and performance expectations.

People and human resources

The transition will significantly shape the workforce and organisational culture; a motivated, skilled and unified team is essential to delivering the vision of the new council.

Our focus:

- **Pay and reward:** Ensuring employees are paid correctly on day one.
- **Workforce planning:** Identifying staffing requirements, skills gaps and recruitment needs.
- **TUPE and employment law compliance:** Managing employee transfers in accordance with legal obligations.
- **Organisational development:** Supporting employees through change with training, coaching and engagement.
- **Employee engagement:** Creating channels for employees feedback, involvement and recognition.

Processes

Process design and optimisation are critical to ensuring that the new council operates efficiently and consistently.

Efficient processes will underpin service delivery, financial management and customer experience. Our aim will be to minimise disruption to customer experience on vesting day.

Our focus:

- **Process mapping and harmonisation:** Identifying and aligning key business processes across legacy councils.
- **Standard operating procedures (SOPs):** Developing SOPs for core functions to ensure consistency and compliance.
- **Workflow automation:** Exploring opportunities to automate routine tasks and improve productivity.
- **Process ownership and governance:** Assigning responsibility for process design, maintenance and improvement.

Digital, data and technology

Digital infrastructure and data governance are key to the success of the new council.

Digital transformation will be a key enabler of efficiency, transparency and innovation.

Our focus:

- **Systems integration:** Consolidating IT platforms, applications and infrastructure to support unified operations.
- **Information management:** Designing and implementing a new unified information governance compliance structure and rolling out appropriate training.
- **Data migration and quality:** Ensuring accurate, secure and compliant transfer of data from legacy systems.
- **Digital service delivery:** Enabling online access to services and information for residents and employees.
- **Cybersecurity and resilience:** Implementing robust security protocols and disaster recovery plans.
- **Technology strategy:** Developing a digital roadmap aligned with organisational goals and resident needs.

Finance and commercial

Financial integrity and commercial agility are vital to long-term sustainability, with planning closely aligned to service priorities, risk management and transformation goals.

Our focus:

- **Budget consolidation:** Merging financial plans, reserves and liabilities across councils, establishing financial controls and reporting.
- **One financial platform:** Establishing a common financial system for budgeting, monitoring and auditing.
- **Commercial strategy:** Reviewing contracts, partnerships and income-generating opportunities.
- **Procurement frameworks:** Designing compliant and efficient procurement processes.
- **Funding and investment planning:** Identifying capital requirements and funding sources for transformation.
- **Banking and debtors management:** Establish unified banking arrangements and develop a strategy for managing legacy and future debtors.
- **Purchase to pay:** Establish unified purchase to pay systems and processes.

Property and assets

The new council will inherit a diverse portfolio of physical and digital assets. Effective asset management will support service delivery, financial sustainability and community engagement.

Our focus:

- **Asset inventory and valuation:** Cataloguing and assessing the value and condition of assets.
- **Ownership and transfer arrangements:** Managing the legal and operational aspects of asset transfer.
- **Estate strategy:** Developing a service focused strategy for office space, depots, community facilities and other assets.
- **Asset optimisation:** Identifying opportunities to rationalise, repurpose or divest assets.
- **Facilities management:** Ensuring continuity of maintenance, security and health and safety compliance.

Communication and engagement

The transition to the new council will require comprehensive programmes of communication and engagement both internally and externally.

Our focus:

- **Transition communications:** Managing communications and engagement with residents, employees and stakeholders, preparing them for change.
- **Employee and councillor communication and engagement:** Managing communication with employees and elected councillors from day one, ensuring effective engagement across the new council.
- **Resident and stakeholder communication and engagement:** Managing communication with residents, and partners from day one, presenting one coherent council to the public and keeping stakeholders informed and involved.
- **Media management:** Developing a clear, coordinated and consistent media management approach.
- **Branding:** Developing a single brand identity that supports the new culture and community engagement.

Oxfordshire County Council | LGR proposal | 7. Transition plan and delivery

Legal and governance

The establishment of the legal and governance framework for the new unitary authority is crucial to ensure a smooth and compliant transition from the predecessor councils.

Our focus:

- **Compliance:** Ensuring the development of all statutory compliance requirements for the new authority.
- **Decision making structures:** Agree the new authority's constitution to define governance and decision making structures.
- **Company structures:** Ensuring companies owned and operated by legacy councils are legally transferred and compliant.
- **Support other workstreams:** Legal will play a key role across finance and commercial workstreams, due diligence, supporting the HR and people workstream, information governance, procurement activities and advisory and assurance for the programme.
- **Effective decision making:** Support effective decision-making, new committee structures and delegation schemes.
- **Internal audit and counter fraud:** Establish a single operating model for internal audit and counter fraud services, including an internal audit plan and unified counter fraud strategy.

Service specific workstreams

Transitioning district council services to Oxfordshire Council must be managed carefully to avoid resident disruption and maintain service quality. Continuing authority status will be a key enabler for that. Effective implementation should prioritise positive outcomes for residents.

Service specific workstreams will be required to ensure continuity and integration of frontline services. These workstreams will include, but are not limited to, waste; street scene and highways; regulatory services; housing; planning and economic development; and communities. These will be in addition to workstreams for services such as adult and children's social care; public health; libraries; culture and museums.

Not all services will require the same approach to transition. The council recognises that some services, particularly those involving vulnerable populations or statutory responsibilities, carry higher risks and complexities. As such, our implementation strategy will take into account service type, operational dependencies, level of aggregation required and risk exposure.

The migration process will not be uniform. It will vary depending on the nature of the service, the capacity of existing delivery partners and the needs of local communities. For this reason, we expect to work with stakeholders to define the model and process for understanding the kinds of transitions and transformations different services will undergo. Lessons learned internally and through external networks will assist in the design and implementation of new service delivery models.

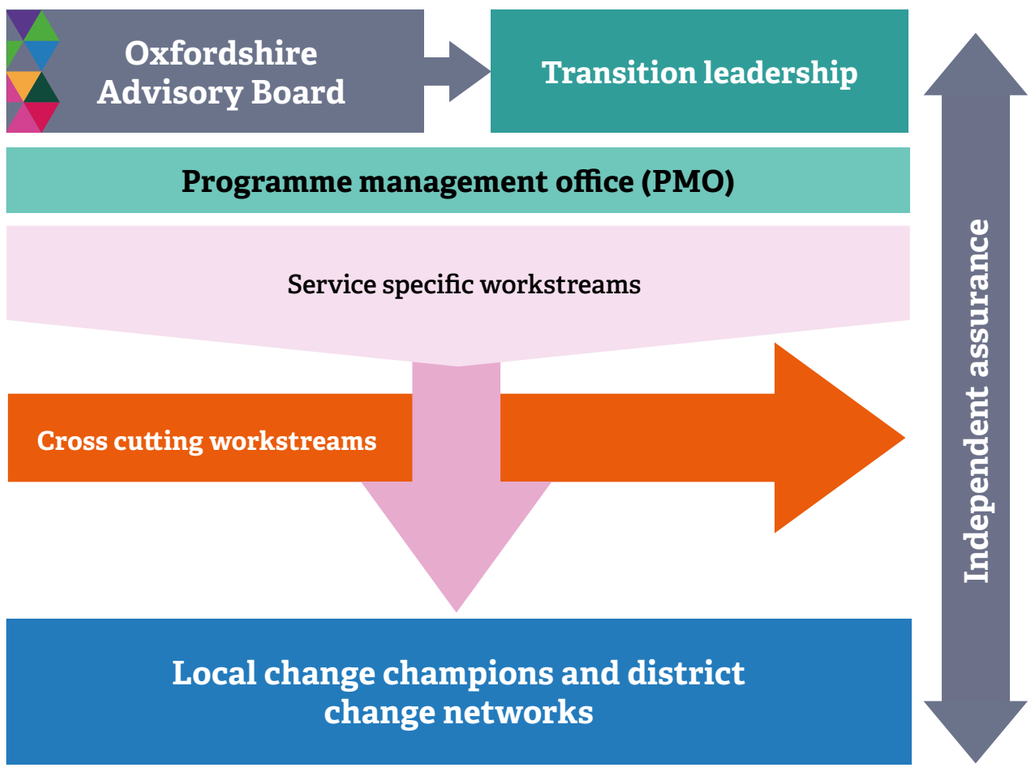
Four key considerations are essential for a successful transition:

1. Teams within services requiring consolidation will lead the design, planning and change implementation, supported by the wider programme team, governance structure and PMO. This ensures the right skills and capabilities are in place, recognising that those with the most knowledge and experience are best placed to shape the future operating model.

2. The concept of "migrating to the most competent platform" is central. This concept recognises that today, services are delivered by multiple authorities with differing levels of resource, capability, maturity and resilience. In some areas, excellence already exists and can be scaled. In others, fragmentation has led to duplication, confusion for residents and avoidable costs. The transformation process will seek to both consolidate and elevate – building on strengths, addressing weaknesses and designing services that are fit for the future.

3. Effective governance boards will provide robust challenge and oversight, aided by additional expertise as needed.

4. Clear resident and stakeholder engagement with those that might or will be affected is crucial.



7.4 Managing risk and realising benefits

Delivering a successful transition to Oxfordshire Council requires a balanced and proactive approach to managing risk while ensuring the realisation of long-term benefits and value.

While the scale and complexity of change present inherent challenges, robust risk management and disciplined tracking will ensure the One Oxfordshire programme remains resilient, focused and capable of delivering its expected benefits.

We will apply the principles of effective risk management to support the transition and transformation. This approach follows the county council's risk management framework, which reviews risks at a corporate, directorate and service level while also ensuring that cross-cutting risks are captured to ensure appropriate assessment, mitigation, review and scrutiny.

Risk management framework

A robust risk management framework will be adopted to support the safe and effective delivery of the transition to Oxfordshire Council. This framework will include clear escalation protocols to ensure that risks are identified early, assessed consistently and mitigated proactively across all programme phases. It will be embedded within the PMO and aligned with governance structures to enable timely decision making and accountability.

Ongoing liaison with external regulators and service commissioners will be maintained to ensure statutory obligations are met and service quality standards upheld. Regular liaison will also take place with external audit. This approach will further help safeguard continuity, ensure public value and build confidence in the transition process.

Oxfordshire County Council | LGR proposal | 7. Transition plan and delivery

Risk theme	Risk area	Mitigations
Financial uncertainty	While we have estimated the implementation costs for reorganisation in Oxfordshire there is a level of uncertainty in the detail of what needs to be delivered, meaning this may be insufficient. Additionally, key areas of concern for transition include: **1.** The risk of councils running down reserves or accruing additional debt beyond existing medium-term strategies. **2.** The impact of following the structural changes order, which may result in additional investment or delay realisation of savings opportunities. **3.** The requirement to continue business as usual, including securing sustainable savings alongside preparing for the transition to the new unitary council.	▶ Develop robust financial plans and conduct independent cost-benefit analysis. ▶ One Oxfordshire will offer sufficient scale to manage the implementation and financial risk effectively and secure necessary upfront investment in people and resources. ▶ Strong governance and control mechanisms. ▶ Independent assurance and scrutiny. ▶ Close monitoring of costs will be conducted throughout the entire plan, with any escalation addressed promptly.
The loss of service continuity	Disruption to public services during transition would affect resident confidence and satisfaction.	▶ Phased implementation, clear service continuity plans and early and effective collaboration and resourcing will help mitigate this risk.
Data and systems integration	Misalignment of IT systems and data migration across merging councils.	▶ Conduct early application and data audits given scale; invest in integration platforms; ensure data governance and security.
Governance complexity and decision making	Over the course of the reorganisation there will be changes to decision making powers, roles and responsibilities. If there is a lack of clarity on the leadership and decision making arrangements during the transition process this may delay implementation activities and increase costs. Without due care there could be risk to current service delivery and delays to the benefits of implementing One Oxfordshire.	▶ Robust governance needs to be established early in pre-transition, be clear, effective and agreed in collaboration. It will need to adapt throughout the process as we move between phases, and we have planned ‘pause and reflect’ moments to assess what is working well and what needs to change for the next phase. ▶ Establish clear governance structures; appoint and involve new leaders early, ensure transparency.

Oxfordshire County Council | LGR proposal | 7. Transition plan and delivery

Risk theme	Risk area	Mitigations
Capacity, capability and morale	Limited internal capacity and capability to manage transformation alongside business as usual activities could lead to employee morale and retention issues. If change is not managed effectively and the workforce not sufficiently engaged, this may damage employee morale, disrupt services and limit retention of the skills and roles for the new organisations.	▶ Early engagement of the workforce across all existing organisations will enable colleagues to be involved in informing and co-designing our future arrangements from the beginning. While recognising our differences, it is critical that all our people contribute to shaping the purpose, identity and culture of the new organisation. ▶ Dedicated programme teams and PMO; skills matrix; external support; backfill key roles; and harmonise HR policies.
Legal and contractual issues	Existing contracts may not align with new structures. Existing companies may not align with new structures.	▶ Legal and procurement will conduct a review of contracts and companies across all councils. Decisions will be made on renegotiation / novation strategies and how to incorporate and scale / 'wind up' companies.
Scale and complexity	Local government reorganisation is a significant change in any setting. In addition, we hope to implement devolution through a mayoral strategic authority, elections for which will take place in May 2027. District elections in 2026 will create additional uncertainty in the year before unitary elections. There will be a significant amount of change in a relatively short period of time.	▶ Government to assign Oxfordshire County Council as the continuing authority. Robust governance and programme management will ensure the right skills and capabilities are in place across the current local authorities.
Feeling of county council take over	Continuing authority status can foster a feeling of 'take over' for district councils.	▶ In the early transition phases, engagement with chief executives to agree principles of collaborative working will be vital. This will enable inclusive PMO structures to be built and encourage effective communication and engagement for all employees early and throughout the programme.
Performance, procurement and risk management	There will be a significant amount of work to standardise performance management practices, procurement and contract management capabilities that can deliver the larger scale and complex programme.	▶ Establishing a robust performance management framework linked to a refreshed culture and desired outcomes of One Oxfordshire. ▶ Upgrading procurement and contract management capabilities to suit the larger scale and complexity.

Oxfordshire County Council | LGR proposal | 7. Transition plan and delivery

Risk theme	Risk area	Mitigations
Aggregation	While aggregation aims to streamline service delivery and improve efficiency, its implementation introduces several significant challenges such as integration of practice methods; systems and processes; cultural and organisational alignment; governance and representation; service harmonisation; financial reconciliation; and strategic planning and identity.	▶ Aggregation demands strategic oversight, strong leadership, careful planning and robust, experienced change and programme management to overcome the challenges. ▶ This will ensure not only effective change put will safeguard existing services throughout the transition.
Governance and internal control	Reduced governance and weakened internal control frameworks during the transition to Oxfordshire Council may result in increased errors, misstatements, or heightened opportunities for fraud. This risk is particularly acute as legacy processes are replaced, new systems are embedded and roles and responsibilities shift.	▶ Develop and implement a dedicated internal audit plan for the transition, ensuring regular and targeted reviews of key control areas throughout the change process. ▶ Establish a dedicated counter fraud plan to proactively identify, assess and respond to fraud risks, including employees training, enhanced reporting channels and real-time monitoring. ▶ Maintain clear documentation of new processes and controls, with robust oversight from senior leadership and the PMO. ▶ Ensure early engagement with internal audit and counter fraud teams in the design and rollout of new systems and procedures.

Conclusion

Oxfordshire's story has always been one of ambition and innovation. We now have the chance to write its next chapter – one defined by unity, resilience and shared prosperity. The case for One Oxfordshire is clear and compelling; it is grounded in evidence and driven by ambition. It will enable us not only to reform local government but unlock the full potential of our people and places, setting a new standard for what a county can achieve.

Oxfordshire stands at a pivotal moment: our county's strengths – our world-class universities, thriving innovation clusters and vibrant communities – risk being held back by fragmented governance, rising demand for services, high housing costs and the need for strategic infrastructure.

This proposal sets out a robust, deliverable plan for a single, unified council that will unlock £163 million in net savings by year five, deliver the strongest financial resilience, and protect and enhance the services our residents rely on. It will enable Oxfordshire to plan and invest at scale, drive inclusive economic growth and ensure that every community benefits from a fairer, simpler and more effective system.

One Oxfordshire is not just about structural change; it's about creating the conditions for people and places to thrive. It's about giving communities a stronger voice, protecting our most vulnerable, supporting our businesses, and building a council that is financially resilient and fit for the future.

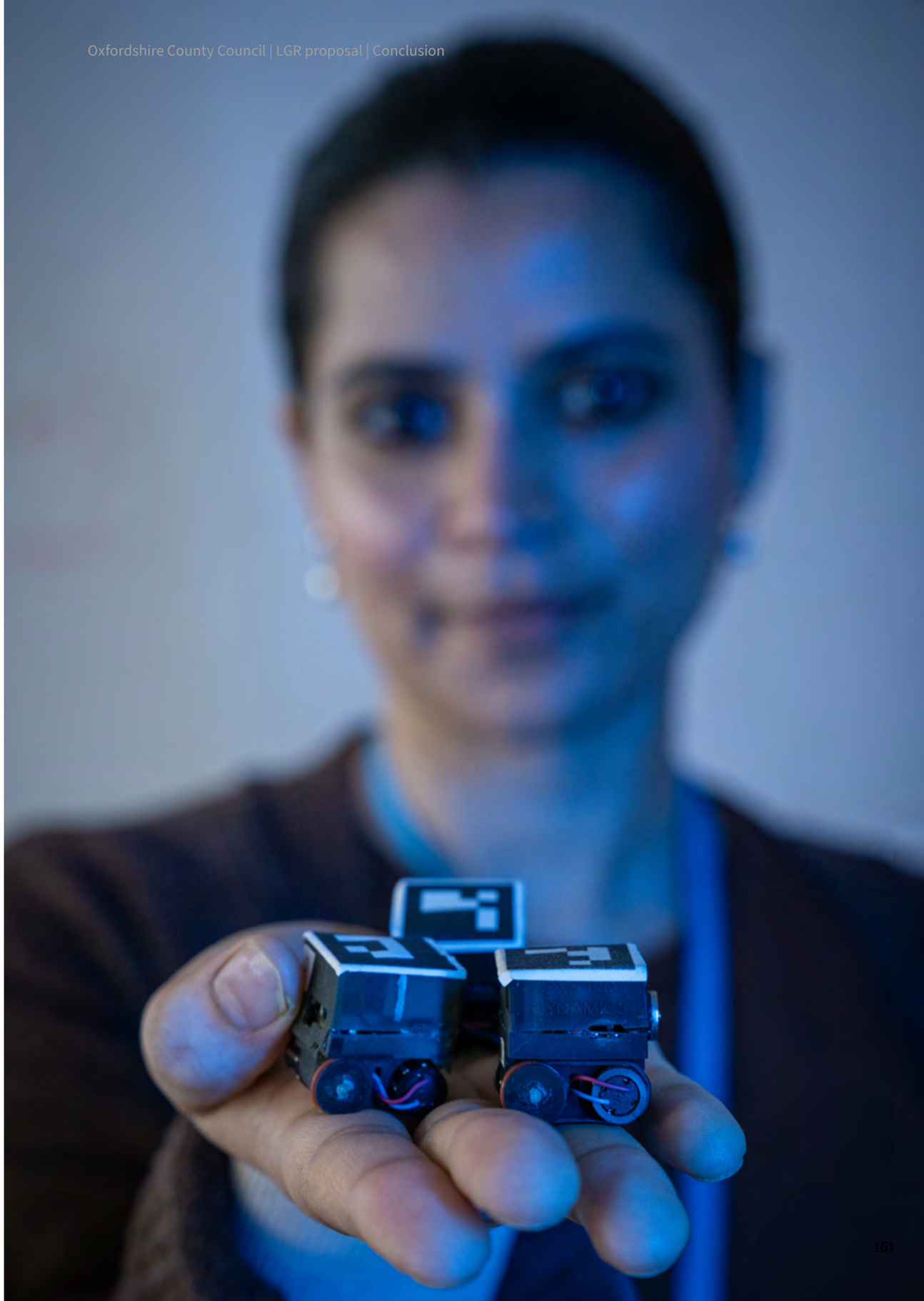
With continuing authority status, we can move to that new future quickly, cost effectively and without unnecessary risk – ready to lead transformation on day one alongside seizing the benefits of devolution through a mayoral strategic authority across the Thames Valley.

One Oxfordshire is a model that meets and exceeds the criteria for reform, delivers value for money and sets a new standard for local government. It will ensure that Oxfordshire remains a beacon of excellence, opportunity and prosperity for generations to come.

Stronger, simpler services.

Let's build one Oxfordshire Council.

Oxfordshire County Council | LGR proposal | Conclusion



Criteria per chapter	Chapter
1 – Covers the whole area concerned	2
1a – A sensible economic area, with appropriate tax basis, which does not create undue advantage or disadvantage for part of the area	2, 3
1b – A sensible geography which will help to increase housing supply and meet local needs	2, 5
1c – Robust evidence and analysis, including estimated costs and benefits	2, 3, 4, 5
1d – Describes single tier structures and how these will achieve outcomes described	5, 6
2 – The right size to achieve efficiencies, improve capacity and withstand financial shocks	2, 3
2a – Has a population of 500,000 or more	2
2b – Why a proposal for a population less than 500,000 is appropriate	n/a
2c – Financial efficiencies identified, getting value for money for taxpayer	3
2d – Managing transition costs	3, 7
2e – Councils in best value intervention / exceptional financial support demonstrate reorganisation will put on firmer footing	n/a
2f – Council debt will not be written off as part of reorganisation	3
3 – Prioritising delivery of high quality and sustainable services	3, 4, 5, 6
3a – New structures will improve service delivery, avoiding fragmentation	4, 5, 6, 7
3b – Opportunities to deliver service reform, leading to better value for money	3, 5, 6
3c – Considers impacts for crucial services and wider public services	5
4 – Councils worked together to meet local needs, informed by local views	4, 5
4a – Local meaningful and constructive engagement undertaken	4

Criteria per chapter	Chapter
4b – Considers issues of local identity and cultural and historic importance	2
4c – Evidence of local engagement, explanation of views and how concerns will be addressed	4
5 – New unitary structures support devolution arrangements	6, 7
5a – Supported by existing CA/CCA/mayor	n/a
5b – How devolution will be unlocked	6, 7
5c – Sensible population size ratios between local and strategic authorities and LGR and devolution have compatible timelines	6, 7
6 – New structures enable stronger community engagement and neighbourhood empowerment	6
6a – Plans to engage communities	6
6b – Arrangements in place will enable strong community engagement	6
Boundary changes a – existing district areas used as building blocks	2
Boundary changes b – financial justification for changes in boundaries	n/a
Engagement a – collaborative working and info sharing across area local leaders	3, 4
Engagement b – commissioners appointed for Best Value Intervention input	n/a
Engagement c – stakeholders including members, residents, workforce and businesses engaged	4, 7
Engagement d – engagement informs proposals and builds shared understanding of improvements to delivery	4
Engagement e – views integrated from ICB, police, fire and rescue, local higher education and voluntary and third sector	4
Engagement f – forms a separate process from devolution	6

Footnotes

2: The case for an Oxfordshire footprint

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30. OxLEP (now Enterprise Oxfordshire) – Oxfordshire Strategic Economic Plan, page 8 (December 2023)
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34. Office for National Statistics – Regional gross domestic product: local authorities (April 2025)

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6. Our future operating framework

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OXFORDSHIRE
LOCAL GOVERNMENT REORGANISATION
Three Unitary Authorities Proposal

Empowering People, Growing Prosperity, Building Communities

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1 Foreword

Local government reform is not simply a matter of administrative change — it is an opportunity to reshape how we deliver for our communities for generations to come.

Across Oxfordshire and West Berkshire, our councils have a proud record of service, partnership, and local leadership. Yet we face challenges that demand bold thinking and collaborative action: a housing crisis decades in the making, rising demand for care and support, growing pressures on local infrastructure, and an economy whose full potential remains constrained by outdated structures and boundaries.

Our proposal for the creation of three new unitary authorities represents a once-in-a-generation opportunity to design a system of local government that is simpler, more effective, accountable, and financially sustainable — and above all, close to the people it serves. It sets out a clear, evidence-based vision for councils that are capable of tackling the big issues of today while preparing for the opportunities of tomorrow.

At its heart, this proposal is rooted in place — in the distinct identities, strengths and ambitions of our communities. The creation of Greater Oxford, Northern Oxfordshire, and Ridgeway Councils will align decision making with the geography of people's lives and the economic realities of our region.

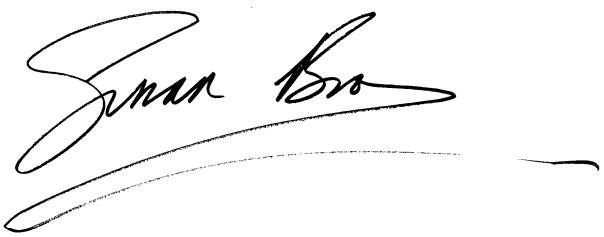
Each will be responsible for all council services in their area and empowered to deliver better outcomes for residents and businesses alike. Together, they will form the foundations of a modern, connected region — one that works in partnership through a Mayoral Strategic Authority to drive growth, investment and innovation across the wider region.

This is not simply about doing things differently; it is about doing them better. By consolidating seven councils into three, we can unlock over £48 million in annual efficiencies and reinvest in front-line services designed around local needs. In doing so, we will finally be able to tackle Oxford's housing crisis and deliver the homes we need. It will unlock Oxfordshire's full economic potential — contributing an estimated £170 billion to the national economy while ensuring that the benefits of growth are felt locally, through new jobs, skills, and investment opportunities for residents and businesses alike. Just as importantly, these reforms will ensure that decisions are taken locally, by people who understand their communities and are accountable to them.

This is a plan not just for more efficient local government, but for stronger, fairer, and more forward-looking councils that deliver the homes, jobs, and services our people deserve.

The proposals set out in this document have been shaped through extensive engagement with residents, businesses, and partners. Their message has been clear: people want councils that are closer, more responsive, and more ambitious for their places. The three-unitary model delivers on that vision — empowering people, growing prosperity, and building communities that can thrive long into the future.

This proposal marks the next step in that journey. It presents a compelling, evidence-based case for change — one that will create councils fit for the challenges and opportunities of the twenty-first century, and for the generations to come.



Councillor Susan Brown
Leader, Oxford City Council

2 Executive Summary

The reorganisation of local government is a once-in-a-generation opportunity to deliver more effective, accountable, and financially sustainable local governance. More than that, it's a chance to design councils capable of driving meaningful change, addressing the challenges communities and public services face today and those in the decades to come.

Our proposal is rooted in the ambitions and needs of communities, and the governance structures that are best able to empower communities and deliver the homes, jobs, infrastructure and services essential to their wellbeing. But in doing so, our proposals will advance national objectives for housing supply, prosperity, and public sector efficiency.

Our proposal to create three new unitary councils spanning Oxfordshire and West Berkshire will:

- Create **three financially sustainable and robust councils delivering £48.6m efficiencies annually** rooted in achieving better results, not just from economies of scale.
- Deliver new **homes at the scale and where they are needed** to tackle the area's decades-long housing crisis in the most sustainable way;
- Unlock Oxfordshire's constrained economic potential**, contributing £170 billion to the national economy, whilst ensuring the benefits of growth are felt locally**
- **Strengthen local accountability** through councils that are closer to the people they serve, responsible for all services in there are, able to reflect the distinct identities and ambitions of their communities;
- **A community-based prevention approach** to give residents the best possible access to services that are shaped to their specific needs and support a better quality of life
- **Enable regional collaboration** through the proposed Thames Valley Mayoral Strategic Authority, ensuring alignment on major transport and growth priorities.

Growth – Oxfordshire's historic dividing line

Oxford City Council has long prioritised meeting housing needs and achieving the city's economic potential, through development both of housing and commercial space. However, Oxford's population constitutes 22% of Oxfordshire's and its pro-growth outlook is not shared in many parts of the county. An inbuilt rural majority has generally prioritised conservation overgrowth. For decades the democratic will of this rural majority has led to the return of councils across Oxfordshire's other districts and at the county level that have sought to minimise the amount of growth planned or delivered. The divide overgrowth has played out in the ceaseless tussle over how to provide for Oxford's unmet housing need, with the city unable to build all the houses it needs because of being so tightly bounded on all sides.

The need for boundary changes – Modification request

Our proposal is for three unitary councils covering the current Oxfordshire geography and extending to include West Berkshire. This requests a Modification by the Secretary of State to enable boundary changes that will see the creation of **Greater Oxford Council** based on the city and its Green Belt. It also creates **Northern Oxfordshire Council** merging West Oxfordshire and most of Cherwell, and

Ridgeway Council that unites most of South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse with West Berkshire.

We have conducted detailed work that sets out an overwhelming case for expanding boundaries for the city of Oxford. This rationale – for the creation of a Greater Oxford - forms a golden thread that runs throughout the three unitaries proposal. Expert analysis of the economic, geographic and demographic case for change and engagement with literally thousands of stakeholders and residents across the geography demonstrates how it best delivers on the statutory criteria set by government.

We have shaped our proposal to create places with a strong sense of identity, opportunity and accountability for residents, businesses and services. This lay-down of boundaries enables three viable unitaries, close to the people they serve, and each with a distinctive identity and profile for their people and communities.

Three unitary authorities: Six key pillars

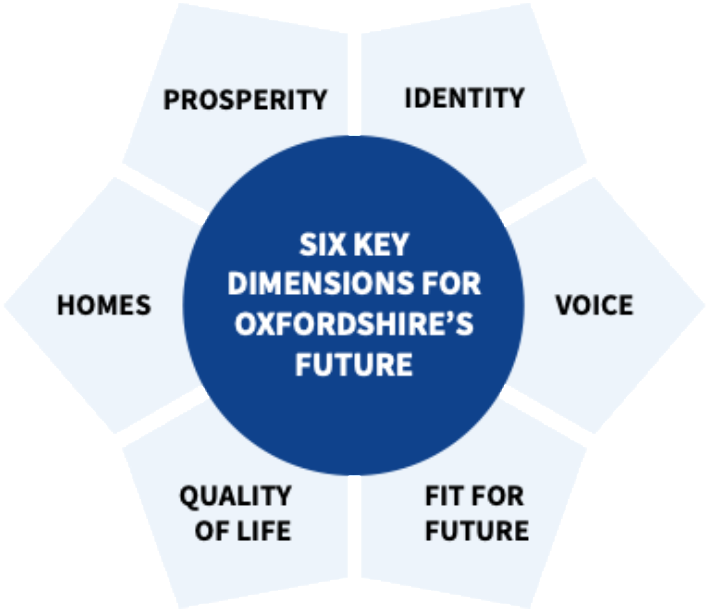


Fig 2.1: Six key dimensions for Oxfordshire's future

Our proposal is built around six key pillars, showing that the 3UA model is the best option for Oxfordshire and West Berkshire and those who live and work here in terms of prosperity, homes, quality of life, identity, voice and future fit services.

Prosperity

3UAs give Oxfordshire and West Berkshire the best possible platform to create and retain the most **jobs and prosperity locally** while also **driving nationally-significant growth for UK PLC**.

The economic opportunity unlocked by the boundary change leading to the creation of 3UAs could deliver up to 218,000 additional jobs - some 65,000 more jobs for local people than either competing proposal, and £43.1 billion more GVA than would be achieved through a single unitary authority. In Greater Oxford, the 3UA proposal will enable more growth around the city, realising the significant

economic, social, and environmental benefits that will flow from greater agglomeration and productivity.

The 3UA option will also allow the other unitaries to work with their own major opportunity areas, including Harwell, Milton Park, Bicester and Banbury to promote sustainable economic growth. Alternatively, the 2UA and 1UA options will continue to constrain Oxford and deliver fragmented and uncoordinated governance across the whole county, unable to prioritise the needs of the city, its other conurbations, and its majority rural communities. This fundamental tension, alongside their significant political and policy constraints in releasing the green belt, will mean the 2UA and the 1UA will grow much more slowly than the 3UA.

Furthermore, 3UAs best complement the strategic economic development role of the new Thames Valley Mayoral Strategic Authority (MSA), which will include responsibility for strategic matters such as inward investment, plus housing, infrastructure and skills planning, all at a regional scale. This is because 3UAs provide the opportunity and place-based leadership to promote and unlock more development in the right locations, including within Oxford's green belt. The 3UA would do this working within the strategic framework created by the MSA. The 1UA option in particular, will struggle to deliver in this space given its scale and its inherent political tensions.

3UA, with its focus and proximity to local communities and businesses, will complement the strategic economic development role of the new MSA. Oxfordshire suffers from significant pockets of deprivation and major inequalities. 3UAs will allow for a focus on place-based responses to address this, through local wealth creation and retention, which the larger unitary options will find much harder. This will include the ability to better focus on the specific sector strengths within each of the 3UAs, and on skills and supply chains at the local level.

Homes

3UA is the best way to **sustainably deliver the scale of homes** Oxfordshire needs, while protecting and enhancing our environment and villages.

3UAs will address this head on, providing each council with plenty of suitable land to meet their own housing need, within their own boundaries, for the first time. This will ensure that more rural areas outside Greater Oxford can grow in line with their own priorities rather than meeting the housing needs of the city. Moreover, Greater Oxford could go well beyond its housing target (by 1,217 homes a year) to secure a total of 40,000 new homes in 15 years via the release of only 2.6% of the green belt.

As such, 3UAs is the only option to directly address both the affordable housing crisis we face and our wider economic growth ambitions. Oxfordshire's affordable housing crisis can in large part be traced back to decisions on boundaries made in the 1970s. This constrained the city from delivering the housing it needs and put in place political fault lines that have led to major challenges in securing the right levels of housing growth across the county, not least in meeting Oxford's housing need. This in holding back growth, with objections received from the County Council and some district councils to Oxford's now withdrawn pro-growth Local Plan 2040. Moreover, where growth has happened, this has largely been beyond Oxford's Green Belt, leading to unsustainable commuting patterns and increased congestion. This all impacts on economic growth and investment because a lack of affordable and accessible homes is a key consideration for businesses looking to locate.

The 2UA and 1UA options will fundamentally fail to address Oxford and Oxfordshire's housing crisis. Even if there were the political imperative to do so, the National Planning Policy Framework means that both options will struggle to release sites at scale from the green belt. This is because of the availability of other suitable land in each of their proposed areas, which will push more growth further away from the city. Moreover, 2UA would see all of Oxford's housing need rolled in with that of Cherwell and West Oxfordshire. This will create a significant imbalance in housing provision between the north and the south of the county and is likely to prove politically challenging to deliver.

Quality of Life

3UAs give Oxfordshire the best possible chance to **deliver and enable access to services which give better quality of life** by working at a local level and whole systems approach.

80% of the 1,580 Oxfordshire and West Berkshire respondents to our public survey on LGR agree that urban and rural areas require different approaches to housing, social care, transport, education, skills, and other key council services. The 3UA supports models of service delivery that respond to this, allowing for enhanced service integration, simplified governance and increased democratic accountability, leading to authorities that are inherently closer to communities they serve.

3UA will allow for service delivery through councils that reflect local need and coordinate support across services at the local level – understanding and engaging with communities and their different requirements. There are clear advantages and improved outcomes to have placed-based and designed social care, housing and SEND offers. Economies of scale, joint commissioning and strong partnership working within social care can all be delivered at a wider scale dovetailing with support and services that better understand and respond to local circumstances.

Place-based, more agile councils are better able to focus on coordinating support around the needs of residents to deliver outcomes that matter most to individuals and families, rather than expecting them to bend around council siloes. The key is about creating a single and integrated pathway and 3UAs are fundamentally better placed to deliver this.

The 2UAs and 1UA will by their very nature create larger authorities (1UA will be second only after Birmingham by 2040) which will find it much harder to join up services and respond to varying local needs. Due to their size and proximity to the communities they serve, 3UA will also intrinsically be better placed to deliver a more preventative approach to service delivery, to address the root cause of demand and promote holistic problem-solving.

Identity

3UAs are the best way to **protect local identity** and gives the strongest possible **local representation** in decision making.

3UA much better reflect the true identities of the places and people of Oxfordshire than the 1UA or 2UA options. The histories of Banbury, Witney, Oxford and the Ridgeway towns and villages are proud and unique. Moreover, Oxford's demographic profile is very different to its neighbours, while its population also identifies directly with the opportunities brought through growth in a way other parts of the county do not.

From a place and identity perspective, the need for Oxford to expand is clear. Areas outside of Oxford, like Botley, Kidlington and Kennington and Sandford-on-Thames have become a near contiguous conurbation with Oxford. While Wheatley and Berinsfield are both separated from the city, most of their residents have regular work, family or leisure connections there and all struggle with the chronic congestion in and around the city. The 3UA proposal addresses these by creating a Greater Oxford, a completely new authority belonging as much to these places, as to the Oxford of today. The 2UA largely ignores these on the ground realities and will serve to prevent residents in these areas (except Kidlington) from having a say in how the city is run.

The 2UA and 1UA options also both fail to recognise the need for a place-based and locally responsive approach that most residents want. When compared to the 2UA option, the 3UA option will serve to protect the identities of the market towns and rural areas of the current West Oxfordshire and Cherwell within a separate Northern Oxfordshire unitary. These would otherwise be brought together with Oxford - and indeed its housing need. The 3UA option also directly supports the principle of the Ridgeway proposal, as set out in the 2UA option, but seeks to alter its northern boundary with Oxford, with the Greater Oxford taking in around 40,000 residents close to the city. The 1UA will quite simply wipe out centuries of governance arrangements linked to place and identity.

Voice

3UA are the best way to **empower local communities with representative democracy** which supports genuine resident-focussed design, aligned to the places and communities in which people live.

The 3UA option establishes the right powers, at the right scale, to deliver real change for our communities and places, leading to services and places designed with and for residents. It empowers Oxfordshire's towns and villages to speak strongly for their residents and businesses. At the same time 3UA provides vital city-scale governance for Oxford that has the focus and clarity of vision to help realise its full potential as a city of global significance. The 1UA and 2UAs simply cement in the decades old dynamic that has seen the interests of city and rural areas represented together in a vehicle which is unable to effectively speak for either. Oxford's population would represent only 22% of the wider 1UA population, meaning those making the decisions for the city, will not be nearly as accountable to those that live there as with the 3UA option.

The creation of Neighbourhood Area Committees (NACs) will grant communities a direct voice in contributing to and shaping priorities, real influence over decisions, and stewardship of local budgets, as well as building capacity and capability. We will ensure the NACs are fully coterminous with the planned Health Neighbourhoods set out in the NHS 10-year Plan. This hyper-local focus and voice, alongside the place-based scale of the 3UAs will create a local governance system that works best with the new MSA.

3UA is the only option that will give the city of Oxford a seat at the table on what will be the new Thames Valley MSA. This is critical and will ensure the needs and priorities of the city are heard loud and clear at the strategic regional level, alongside the existing unitary conurbations of Reading, Slough, Bracknell and Swindon. The 3UA is also best for the wider county. It gives one urban voice and two rural voices for Oxfordshire on the MSA, each able to advocate for its own priorities. The 3UA option is also the best fit for the new national hierarchy of local government, as a significant amount of the MSA powers will move from the County Council level, including strategic transport planning

and delivery, inward investment and skills. This shifting of responsibility to the MSA undermines the case for larger more strategic unitaries like the 1UA option, which will lack distinctiveness with the MSA. Moreover, it underlines the case for effective placed-based unitaries that will complement the delivery of these more strategic functions at the MSA level.

Future-Fit

3UA will create three councils are **financially robust and sustainable** from Day 1, and which will provide **quality services that work** for the current state and through future transformation, with a continuous focus on prevention and growth.

Our 3UA proposal is self-financing and does **not** require or seek Exceptional Financial Support (EFS) or any central government subsidy to fund the transition. Instead, it is underpinned by local resources — including reserves and the Flexible Use of Capital Receipts allowances. Our proposal **fully pays back in 4 years**, through efficiencies and transformation savings delivered by streamlining seven councils into three. **By year 5 annual net savings of £48.6 million will be delivered**. Pixel Financial, experts in local government finance and funding has reviewed the financial analysis presented in this proposal.

The 3UA provides the best opportunity for longer-term financial stability by creating the platform for both economic growth, and prevention-led services in a way the 2UA and 1UA do not. Our higher levels of growth will not only significantly increase the tax base; the delivery of new homes and jobs will increase health and wellbeing. The ability to focus more on prevention, will enable more residents to live high-quality, independent lives with reduced need for long-term intervention from the council. This includes adult and children's care services across Oxfordshire and West Berkshire where we see significant preventive opportunities that will help to ensure the delivery of better outcomes for individuals in receipt of care and support, as well as more responsive and efficient services. The funding challenges faced by statutory services are ones felt nationally. However, we believe our programme of transformation will achieve the significant benefits and saving.

The opportunity to drive public sector reform through the creation of 3UAs is greater than with the 1UA or 2UA options, because of their scale and proximity to place. The prize is councils that is efficient, modern, and responsive to local needs, utilising technology and digital solutions to provide fast, seamless support, while maintaining a strong face-to-face offer for those who need it most. The ability to work at a local level means each authority can be responsive to the priorities of the specific communities they serve.

Public engagement

We believe the 3UA is based on a clear mandate. Our extensive engagement has shown that people want governance that is closer to communities, more responsive, and more accountable. Furthermore, business and economic partnerships back the proposal for its ability to simplify planning, strengthen representation, and accelerate decisions.

Our online survey of residents across Oxfordshire and Werst Berkshire found that **69% agree** that councils are most effective when they are smaller and closer to the people they serve, enabling them to respond and adapt more easily to local needs. Moreover, **80% agree** that urban and rural areas often require different approaches to housing, transport, education and skills, and other key council

services. While **88% agree** that councils have an important part to play in supporting the local economy, including through housing, infrastructure and transport policies. This feedback aligns directly with the foundation principles of the 3UA proposal, while undermining the case and rationale for either the 1UA or the 2UA options.

As well as engaging key stakeholders and businesses through workshops and meetings, our online survey to Oxford businesses found that over **80% of respondents** said being located in or near Oxford is very or extremely important to their success. While around **68% strongly agree** that Oxford should go beyond the government's housing delivery targets, and almost **85% agree** that affordable housing near Oxford is important for business growth. Furthermore, **46% favour** building additional homes close to the city, including suitable locations within the Green Belt. (**23%** would prefer development beyond the Green Belt). **Over half (54%**) believe future development should balance new homes with employment space. This again supports the fundamentals behind the 3UA and undermines the rational for both the 1UA and 2UA options.

Feeback from these surveys and our wider engagement has demonstrated that the City Council itself is seen as the key convener in the city of Oxford and is most aligned with the ambitions and issues the city faces. Moreover, that creating the right scale of council, close to the people and places it serves is critical to ensuring local government remains in a position to take on, and expand further, into this role.

Empowering People, Growing Prosperity, Building Communities

Any model for consolidating local authorities will realise efficiencies from economies of scale and integration of services. However, this unique opportunity of LGR should be used to deliver the far greater benefits from purposeful, people-first redesign of government for future generations. At its heart, it should maximise growth while removing barriers to sharing in that prosperity - particularly through ensuring everyone has access to a good, affordable home. The **3UA model** delivers efficiencies, but more than that, it is a transformative opportunity to deliver sustainable and inclusive growth, homes, services, and community empowerment, ensuring Oxfordshire and West Berkshire thrive today and into the future.

Our submission is out over eight chapters, which together provide the detailed justification and evidence to support our proposal. Alongside the foreword and this Executive Summary, Chapter 3 sets out an Options Appraisal, our assessment of all the proposed LGR options being put forward for Oxfordshire and West Berkshire. Chapter 4 then expands on our case for three unitary authorities, set against our six key pillars. Chapter 5 provides the detail of our financial case, explaining how we will deliver savings and efficiencies by moving from 7 to 3 local authorities. Chapter 6 builds on this from a service delivery perspective. It articulates how 3UAs create the opportunity to establish a new Target Operating Model that will help drive improvements and transformation to deliver better outcomes. Chapter 7 moves on to explain our proposed implementation road map, while Chapter 8 concludes our submission with an assessment of how our 3UA option achieves the criteria for LGR set by Government.

3 Options Appraisal

In developing our case for a three unitary proposal – a city unitary with expanded boundaries, a northern unitary and a southern unitary including West Berkshire – we have compared the preferred option to alternative proposals to ensure we are proposing the best option for our region. Each option has been appraised and scored against the Government's LGR criteria.

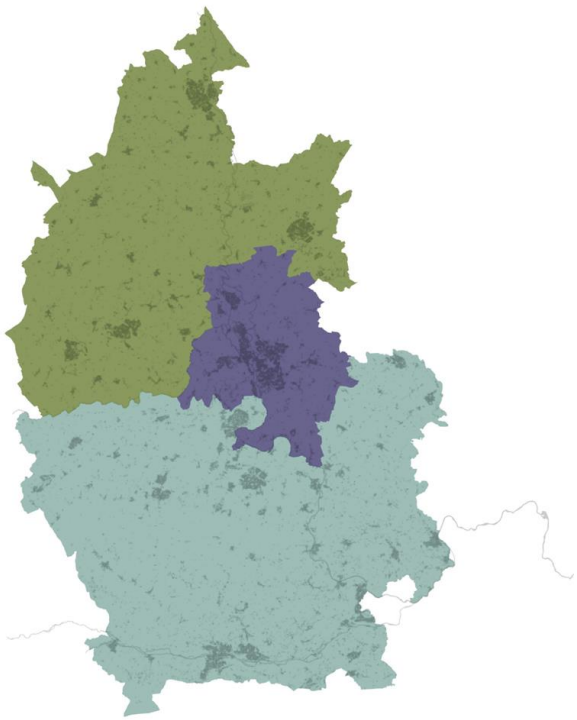


Fig 3.1: Three unitary authorities

3.1 Options considered

As part of our work to develop this proposal, we have also considered the alternative options for Local Government Reorganisation in Oxfordshire. The three potential options are defined as follows:

1. **Single Unitary Authority for Oxfordshire (1UA):** Amalgamation of all councils into a single unitary authority for the whole of Oxfordshire, where Oxfordshire Council is responsible for every local government service across Oxfordshire.

2. **Two Unitary Authorities (2UA):** Replacing the current two-tier, six-council system with two unitary councils. Oxford and Shires Council created from the existing district councils for Cherwell, Oxford City and West Oxfordshire; and Ridgeway Council, created from the existing district councils of South Oxfordshire, Vale of White Horse and the unitary council of West Berkshire.

3. **Three Unitary Authorities (3UA):**
    a. Introducing three unitary councils that create a unitary city on existing boundaries, as well as northern and southern unitary authorities, also including West Berkshire. These would be Oxford, Northern Oxfordshire and Ridgeway. This is presented as a

compliant proposal under the Local Government and Involvement in Public Health Act 2007.

b. Introducing three unitary councils that create a unitary city on expanded boundaries, as well as northern and southern unitary authorities, also including West Berkshire. These would be Greater Oxford, Northern Oxfordshire and Ridgeway and involve boundary changes. This is presented as a requested modification to the Three Unitary Authorities proposal, as it better meets the criteria set out in the Government's statutory invitation in terms of financial sustainability, sensible economic areas, increased housing supply to meet local needs, robust public services, neighbourhood empowerment and supporting devolution. The development of the modified boundaries is described in greater detail in Appendix A.

3.1.1 Single Unitary

Under this option, the County Council and six district councils are merged into a single unitary authority serving the whole of Oxfordshire. This option is being explored by Oxfordshire County Council. This is projected to bring lower growth, a lack of place-based leadership and a reduced ability to represent different communities across diverse geographies and population. The Day 1 efficiencies it would deliver are at risk of being swallowed up by need to respond to place based needs and an absence of targeted models to build in prevention and boost community resilience.

This unitary council would be responsible for all local government services across a huge geography (over 1,000 square miles and 763,200 population[1]). It is expected to grow to a population of nearly 1 million by 2040. This would put its population as the second largest unitary authority in England, behind only Birmingham. Yet, this area has a wide range of different needs – from the urban centre and challenges of Oxford to deeply rural areas.

For services such as planning, local transport system management, community services and culture, this scale would present difficulties to deliver in ways which engage and respond to the needs of local communities. Additionally, this option would look to retain the current Oxford Green Belt in its current form – even if that long standing policy position of the County Council changed it would be difficult to make the case for Green Belt release under National Planning Policy guidelines as there is available development land beyond the Green Belt, which is likely in a countywide unitary authority. This stymies development potential in the Green Belt around the city of Oxford and means that building of homes and businesses would need to take place in a more dispersed way across the wider county – requiring more of the countryside and natural environment to be placed under threat whilst failing to capitalise on the growth benefits of agglomeration. Overall, there is a risk of a fragmented approach to growth, given the need to focus on rural and urban needs, that will lead to the continuation of difficulty in prioritising Oxford's needs as a national significant economic centre.

While a single unitary may present an opportunity to realise greater efficiencies through economies of scale and reduced duplication of staffing and functions, these are considered to be marginal when considered in the context of the foregone additional business rates and council tax revenues as well as well the growth dividend to the Exchequer that the 3UA proposal would deliver.

[1] ONS 2024

The annual savings identified through this single unitary proposal are around £30.1m per annum from consolidation, and a further £33.2m from transformation. This compares with a total £48.6m annual savings from 3UA. However, this option reduces significantly the ability to realise the latent economic growth and housing delivery opportunity within the area. This would only exacerbate the ongoing challenges faced by Oxford as a global leader in education and research. 3UA projects an additional £43.1 billion of GVA growth by 2050 – or £2 billion per annum – relative to 1UA. This provides a far greater financial impact than the potential incremental greater cost savings of £14.7m per annum that 1UA delivers over 3UA.

This model is fundamentally the wrong fit for Oxfordshire. It is too large and too remote to deliver the place-based leadership, targeted growth, and responsive services that our diverse communities need. Instead of unlocking Oxfordshire's potential, it risks diluting local priorities, stifling growth, and leaving residents lost in a system that cannot reflect or respond to their unique needs.

Fig 3.2: A single Oxfordshire unitary (not including West Berkshire)

3.1.2 Two Unitary Councils

Under this option, the County Council and six district councils are reorganised into two unitary authorities:

- Oxford and the Shires Council, created from the existing district councils of Cherwell, West Oxfordshire and Oxford City Council; and
- Ridgeway Council, created from the existing district councils of South Oxfordshire, Vale of White Horse and the unitary council of West Berkshire.

This proposal is being developed by these district councils and West Berkshire (except for Oxford City).

The inclusion of West Berkshire in Ridgeway Council reflects the strong historic and current links with southern Oxfordshire. Much of southern Oxfordshire sat within the county of Berkshire up to 1974.

West Berkshire also shares with southern Oxfordshire very similar demography, landscapes and economies, and is within an area expected to sit within the same devolved Thames Valley MSA. Ridgeway as defined here is very similar to the Ridgeway proposed under the three unitary model, with the main difference being the treatment of Oxford's boundaries.

Although the two unitary model could enable some cashable savings through economies of scale and transformation, around £59.8m annually, these potential efficiencies are outweighed by the structural problems it creates. The core issue is that Oxford remains chronically under bounded, its boundary to the south is fixed by Ridgeway, preventing the city from expanding on three sides to meet its own housing and economic needs. While Ridgeway as a unitary makes sense for the southern area, the real challenge is that Oxford and the Shires Council would combine one of England's fastest-growing, most densely populated cities with some of its most rural and sparsely populated areas. This creates an authority with fundamentally different demographics, geographies, and priorities, making it extremely difficult to focus on the needs of either community. Additionally, this boundary cuts through the Oxford conurbation and would create significant issues for residents, such as differential access to city services like libraries and Household Waste Recycling Centres.

By amalgamating Oxford's housing need into a wider requirement for Oxford and the Shires, this model requires the city's unmet need to be met only to the north, cementing the current issues that prevent expansion to the south, east, and west. As a result, Oxford's growth is constrained, and development pressure is pushed into less sustainable rural locations, increasing the risk of scattered, car-dependent development and failing to address the city's acute challenges. The inability to release sufficient green belt land around Oxford means there is no realistic way to deliver the homes and business space needed where demand is highest, undermining agglomeration benefits and the city's role as an economic engine for the region.

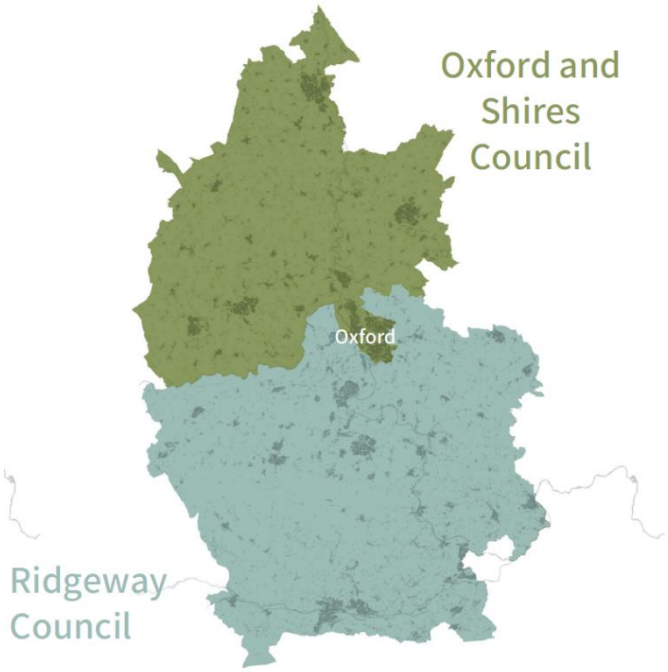


Fig 3.3: A two unitary model, including West Berkshire

3.1.3 Three Unitary Councils

The three unitary proposal would create three new unitary authorities from the current two-tier, seven authority system including West Berkshire – a Northern Unitary (Northern Oxfordshire), a Southern Unitary (Ridgeway), and a Greater Oxford. These unitary authorities largely align with existing district boundaries, except for the area of Greater Oxford which draws in parishes around Oxford's Green Belt from Cherwell, South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse. Each unitary is envisaged to cover distinct areas which share common identities, needs and challenges.

These boundaries enable the strategic release of around 2.6% of Green Belt which would enable Greater Oxford to meet its needs for homes and commercial space in ways which not only protect the wider countryside across Oxfordshire, but drive significant growth and sustainability benefits through using land value capture to fund protection and enhancement of the remaining Green Belt. These will be achieved through concentrating more, new development around the city, supporting a more viable public transport network and wider infrastructure, plus significant agglomeration benefits for businesses and research.

Greater Oxford is the economic engine of Oxfordshire: a city-region with world leading education, research and technology sectors. It has an extensive range of key industries from world leading data science, quantum technology and life sciences to advanced manufacturing, publishing, automotive industry, healthcare and tourism.

Northern Oxfordshire is made up of strong and ambitious towns working to fulfil their growth priorities while maintaining their character, including Banbury, Bicester, Carterton and Witney. It is a key tourism and shopping destination for the UK, with attractions including Bicester Village and Blenheim Palace, as well as the natural beauty of the Cotswolds. It is home to key sectors which benefit from its central location within the UK and link with the Oxford to Cambridge Growth Corridor. These include motoring and other high-tech industries form that part of the 'knowledge spine' together with logistics.

Ridgeway as defined under the three unitary authorities proposal is similar in most respects to that proposed under two unitary authorities and includes West Berkshire for the same reasons. The main difference is the northern boundary around Oxford is changed to align broadly with the edge of the Green Belt. Ridgeway balances a strong network of idyllic market towns and rural areas with cutting edge industries. It also forms part of the strong technology sector spine which runs down into West Berkshire and includes a world leading fusion energy research project, cutting-edge laboratories, and a central hub to the UK's digital infrastructure. The area already has a strong history of collaboration of services between the existing authorities to deliver highly successful shared services.

The distinct demographics and geography of each unitary and the ability to balance the voices of the rural and urban populations at a Mayoral Strategic Authority level necessitate creating authorities smaller than 500,000 residents. There is a strong economic case for this exception. This will ensure that the unitary authorities can deliver optimum economic and housing delivery strategies, place-based outcomes, manage risks and engage with their communities in service delivery at a local level. The smallest proposed authority, Greater Oxford, has a current population which is larger than many established unitary authorities, such as York, Luton and Swindon. Rapid growth as a result of housing delivery ahead of existing Government targets would see Greater Oxford population expand by 44%

by 2040, placing it among the top third largest unitary authorities in the UK based on population projections.

Our proposal has been developed by Oxford City Council and focuses on the ability of a three unitary model to deliver the growth in homes, jobs and economy within Greater Oxford. By concentrating the growth needs for the area in this authority, Northern Oxfordshire and Ridgeway would be able to pursue their strategic objectives in close partnership with their local communities without being overwhelmed by the distinct requirements of Oxford and its very different demographics, needs and geography. Crucially, they would be able to grow in ways which appropriately maintain and build upon the existing characteristics and identities of its unique settlements as Greater Oxford's release of Green Belt and focus on development in this area would greatly reduce the needs to develop across the wider countryside.

The three unitary model not only creates the right structure for Oxfordshire, it forms part of a wider opportunity across England to define a new national structure and empower cities through Local Government Reform. As set out in the *Case for Cities in Local Government Reorganisation* [2] report, enabling cities like Oxford to govern at the right scale is essential to unlocking inclusive, prevention-focused growth and delivering on national priorities. The generational opportunity is not just for Oxford and Oxfordshire but for Norwich, for Cambridge, for Exeter, for Lincoln and other small cities. The UK's small cities have historically underperformed compared to our international comparators, despite often outperforming larger cities on growth and resilience, even while under-bounded. Giving them the tools to lead, through right-sized, city-led unitary authorities, would supercharge national GVA and help tackle inequalities at their source. Modelling shows that creating unitary cities across the country would deliver major increases to national GVA above current trends, enabling UK cities to compete globally rather than against each other.

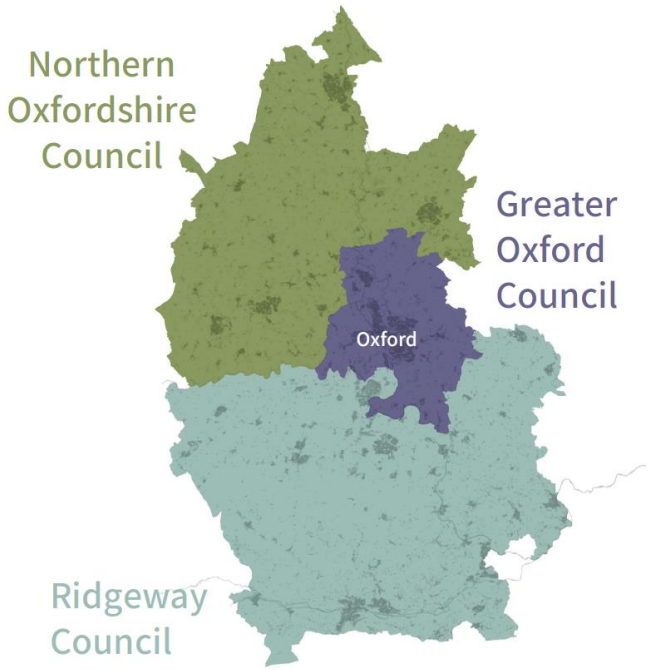


Fig 3.4 A three unitary model including West Berkshire with expanded boundaries for the Oxford city authority

[2] https://www.caseforcities.uk

3.2 Appraisal Outcome

The three unitary model will realise efficiencies from economies of scale. However, there are far greater benefits to be gained from using the opportunity of LGR to direct a purposeful, people-first redesign of government for future generations; and to drive growth. By working with these three distinct areas, this reform will embed the principles of place-based leadership, collaboration and citizen empowerment. They will work at a level which enables joined up delivery of services within the localities which respond to local need and work to prevent issues in people's lives. It is not only the option which delivers the greatest financial benefits by reducing the need for expensive interventions and preventing need but makes the greatest positive impact to living standards and quality of life – providing and breaking down barriers to good housing and prosperity for the most people.

We have built on our initial analysis and used the criteria set out by the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) to appraise each of the primary options. The table below provides the scoring of each option against the criteria. It uses a scale of 0-3 where 0 indicates it does not meet the criteria at all and 3 indicates that it fully meets the criteria. A more detailed explanation of the scoring for each option against the government criteria is set out in the Appendix B.

Based on our assessment, the three unitary proposal with modified boundaries for Greater Oxford represents the option which best meets the government's LGR criteria, its wider growth mission and, most importantly, the needs of the residents and communities of Oxfordshire. Our three unitary model empowers locally accountable, place-based leadership to deliver services which are tailored to the needs of communities and creates significant benefits of size and scale. Greater Oxford, Northern Oxfordshire and Ridgeway would represent, co-produce with and serve areas which have their own distinct identities, context and existing partnerships. Three unitary authorities represent a model of councils with a sustainable scale and geography to work with a Mayoral Strategic Authority with a balance of voices which truly represent the communities for which they advocate.

Table 3.1: Single Unitary for Oxfordshire (excluding West Berkshire)

LGR Criteria	Score	Rationale
A single tier and sensible geography to improve housing supply and outcomes avoiding creating (dis/)advantaged areas	**1**	This would create the third largest unitary in the country and cover too diverse an area to deliver local priorities. It would deliver fewer homes than other proposals, and they would need to be built in areas which may change local characteristics of rural areas.
Unitary local government must be the right size to achieve efficiencies, improve capacity and withstand financial shocks	**2**	This option would deliver the most benefits in economies of scale and, with the largest revenue budget, increase its resilience to financial shocks. However, it would also be least able to deliver public service reform which responds to local needs to address demand and reduce the overall cost of service delivery.
Prioritise the delivery of high quality and sustainable public services to citizens	**1**	This would minimise disruption as many services are currently provided by the County authority. However, this would also limit the ability for public service reform around a deep understanding of local communities at a place-based level. The size of organisation would limit its ability to deliver agile and fast transformation and be flexible to tailor high quality public services to local needs.
Councils must work together in coming to a view that meets local needs and is informed by local views	**1**	This proposal does not respond to the clear view expressed by engagement across the county that councils should be closely linked to their communities and that bigger authorities risk losing touch with residents.
New unitary structures must support devolution arrangements	**1**	A single unitary would be too close in size to the MSA and would account for at least 37% of its total population. It would aim to take a strategic view over the area, duplicating the strategic role of the MSA. It would mean that Oxfordshire's rural and urban areas would only have one voice at the MSA level for its diverse views and priorities, and Oxford would have a weaker voice than the other metropolitan areas in the MSA.
Enable stronger community engagement and deliver genuine opportunity for neighbourhood empowerment	**1**	The size of the unitary would make it feel too distanced from the communities it serves to be able to engage and co-design most meaningfully. Having to balance the views of a major city, a network of market towns and rural communities would give too many contrasting priorities to be able to ensure specific neighbourhoods are suitably empowered.

Table 3.2: Two Unitary Proposal (Oxford and the Shires comprising current Cherwell, West Oxfordshire and Oxford City, Ridgeway comprising South Oxfordshire, Vale of White Horse and West Berkshire)

LGR Criteria	Score	Rationale
A single tier and sensible geography to improve housing supply and outcomes avoiding creating (dis/)advantaged areas	**2**	This creates authorities of an appropriate population size with a sensible geography for Ridgeway. However, the merging of Oxford and the Shires combines two distinct geographies with very different priorities and demographics. This would retain the under bounding of Oxford and deliver fewer homes than a three unitary proposal, with more of these homes being built in rural areas and affecting the character of villages.
Unitary local government must be the right size to achieve efficiencies, improve capacity and withstand financial shocks	**2**	This would create savings through economies of scale, although less than a single unitary, and be viable with ability to withstand financial shocks. However, savings from rationalisations would be smaller than the additional costs of demand.
Prioritise the delivery of high quality and sustainable public services to citizens	**2**	The two unitary model would be more able to tailor services to meet the needs of its geographies than the single unitary option – particularly in Ridgeway. However, the contrasting populations, demands and priorities of Oxford and the Shires would require a constant balance to deliver appropriate services to very distinct areas within one authority.
Councils must work together in coming to a view that meets local needs and is informed by local views	**2**	While Ridgeway would be able to respond to local needs across its villages and market towns, Oxford and the Shires would need to balance competing local needs. This would not be informed by local views, which want councils based on areas relevant to their communities and show that the north of Oxfordshire and city of Oxford view themselves as distinct from each other.
New unitary structures must support devolution arrangements	**2**	This would support devolution arrangements better than a single authority. However, Oxford and the Shires would mean a single voice at MSA level would need to represent both rural and urban needs rather than distinct areas. It would weaken the voice of Oxford compared to other major metropolitan areas in the MSA.
Enable stronger community engagement and deliver genuine opportunity for neighbourhood empowerment	**2**	Ridgeway would be able to engage strongly and deliver neighbourhood empowerment across its towns and villages. There would be a greater challenge across Oxford and the Shires, which would need to develop distinct approaches and models for its urban and rural areas. Those living in “the shires” would feel their priorities are competing with Oxford and vice versa, reducing the feeling of empowerment and being heard in working with communities.

Table 3.3: Three Unitary Proposal (Greater Oxford comprising Oxford City and expanded borders, Northern Oxfordshire comprising West Oxford and remainder of Cherwell, Ridgeway comprising West Berkshire and remainder of South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse)

LGR Criteria	Score	Rationale
A single tier and sensible geography to improve housing supply and outcomes avoiding creating (dis/)advantaged areas	**3**	Creates a single tier through three unitary authorities: a Greater Oxford, Northern Oxfordshire and Ridgeway. By addressing the under bounding of Oxford, targeted green belt release will deliver the most homes, in places which minimise the impact on the environment, infrastructure and rural settlements.
Unitary local government must be the right size to achieve efficiencies, improve capacity and withstand financial shocks	**2**	Creates three unitary areas which are financially viable and deliver savings from economies of scale. The greater savings will be driven by the transformation of services to a preventative approach with a place-based approach to ensure that services work within each location to best reduce demand, and therefore cost, while improving outcomes.
Prioritise the delivery of high quality and sustainable public services to citizens	**3**	The proposal ensures services are high quality and tailored to local needs through close collaboration with the local community and partners. Decisions can focus on the needs of specific areas, and analysis has shown all unitary authorities will deliver sustainable services which focus on prevention and align with the wider public sector reform agenda.
Councils must work together in coming to a view that meets local needs and is informed by local views	**3**	A comprehensive and inclusive engagement programme has been delivered across Oxfordshire and West Berkshire to understand the local needs and views which this proposal seeks to answer. Through this it gives residents more say in local planning and ensures services are tailored to the specific needs of each place, meeting the desire for councils to be locally responsive and relevant to their communities.
New unitary structures must support devolution arrangements	**3**	This proposes a balance of three voices across Oxfordshire to the Mayoral Strategic Authority, balancing the rural and urban populations. It gives consistency of scale across the Thames Valley MSA, and a voice for a globally significant in line with the other authorities represented.
Enable stronger community engagement and deliver genuine opportunity for neighbourhood empowerment	**3**	Three unitaries enable governance which is more tailored and representative to local need. It will support local leaders to better understand and tackle local challenges. It supports increased community engagement in democratic processes, the design of services and community empowerment more generally. It allows each area to speak for itself and its own identity and priorities.

4 Case for Three Unitary Authorities

This proposal for three unitary authorities (3UA) is designed to deliver the best possible outcomes for the people, places, and economy of Oxfordshire – together with West Berkshire. It is a direct response to the clear needs and ambitions of the area, providing a blueprint for a modern, effective, and equitable model of local government.

The current two-tier system has proven incapable of delivering this vision. It has constrained economic growth, diluted local identity, and hindered the preventative and collaborative approaches needed to tackle deep-rooted social challenges. It is the single greatest limiting factor in the development of modern and resilient governance.

Growth – Oxfordshire's historic dividing line

The three unitaries Oxfordshire proposal is unashamedly a pro-growth proposal. Oxford City Council has long prioritised growth – both in housing and commercial space – whilst always seeking to protect the city's historic architectural treasures. This is strongly supported by Oxford's residents and businesses alike. In the Council's 2025 annual Residents Satisfaction Survey just 14% of citizens were satisfied with the number of homes being built to meet Oxford's housing needs. In the Council's 2025 survey of businesses for LGR 68% believed Oxford should go beyond the government's target for delivering new homes in and around the city.

But Oxford population constitutes 22% of Oxfordshire's and its pro-growth outlook is not shared in many parts of the county. An inbuilt rural majority has generally prioritised conservation overgrowth. For decades the democratic will of this rural majority has led to the return of councils across Oxfordshire's other districts and at the county level that have sought to minimise the amount of growth planned or delivered.

The divide overgrowth has played out in the ceaseless tussle over how to provide for Oxford's unmet housing need, which the city itself so tightly bounded on all sides cannot do alone. This has led to demands that Oxford abandon plans to develop a cutting-edge Knowledge Quarter on regeneration land in the city centre next to the railway station and instead prioritise housing. Contention overgrowth also saw the collapse of work to create the much-needed Oxfordshire 2050 Strategic Plan due to concerns by other authorities over having to agree housing numbers beyond the now defunct old 'Standard Method' approach.

Progress made last decade in securing Oxford's unmet needs sites in other districts is now being lost, where the latest Local Plans from South Oxfordshire, Vale of White Horse and Cherwell Councils have all sought to deliver lower levels of housing than new government 'Standard Method' targets by utilising transitional arrangements. While Oxford City Council did object to this approach, it is relevant to underline that Oxfordshire County Council did not, providing tacit support for their approach. However, objections to proposed levels of housing in Oxford's pro-growth 2040 Local Plan (now withdrawn) were received from the County Council, as well as South & Vale district councils. It is also material that the last time land use planning sat at County level, the Structure Plan 2016, sought overtly to constrain Oxford's growth.

Government has made clear that growth is its number one mission and set clear housing targets for every area - and therefore all three proposals for unitarisation of Oxfordshire local government will

reference housing delivery and support for business. However, the nature of the geography in either of the one unitary and two unitary proposals would create the strong likelihood of an anti-growth majority within any of these councils and putting Oxford's residents in the position of a minority voice. The democratic will of those populations is likely to lock in a status quo and stymie any real dash for growth in Oxfordshire. Conversely, with Oxford constituting 71% of Greater Oxford there is more likely to be continued majority support for an acceleration of housing delivery and the creation of skilled jobs.

Six key principles of the case for three unitary authorities

The right geography for governance is the foundation for success. The three unitary authorities model is built on this principle. The three unitary authorities will deliver a future where Oxfordshire achieves its full potential across six critical dimensions:

- where **prosperity** is unlocked through Oxford's economic engine;
- where good **homes** are available to all, and fit well into Oxfordshire;
- where **quality of life** is enhanced through preventative, integrated services;
- where community **identity** is strengthened rather than diluted;
- where democratic **voice** is empowered at every level; and
- where governance is **future-fit** and financially sustainable.

Extensive public engagement has been central to shaping this proposal, revealing strong support for councils that are closer and more responsive to the people they serve. This informs directly our commitment to enhancing democratic voice.

The following sections set out how the three unitary model delivers against the six key dimensions of Oxfordshire's future. It demonstrates why this proposal is not merely an administrative change, but the most credible and forward-looking framework to secure a better future for all of Oxfordshire and West Berkshire, now and for generations to come.

4.1 Prosperity

Prosperity: Unlocking Oxfordshire's True Economic Potential

The three unitary authorities model delivers a step change in economic growth. Significantly, it does so in a way that can fully unlock the opportunities across high-growth sectors. It will increase productivity; making growth and employment more inclusive whilst maximising our existing partnerships and coordination across each area's strengths and challenges.
This proposal unlocks Oxfordshire's full potential by aligning land, infrastructure and skills within a coherent economic geography, creating up to **65,000 additional jobs** more than either competing unitary proposal and **£43 billion more GVA** by 2050 than would be achieved through a single unitary authority (1UA).

Oxford is already a success story, central to which sits it universities. For every £1 invested in the University of Oxford, £10.30 is returned to the UK economy[3]. However, we are not fulfilling our potential. For too long, Oxfordshire's prosperity has been constrained by outdated boundaries and fragmented governance.

[3] The economic impact of the University of Oxford

Oxford's current functional economic area extends well beyond existing administrative boundaries. It's global research base and innovation ecosystem have been held back by a lack of space to grow, limiting the scale of high-value employment and investment the county can sustain. Without addressing this imbalance, Oxfordshire risks losing its competitive edge to other global innovation hubs. The three-unitary model removes these constraints. The approach allows each distinct part of Oxfordshire to focus on its strengths, delivering growth in key sectors and collectively maximising impact.

The creation of a Greater Oxford will enable the release of strategically located employment land at the edge of the city. This will bring firms closer to the research, talent and transport connections that drive productivity – while minimising the impact on infrastructure and the environment.

This focused approach mirrors the pattern seen in the world's other successful innovation economies. As shown by Volterra's independent analysis, when Oxford can grow beyond its current boundaries, it achieves a higher rate of employment growth across Oxfordshire, around 1.5% a year compared with 1.0% under a single authority, translating into a more productive mix of sectors, stronger wages, higher tax receipts and more funding for public services across the county.

We will ensure that the growth we achieve benefits all of our residents and is genuinely inclusive, by having place-based unitary authorities which can work at the local level to create the right interventions to address barriers to better jobs. This is vital given that, despite perceptions of affluence, we have very significant areas of deprivation.

Constraints on Growth

Oxford brings together knowledge industries and technology clusters due to its world-renowned university and research institutions. Over 73% of Oxford's businesses operate in knowledge-intensive sectors — including life sciences, biotechnology, data science, and robotics — forming one of the strongest and most dynamic tech clusters in the UK. Ensuring these sectors have the space, connectivity, and infrastructure to expand is critical to sustaining Oxfordshire's global leadership in innovation and maintaining the UK's competitiveness on the world stage. It is also home to a wide range of other sectors of strength which have huge importance to the whole country, such as automotive and advanced manufacturing, publishing, healthcare and tourism.

Oxfordshire's global reputation, innovation ecosystem and demand point to huge potential for growth. However, it currently underperforms. Oxfordshire lags well behind neighbouring Berkshire and Swindon in terms of productivity. The aspiration of the proposed Thames Valley MSA is to return to annual GVA growth of 2.35% a year. However, Oxfordshire's current model risks holding that back. Historical employment growth of around 1% in Oxfordshire and productivity is only around the UK average. Despite Oxford's position as an innovation leader, the constrained nature of the city, combined with a sector profile that includes a high proportion of public sector and academic workers, currently sees it score lower in terms of productivity than the national average.

The lack of space in Oxford's tight boundaries has also driven up the cost of new commercial development. This has constrained the growth of more productive employment, pushed activity into less connected locations and weakened agglomeration and productivity benefits. At worst, it has cost the UK huge opportunities. Volterra analysis (see Appendix C) has outlined that the city of Oxford can

be a huge draw for major global firms. However, for some, where they cannot find accommodation within proximity of the city they will not re-locate around Oxfordshire or even the UK – they will invest internationally in places like Boston or Silicon Valley. Our survey of businesses on LGR (see Section 4.7) reinforces the importance of proximity to the city: with 83% this was 'very' or 'extremely important' to the success of their business.
The Chancellor has committed to making the Oxford-Cambridge Corridor Europe's Silicon valley – addressing years of underinvestment in public transport, affordable housing and infrastructure.[4] This notes a potential prize of up to £78 billion in cumulative economic growth by 2035. Ensuring that Greater Oxford has the available space for this growth, and that Northern Oxfordshire can benefit from its links to East-West rail at Bicester Village for its own technology sector, will ensure we can deliver on this key priority for the country's economic development.

A place-based approach aligned to the Mayoral Strategic Authority

3UA are best placed to complement the role of the new Mayoral Strategic Authority. The MSA will take on powers including strategic planning, inward investment, skills and both strategic transport planning and delivery. The scale and broad strategic scope of the MSA undermines the case for a larger unitary, as proposed under the 1UA option. Conversely, it underlines the case for smaller place-based unitaries, as put forward under the 3UA option.

As such, strategic economic, planning, investment and infrastructure will not be planned at the county level, instead, the MSA will provides a single, joined-up framework for leadership, investment, and delivery, enabling coordinated action at that scale. Working as three unitary authorities will enable each area to take a place-based and delivery-driven approach while the MSA coordinates strategic infrastructure and investment across the wider region.

Economists, Volterra have assessed each of the proposal LGR options to look at their likely impact on economic growth. They conclude that the 3UA provides the best possible platform for growth by creating unitary authorities that can prioritise the investment needs of their own areas, working with the MSA. However, they conclude that both the 1UA and two unitary authority (2UA) options are much more likely to deliver un-coordinated and fragmented leadership across their areas, unable to prioritise the investment needs of the city, while also prioritising the very different needs of the majority rural communities and market towns.

Realising agglomeration benefits around Oxford

The three unitary authorities option unlocks additional land around Oxford, while enabling Northern Oxfordshire and Ridgeway to focus on their own economic strengths and priorities.

The creation of a Greater Oxford unitary as part of the 3UA proposal could release green belt land around the city to deliver 13m sq. ft. of additional commercial space and up to 29,000 new jobs, alongside 40,000 new homes.

Both the 1UA and 2UA option would instead see employment growth spread across a wider area, and at a smaller scale. Both those options would have available land outside the green belt that would need to be prioritised. Setting aside any political imperative within the 1UA and 2UA not to grow the

[4] 23 October 2025 HM Treasury Press Release

city, national planning guidance limits the ability to allocate green belt land, especially where other developable land is available in local plan areas. The 2UA does provide some potential opportunity for the growth of Oxford northward, while constraining the city to the on the south, east, and west of its boundaries. The 1UA on the other hand, for the reasons set out above, will see commercial growth focused beyond the green belt.

As such, only the Greater Oxford and the 3UA proposal would allow the city to expand in a balanced way, delivering more land to meet demand. This land will also be in the right places, close to its universities, hospitals and science parks, while protecting rural areas from dispersed and unsustainable development. By focusing jobs closer to good public transport links, it will make sustainable travel the easy choice and reduce the need for car-based commuting. Moreover, Oxford's economy would become more productive, with expansion allowing for a greater proportion of higher value jobs to come forward. The provision of additional commercial land around Oxford, facilitating a more productive sector mix, are both noted by Volterra as reasons why the 3UA option will drive more economic growth that the 1UA or 2UA options.

Research from the Centre for Cities also shows that locating development in this way around urban areas creates agglomeration, which drives even greater productivity and innovation through three interconnected channels:

- Sharing: businesses benefit from shared infrastructure and services, achieving economies of scale and lowering costs.
- Learning: regular interaction accelerates the exchange of ideas between firms, researchers, and institutions.
- Matching: dense labour markets make it easier for employers to find the right skills and for workers to secure high-quality, highly skilled jobs.

Volterra's modelling shows that this specific agglomeration effect adds a further **£5.3 billion in GVA** in addition to the direct impact of new, and more productive, jobs. The result is self-sustaining growth: firms locate near leading institutions, attract skilled workers, and in turn generate more innovation and investment.

This growth will be delivered through strong local partnerships. Greater Oxford will build on the City Councils close relationships with the University of Oxford, Oxford Brookes, the NHS, major landowners, and major employers such as BMW Mini and Culham (the UK's first approved AI Growth Zone) to shape investment, coordinate infrastructure, and ensure that new development supports both economic and environmental goals.

The City Council's ability to bring together partnerships alongside EDF Renewables, the University of Oxford, Habitat Energy, RedT and Kensa to deliver the Energy Superhub Oxford and Europe's most powerful EV charging hub demonstrates a track record in leveraging innovation to make transport clean. Strong partnerships and strategic leadership from the City Council has already brought through the re-opening of the Cowley Branch Line. This will provide vital and sustainable connectivity options to new and existing jobs.

A model that works for the whole county

We have set out in this proposal the importance of ensuring Oxford as a city realises its full potential through agglomeration and intensification of development on edge of city sites. Growth which does not address Oxford's constraints and which relies on provision spread across the County will see Oxford fail.

However, whilst a successful Oxford is vital to a prosperous region, it is equally important that all parts of the County flourish. To close the productivity gap between Oxfordshire and other parts of the Thames Valley MSA region requires a pan-Oxfordshire approach.

Northern Oxfordshire has a strong base in advanced manufacturing, logistics, and green technology, with market towns such as Banbury, Bicester and Witney providing vibrant local economies. Around 36% of residents hold degree level qualifications, and another 40% have intermediate or technical skills. With greater local control, the new council can strengthen partnerships with Bicester Motion, Banbury College and the Oxfordshire Advanced Skills Centre to deliver new training routes in sustainable industry, clean mobility and construction. There can also be a focus on the strengths of the market towns, ensuring that economic growth reflects the character and identity of much-loved communities, towns and villages, with a focus on creating new jobs across sectors such as mid tech, motorsport, tourism and agriculture.

In Ridgeway there will be the opportunity to progress Harwell's unique offer as part of the wider Science Vale and the expansion of Didcot. Alongside the Harwell Campus, Milton Park and Didcot Garden Town together host more than 250 companies working in life sciences, space, quantum technologies and renewable energy. Around 41% of residents hold degree level qualifications, supporting one of the most productive workforces in the country. The Crown Estates recent acquisition of a 221 acre site next to the Harwell Campus with potential for 4.5m sq ft of laboratory and advanced manufacturing space provides an enormous opportunity.

Under the new structure, Ridgeway and Norther Oxfordshire unitary authorities will coordinate growth across these nationally significant sites for the first time, working with the MSA.

Together, these changes will enable Northern Oxfordshire and Ridgeway to grow in ways that strengthen local economies while preserving the distinctive character of their much-loved communities, towns and villages.

The most impactful option

Volterra have undertaken modelling to look at the likely different economic futures under each of the different LGR proposals. They conclude that the 3UA option is the only one that is likely to provide co-ordinated governance, able to prioritise the needs of each of the three unitaries. Furthermore, that it is the best option to support the release of more land in the right places, and at scale, including around Oxford. As such, 3UA delivers more effective and timely investment, more, productive jobs, and greater agglomeration benefits. Volterra look at past trends and forecasts to conclude that the 3UA is best able to deliver a step change in employment growth, increasing it from its historic trend rate of 1% to 1.3% per annum, across the 3UAs.

While they conclude that both the 1UA and 2UA will both suffer from governance and leadership unable to prioritise across both urban and rural dimensions of their areas, they recognise that the 2UA does have the ability to support Oxford's growth northwards, estimating that this could deliver employment growth at 1.1% per annum. However, the political and policy constraints faced by the 1UA in releasing more land around Oxford, alongside the governance issues, lead Volterra to conclude that this option will not be able to make a step change in the county's economic growth and would continue to see Oxfordshire's jobs growth at the status quo, 1% per annum.

Table 4.1: Volterra Comparative Economic Impact of Alternative LGR Models

	3UA	2UA	1UA
Total jobs growth up to 2050	**218,000**	**180,000**	**153,000**
Direct additional GVA up to 2050 (NPV)	£37.8bn	£15.5bn	£0bn
Additional GVA from agglomeration benefit up to 2050 (NPV)	£5.3bn	£0.8bn	£0bn
Total additional GVA up to 2050 (NPV)	£43.1bn	£16.3bn	£0bn
Total GVA (NPV) to 2050	£168.8bn	£142bn	£125.7bn
Annual GVA growth	2.6%	2.0%	1.8%

As set out in the table above, Volterra conclude that the 3UA could deliver £43.1bn more in GVA than the 1UA option, and £26.8bn more than the 2UA. The 3UA could also see 65,000 more jobs up to 2050, than the 1UA option, and 38,000 more than under 2UA.

Prosperity with Purpose

True prosperity must be shared. Despite Oxfordshire's global reputation for research and invention, some communities still feel disconnected from opportunity. The three unitary model places inclusive growth at its heart, ensuring that economic success reaches every corner of the county.

The emerging MSA will set strategic policies for delivering skills across the region to ensure the needs of businesses are met. However, growth will only be truly inclusive if there are locally identified bespoke interventions which deal with the specific challenges of individual communities and ensure all residents have access to emerging opportunities. We believe this is best achieved through a 3UA model rather than via larger unitaries which are likely to replicate the role of the MSA.

Each council will have the power and insight to tailor skills and employment programmes to local needs, ensuring that prosperity and the growth of opportunities are more widely shared. In Greater Oxford, where inequality remains high, partnerships with universities, hospitals and major employers will create new opportunities in the city's growing innovation economy. In Northern Oxfordshire, where technical skills are a major strength, collaboration between colleges, businesses and local government will expand apprenticeships and training in sectors such as low carbon manufacturing

and logistics. In Ridgeway, partnerships with the science and energy institutions at Harwell and Milton Park will ensure that local people can access the jobs created in these fast-growing sectors.

Improving access to training, transport and housing will make growth more inclusive. Each authority will integrate employment and infrastructure planning so that people can live closer to where they work, reducing commuting pressures and supporting a greener, healthier economy. This balanced approach will create stronger, more connected communities and ensure that Oxfordshire's prosperity benefits all who live and work here.

4.2 Homes

Building the homes Oxfordshire needs

The three unitary authorities model offers the biggest opportunity in a generation to unlock housing for Oxfordshire. It could deliver 1,220 more homes per year than other proposals (16,000 over 15 years)[5]. It addresses the long-standing housing shortage across Oxfordshire, providing the homes needed for the future, while protecting wider rural locations from inappropriate development that may be otherwise required to deal with Oxford's overspill.

By releasing just 2.6% of the current Green Belt around Oxford, only enabled by rebounding the city to create Greater Oxford, up to 40,000 homes in total could be built by 2040 – with at least 40% of these being affordable homes. This would be coupled with major housebuilding projects already proposed or underway including at Didcot, Dalton Barracks, Salt Cross and Heyford Park that will deliver large numbers of homes across Oxfordshire.

Engagement with the public in Oxfordshire has consistently shown that there is strong support for building more genuinely affordable homes in the right places. In Oxford City Council's 2025 Resident Satisfaction Survey[6], only 14% of Oxford residents said they were satisfied with the number of homes being delivered to meeting housing need. Citizens want these homes to be close to jobs, connected by good infrastructure. Unlocking housebuilding at this scale is also the only way to ensure Oxfordshire can deliver on Oxfordshire's economic growth potential and increase prosperity.

Building at density, particularly around Oxford, will enable more sustainable and viable public transport routes as well as active travel – reducing congestion. The scale of delivery possible in Greater Oxford will also mean that Ridgeway and Northern Oxfordshire will no longer need to meet Oxford's unmet housing demand. Because of this they can focus on delivering homes which fit the specific characteristics and needs of their unique settlements.

Oxfordshire's housing crisis

Oxfordshire does not build enough homes. There are several contributing factors, included the under-bounded nature of Oxford city alongside its restrictive Green Belt, and the historic townscape in and around Oxford and many other parts of the county and around the city.

[5] This is calculated as with authorities delivering their Standard Method numbers of homes and excludes the delivery of the New Town at Hayford Park as New Towns are not part of the Standard Method targets.

[6] Satisfaction with Oxford and Oxford City Council rise but concerns about housing, transport and crime remain, Oxford City Council 2025

On current boundaries, due to a lack of available land, the city can accommodate less than half the housing target set by the Government's new Standard Method. This would therefore require the export of around 600 dwellings per year to is neighbours. With Oxford's Green Belt in place, this then forces growth around towns and villages unconnected to the city.

While a national issue, this lack of supply is perhaps felt most keenly in Oxford, which is the least affordable city in the UK – with the average house price 13.6 times the average wage.[7] and average wages are 68% of average rent levels in the city. With one third of the city's housing stock privately rented (either as HMO or private tenancy), the issue of affordability of housing is further exacerbated.

These issues have in turn spread this demand and price inflation across Oxfordshire. There is an overwhelming need for all tenures of affordable housing, and particularly socially-rented properties in Oxfordshire.[8]

This is a cost of living, a public health and a quality-of-life issue for many of Oxfordshire's residents. Furthermore, where growth has happened it has typically leaped the green belt, creating congestion issues, additional carbon emissions, and made it harder to deliver sustainable public transport connections. Economic growth in Oxfordshire is also being held back by these issues, making us a less attractive place to set up or expand a business. Other competitor locations globally can offer a higher quality of life with lower housing costs.

Unlocking home building and meeting Oxford's housing need

The boundary change to create Greater Oxford, proposed as part of the 3UA option, is the most appropriate and most sustainable way for Oxford to meet its own housing need. It is the only option that will deliver homes at scale close to jobs, amenities and public and active transport networks, via a careful but strategic green belt release.

As noted in the Prosperity section above, both the 1UA and 2UA option would instead see Oxford housing need spread across a wider area, where the abundance of available land outside the green belt would need to be prioritised. Setting aside any political imperative within the 1UA and 2UA not to grow the city, national planning guidance limits the ability to allocate green belt land, especially where other developable land is available in local plan areas. As such both options would serve to increase the pressure on villages and smaller towns across a wider area and add further stress to an already creaking transport network. In the case of the 1UA this housing would be spread county-wide, and in the case of the 2UA, this additional housing would need to be met in what is currently Cherwell and West Oxfordshire.

Under 3UA, Greater Oxford's ability to deliver its own housing need will allow the Northern Oxfordshire and Ridgeway Councils' plan-making process to focus on their own growth requirements, with new homes that fit these locations and communities, alongside the need to conserve the current natural environment and characteristics of rural settlements.

The 3UA approach will also improve the quality, function, and accessibility of Oxford's green belt. New development will be expected to deliver on-site green spaces as well as contributing to

[7] Centre for Cities, Cities Outlook 2025.

[8] Volterra report, 2025

expanding and maintaining public access areas while protecting and enhancing other areas for biodiversity net gain and nature recovery. This could support the potential expansion of Shotover Country Park, or the realisation of Berks Bucks & Oxon Wildlife Trust's (BBOWT's) ambition of linking the unique habitats of Otmoor and Bernwood. This will be supported by ensuring appropriate developer contributions and land value capture from the release of green belt land. It will also be possible to deliver appropriate levels of community infrastructure, working with the local communities to ensure their voice guides its design and delivery.

Oxfordshire bus operators are also clear that increasing the density of housing around the city would directly improve the viability of bus services to villages in the Greater Oxford area.

The best option for homes

The 3UA option therefore provides the best opportunity to address housing delivery given the imperative Greater Oxford would have to unlock green belt land, and the political and technical challenges faced by the 1UA and 2UA options in doing the same.

It provides the land and opportunities to deliver housing in line with the new Standard Method in each of the 3UA. Moreover, it creates the platform to go beyond this target in Greater Oxford by 16,000 homes up to 2040. This could result in over 1,200 homes per year above the new Standard Method being delivered. The table below demonstrates this, setting out housing targets based on the old Standard Method (SM) and the new one for the existing district councils across Oxfordshire, alongside the proposed new ones under the 3UA option.

Table 4.2: Model of housing supply annually under existing and 3UA models

	Old SM	New SM	3UA with new SM	3UA potential (supply-led)
Oxford City	762	1,087	1,449 (Greater Oxford)	2,666 (Greater Oxford)
West	549	905	1,837 (Northern Oxfordshire)	
Cherwell	706	1,118		
South	579	1,179	1,952 (Ridgeway without W Berks)	
Vale	633	949		
Total	**3,229**	**5,238**	**5,238**	**6,455**

Greater Oxford's drive towards a more ambitious housing targets could be further supported by the creation of one or more Mayoral Development Corporations in collaboration with the new Mayoral Strategic Authority (MSA). This would build upon Oxford City Council's strong reputation as a proactive partner in delivering growth and act a catalyst for targeted growth. It is also welcome news that a New Town is proposed in Northern Oxfordshire, at Heyford Park. However, Government is clear that this housing growth will be in addition to the new Standard Method requirements , so removing Oxford's unmet need from the equation will be helpful in achieving this.

4.3 Quality of Life

The 3UA proposal will develop place-based organisations that possess deep local knowledge and insight, adopting a whole systems approach to enable access to high quality services across Oxfordshire and West Berkshire to provide better quality of life. Placed based collaboration will ensure outcomes that matter most to residents are reflected in local strategies through bringing together functions and partners across the system, at a local level to deliver joint outcomes. Place-based partnerships will focus on tackling the root causes that currently lead to health, social and economic inequalities across the footprint.

The ambition is to develop affordable homes in the right places, place-based investment to boost transport and connectivity so individuals can better access spaces and jobs that fit their personal aspirations, safeguard green spaces and uphold climate resilience, provide proactive health and care services that consider all the wider determinants of health within their design to help residents maintain their wellbeing and age well, enhance education settings to meet the needs of all children supporting them to preserve their sense of belonging and ensure community safety.

All these strategic objectives are best delivered through the 3UA proposal as place-based organisations support quality and sustainability of local services.[7] District councils' deep community connections and extensive local knowledge is well evidenced to effectively improve the health and quality of lives, as service delivery is embedded within communities, generating local-level insights that shape service design.[8] These strengths will be built on through detailed analysis of local contexts within each unitary, to determine functions that are best delivered across system, place and neighbourhood levels to better resident outcomes.

Supporting our communities

Our public survey on LGR received 1,580 responses from residents across Oxfordshire and West Berkshire, evidencing 80% agreement that urban and rural areas require different approaches to housing, transport, social care, education, skills, and other key council services. The 3UA proposal provides a platform to best deliver improved socio-economic outcomes through enhanced service integration, simplified governance and increased democratic accountability in a way that best addresses specific rural and urban needs. It will establish authorities that are closer to communities they serve.

Our extensive public engagement shows there is an aspiration for high quality services and outcomes that enable residents to live healthy and rewarding lives. However, this is not a reality for many across Oxfordshire as socio-economic and geographic differences mean unequal access to opportunities.

Research highlights that residents in rural areas are more likely to be impacted by the twin pressures of energy and transport poverty due to environmental and infrastructural characteristics, including older homes with poor insulation.[9] Urban pressures more typically include housing affordability, social and economic inequalities and deprivation. 3UA will allow for mobilisation of more locally responsive services in rural geographies, including better infrastructure across Northern Oxfordshire

[9] Identifying double energy vulnerability: A systematic and narrative review of groups at-risk of energy and transport poverty in the global north

and Ridgeway and sustainable local development strategies to ensure rural communities are prioritised.

Deep pockets of deprivation persist across Oxfordshire, in the city, urban market towns and rural areas, which often require different responses. The one size fits all approach of a single unitary risks failing to meet specific needs of different communities. The extent of local differences is stark – a 14-year gap in life expectancy exists for men across the footprint and 26% of children in Oxford live below the poverty line.

The most recent figures from the Indices of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) indicated that Oxford's place-based, preventative approach is working, with improvements in areas within the Community Impact Zone[10] and adjacent to the service hub provided by Rose Hill Community Centre. Other areas in the city that have moved up from the lowest 20% IMD rankings have benefitted from the City Council locality working model, with Neighbourhood Plans driving the focus for support and resources in places that are now seeing better outcomes, like Barton and Blackbird Leys. Overall, the city has reduced the number of areas in the 20% most deprived from nine to four areas. This demonstrates the power of place-based, locally led interventions to tackle the root causes of issues that can have life-long impacts and create better outcomes for individuals and communities.

The IMD figures also show South Oxfordshire, West Berkshire and Vale of White Horse are closely grouped in the average rankings, indicative of their similarities and shared challenges. Oxford continues to be an outlier with the highest average ranking, with Cherwell more closely aligning to West Oxfordshire. The ability of these areas to take an appropriate, place based and preventative approach will be strengthened by the three unitary arrangement that brings together places with shared characteristics.

A focus on residents and communities

Delivering better outcomes for residents through public services is about focusing on individuals and families, rather than expecting them to bend around council siloes. From a service perspective it is about creating a single and integrated pathway, to avoid residents from having to tell their story multiple times. We understand that human experiences and needs are complex, requiring a holistic and systems-based approach underpinned by a strong insight, to identify and address the root cause of demand and promote holistic problem-solving.

Deeply community-connected services will form the backbone of neighbourhood working, strengthening partnerships with health, education, and voluntary sectors, and making full use of multi-agency Hubs. Oxford City Council's Rose Hill Community Centre already performs such a function – housing council, NHS, Police and voluntary sector services in one of the most deprived areas of the city. As a result it was the venue chosen for the joint Oxfordshire councils' launch of the countywide Marmot Place initiative. This integrated, place-based approach builds resilience and reduce reliance on acute support services over time. This way of working will seek to link into wider community assets, a strong wellbeing leisure offer and local green spaces.

[10] The Community Impact Zone (CIZ) aims to tackle inequalities of health, education and opportunity in South East Oxford www.oxfordhub.org/ciz

This approach will support a person-centred, community-based, preventative approach within adult social care. This will enable residents to receive support in a personalised way through effective short-term interventions, technology-enabled care, and specialist housing as powerful alternatives to traditional, high-cost models of provision.

Caring, stable, and nurturing family environments, supporting by the wider community offer will underpin Children's Services. Expanding existing specialist provision will allow more children to learn closer to home, supported by improved transport infrastructure and inclusive schools that foster belonging and opportunity.

Building on existing practice

This is not new territory for district councils, which are already embedded within the delivery of support for vulnerable residents and have a strong on-the-ground presence. This is instrumental to promoting and enabling the independence and wellbeing of local populations.[11] Far from all the relevant knowledge sitting in the existing upper tier authority, Oxfordshire's District Councils are well versed in being the first point of contact for individuals requiring support through their housing, benefits and neighbourhood teams.

Oxford City Council's Home Improvement Agency exemplifies this, as it has enabled residents to remain at home through accessing grants for adaptations – this includes creating safer home environments for individuals with dementia and those experiencing frailty, preventing hospital admissions or transfer to care homes.

District Councils are also deeply embedded within communities and core to prevention delivery, including providing support for individuals who fall below statutory and social care thresholds. Oxford City Council worked in close partnership with Oxfordshire County Council to deliver Blackbird Leys Youth Hub which provides support services and activities for young people, driving positive outcomes including improved mental and physical wellbeing, and skills for life and work.

Districts also lead delivery of projects with system partners that tackle housing and homelessness, possessing local knowledge and invaluable data on issues that people and organisations face day-to-day to design the most effective and evidence-based solutions. Oxford City Council is a leader in this area, partnering with third sector organisations including Crisis to deliver innovations like Built for Zero to enable communities to end homelessness for specific homeless populations.

3UA will result in councils that are effective stewards and convenors for their areas and are able to effectively deliver locally focused services, connecting residents to support that ensures they are healthier, resilient and able to live quality lives independent of support from the local authority and wider public sector. In contrast to the 1UA and 2UA proposals, 3UA creates smaller more responsive organisations can tailor their services to better meet the need of their residents based on local demography and demand requirements.

Research literature shows that that District councils' smaller geographic scale, deep community connections and extensive local data lead to the development of bespoke services that improve

[11] The power of prevention and place in new unitary councils

health and quality of life.[12] It is precisely these strengths that will be built upon to ensure residents can stay independently at home for as long as possible, benefit from stable employment opportunities and access assets and green spaces that help to build strong community networks and boost overall wellbeing.

Early Intervention and Prevention

The three unitary model will improve residents' quality of life through adopting a place-based approach to reform. The early intervention and prevention offer will be delivered via local hubs that reflect varying needs of local communities across the three unitary authorities. This will ensure that all residents receive support even when they do not meet the thresholds of statutory services. National research highlights place-based approaches as being core to reducing demand and enabling effective service delivery – evidencing that scale is not the key determinant of positive resident outcomes, with no performance improvement across critical services including adult social care for a population size over 500,000.[13] This principle is also seen across Children's Social Care as 58% of existing outstanding Children's Social Care authorities have a population of under 500,000, increasing to 78% if London boroughs are included.

At the heart of reform will be a deep understanding of local identity and the voice of residents, each of whom will have a different definition of what quality of life means for them. For some this will mean reduced travel time to access the right education and learning opportunities to develop their skills. For others it is about receiving respite from caring by funding and providing the right types of services so they can maintain their wellbeing. Resident engagement will be a key design principle within service delivery across the three unitary authorities, ensuring everyone can benefit equally from council-led initiatives.

Oxfordshire's ambition for inclusive growth and planning will be aligned to the vision for place-based prevention, ensuring residents are empowered through seamlessly integrated services, delivered closer to home. This vision is aligned to UK Government's agenda on developing neighbourhood health services to reduce health inequalities as part of the wider 10-year Health Plan for England.

4.4 Identity

Oxfordshire is far from homogeneous, and this is reflected in the very different histories and distinct characteristics of its three proposed unitary authorities: Greater Oxford, Northern Oxfordshire, and Ridgeway. This demographic distinctiveness, coupled with a clearly stated public preference for smaller local authorities closer to the people they serve, underlines the rationale for three separate unitary councils.

While initially settled in Saxon times, Oxford expanded around the founding of its university – the first in the English-speaking world. Since then, it has enjoyed 1,000 years of local government and has held City status for nearly 500 years, serving briefly as England's Royalist capital during the Civil War.

Quite separate for 1,000 years prior to the 1974 local government reorganisation, much of what is currently southern Oxfordshire and all of the Vale of White Horse were part of Berkshire. The

[12] Collaborate, The Bigger You Go the Less You Know for Test Valley

[13] Bigger is not better: the evidenced case for keeping 'local' government

Ridgeway path that connects this area is Britain's oldest road, more than 5,000 years old and runs east-west – not to Oxford - threading its way between the market towns of Wallingford, Wantage, Newbury and Hungerford.

Banbury also long predates Oxford, having been settled since the Iron Age in an area that was latterly shaped by the Fosse Way and the Salt Way. It has always formed the natural centre of northern Oxfordshire, just as Witney and its specialised traditional industries like tweed and blanket making and the Cotswolds Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty characterise western Oxfordshire.

On the ground public engagement on LGR by Oxford City Council officers and members, as well as our 1,580-response survey revealed just how different identities are across the Oxfordshire and West Berkshire geography. For most people across the county, Oxford does not define Oxfordshire and - other than residents of the city and its hinterland - they describe their identities in other ways.

Three unitary councils covering respectively northern and western Oxfordshire, the city of Oxford and central Oxfordshire, and the linked areas that were historically connected with Berkshire, will much better reflect the true identities of these areas than lumping them together.

Distinct priorities and needs

Over recent years, several detailed studies and plans have been undertaken by city and district councils in recent years to better understand residents' vision, priorities and needs for the different places in which they live. These studies include: Oxford2050 Vision, West Oxfordshire Market Towns study, Banbury Vision 2050, Bicester Healthy New Town study, South & Vale Draft Local Plan 2041 and West Berkshire Local Plan 2041.[14] Taken together, these show that pride of place and the aspirations of local residents reveal themselves in very different ways in across the wider geography.

Greater Oxford

Oxford stands out from the rest of the county. Its population is younger, much more diverse, and more densely housed. Nearly a quarter of its residents are students, including many postgraduates, and consequently it has fewer families with children, and most people rent their accommodation.

This young, diverse, highly qualified and very mobile population identifies directly with the opportunities brought through growth. The Oxford2050 Vision – produced with the input of the city's residents and businesses - set an aspiration that "Oxford's population will continue to grow over the next thirty years as people are drawn to live, work and study in our attractive, vibrant and thriving city." A recurring theme of the vision is the desire for more affordable housing, homes near jobs, and protection for renters.

Over the decades Oxford, Botley, Kidlington and Kennington and Sandford-on-Thames have become a near contiguous conurbation, despite spanning four separate district council areas. The hamlet of Shotover, which sits in South Oxfordshire can only be accessed by road through Oxford itself.

[14] Oxford 2050 Vision, West Oxfordshire Market Towns study, Banbury Vision 2050, Bicester Healthy New Town study, South and Vale Draft Local Plan 2041, West Berkshire Local Plan 2041

This proximity brings people together and unsurprisingly, while some residents attending drop-in engagement sessions on LGR in Botley, Kidlington and Kennington highlighted the distinctive nature of these parishes, many acknowledged the areas they lived already felt like part of Oxford and welcomed an opportunity to have a say in how the city is run.

While Wheatley and Berinsfield are separated from the city, most of their residents have regular work, family or leisure connections with the city and regularly use its services including retail, art and health facilities. All struggle with the chronic congestion in and around Oxford.

Greater Oxford would be a completely new authority, belonging as much to places like Wheatley, Berinsfield and Kidlington as to Oxford. The services will be provided across the whole area and for the first time in 50 years local residents would have more control over Oxford's transport. The proposals would provide additional bus services to villages around the city by extending existing routes. They will also see a redoubled focus on tackling the stark inequalities that are seen in some Oxford suburbs like Blackbird Leys and Rose Hill, as well as Berinsfield – all of which face long-standing challenges including low income, long-term unemployment, and poor health.

Places within the city itself still retain their distinct identities and even continue with a village identity as in Iffley Village and Old Marston. There is real local identity that differs between places like Barton and Jericho, or Blackbird Leys and Wheatley and our proposal aims to support community engagement and empowerment at the neighbourhood level across all areas of Greater Oxford, including the creation of Neighbourhood Area Committees.

Graphics will follow to capture the following stats:

As with many prosperous areas, Greater Oxford experiences stark inequalities. While overall health outcomes are better than the England average, there is a 10-year gap in male life expectancy between different areas.[15] *Wealthy wards within Oxford, like Jericho, Marston, and Summertown are among the least deprived in the country, but they exist alongside areas such as Blackbird Leys and Rose Hill, which . In other more deprived parts of Greater Oxford such as Berinsfield, 21% of children live in absolute poverty, more than double the county average (10%)*[16] *and 26% of households claim Universal Credit, compared to 16% in Oxfordshire as a whole.*[17]

The average age in Oxford is 31 years.[18]*, the youngest of any settlement across the three areas, compared to averages in the 40s elsewhere. Oxford is the fifth most densely populated district in the South East of England, and Greater Oxford is the most densely populated of the three unitary authorities, with an estimated 585 residents per square kilometre*[19]*,.*

Young adults aged 15–24 years, make up 19% of Greater Oxford's population, which is above the national average of 12%[20]*,. This is largely due to the student and postgraduate population in Oxford, where nearly a quarter (23%) of residents fall in this age group. These factors, combined with the*

[15] Office for National Statistics. Life Expectancy tables

[16] Children aged 0-19 years old living in absolute low income families, DWP 2024

[17] Total households on universal credit, DWP, May 2025

[18]Census 2021.

[19] Census 2021.

[20] ONS mid-year population estimates 2022

area's thriving knowledge economy, contribute to Greater Oxford being one of the most highly educated areas in England: 47% of residents hold qualifications at Level 4 or above, compared to 42% across Oxfordshire and 34% nationally[21],.

As a result of its younger profile, Greater Oxford has the lowest proportion of older residents, with just 15% of the population aged 65 or over; lower than England (19%), Northern Oxfordshire (19%) and Ridgeway (20%)[22],. Conversely, it also has the smallest proportion of children under 15 (15%) of the three unitary authorities, which compares to 17% in Northern Oxfordshire and 19% in Ridgeway[23],.

Housing tenure reflects this demographic profile. Only 56% of residents in Greater Oxford own their home (with or without a mortgage), compared to 65% across Oxfordshire. Private renting is more common, with 27% of households renting privately or living rent-free, compared to 20% countywide. Greater Oxford also has higher rates of social renting (17% vs 15% countywide), rising to 21% in Oxford and 37% in Berinsfield, which lies in the south of the Greater Oxford area[24],.

Of the three unitary authorities, house prices are highest in Greater Oxford, averaging £550,800[25]. This is driven largely by Oxford's average of £573,300, making it the least affordable of the three unitary authorities.

Greater Oxford is the most ethnically diverse part of Oxfordshire. Only 76% of residents identify as White, compared to 87% countywide. The proportion of Asian, Asian British or Asian Welsh residents is 13%, more than double the county average (6%). Just 70% of Greater Oxford residents were born in the UK, compared to 83% across England, 86% in Northern Oxfordshire, and 88% in Ridgeway.[26]

Northern Oxfordshire

Northern Oxfordshire includes towns such as Banbury, Bicester, Chipping Norton, Witney, and Woodstock. These are proud, characterful, and community-driven places — rooted in heritage and independence – and all are growing rapidly. Amongst the market towns the area is a mix of rural villages across, and it is the least densely populated of the three unitary authority areas at 222 residents per square kilometre, about half the national average.

Northern Oxfordshire has often looked outwards rather than to the centre of the county, with West Oxfordshire District closely linked with Gloucestershire through its joint ownership interest in Publica and Ubico the two Teckal companies that provide many public services which it jointly owns. Cherwell District had a Section 113 formal joint working arrangement with South Northants up to the "forced divorce" in 2019 caused by Northamptonshire's own local government reorganisation.

Many longstanding residents identify with their locale - the Cotswolds or the Cherwell Valley. Yet, the area has many newer residents in more recent or still emerging settlements such as Carterton,

[21] Census 2021

[22] ONS mid-year population estimates 2022

[23] ONS mid-year population estimates 2022

[24] All tenure figures are from Census 2021

[25] Land registry data; September 2024 to August 2025

[26] Census 2021

Graven Hill and Heyford Park. There is also a wide variation across the area in terms of diversity and affluence between rural communities to more urban centres like Banbury and Bicester.

As the West Oxfordshire Market Towns study shows, many residents feel disconnected from strategic decisions and want more local voice, investment, and care in shaping their future. Residents attending the LGR drop-in event in Banbury were fiercely proud of their hometown and were equally clear they didn't wish decisions on its future to be taken in Oxford.

These characteristics call for a place-based and locally responsive approach. While much of the area is relatively affluent, inequalities persist, particularly in the more urban centres such as Banbury. A joined-up system that brings together housing, education, health, and infrastructure will be essential. Tailored solutions for isolated rural communities, older residents, and disadvantaged towns must be informed by the voices of residents.

Graphics will follow to capture the following stats:

Residents in the Northern Oxfordshire area are generally older than Greater Oxford, with most towns having average ages in the 40s. Conversely, Northern Oxfordshire has the highest proportion of children under the age of five (6%), and 19% of the population are under 15, higher than Greater Oxford (15%) but similar to Ridgeway (19%)[27].

Home ownership is high, with 67% of residents owning their homes. This is above the Oxfordshire average (65%) and higher than Greater Oxford (56%). Northern Oxfordshire also has the highest proportion of people living in houses (88%) of the three unitary authorities. This compares to the England average of 77%[28].

Towns such as Banbury and Carterton face high levels of deprivation, lower qualification levels, and significant private renting. Banbury has three areas ranked among the 20% most deprived in England[29]. By contrast, places like Woodstock, Burford, and Standlake are among the least deprived.

Child poverty is higher in Northern Oxfordshire than Ridgeway, with 10.5% of children living in absolute poverty, compared to 8.5% in Ridgeway, although both have lower child poverty rates than Greater Oxford at 11%. Within the Northern Oxfordshire area, Banbury has child poverty rates as high as 17%, compared to just 6% in Woodstock[30].

Just over 36% of residents who are aged 16 and older, have level 4 and above qualifications. Whilst this is the lowest of the three unitary authorities, it is higher than the England average of 34%. Additionally, 15% of adults in Northern Oxfordshire have no qualifications, the highest proportion of the three areas but lower than the country average of 18%[31].

Ethnic diversity is lower than Greater Oxford, with 91% of residents identifying as White, compared to 75% in Greater Oxford and 87% countywide. The largest ethnic minority group is Asian (4%), though

[27] ONS mid year population estimates 2022

[28] Census 2021

[29] Indices of Multiple Deprivation 2025.

[30] Children aged 0-19 years old living in absolute low income families, DWP 2024

[31] Census 2021.

this remains below the Oxfordshire average (6%)[32]. Greater diversity exists in towns such as Banbury and Bicester.

Ridgeway

The Ridgeway area stretches from the outskirts of Reading across the hills of the North Wessex Downs and includes a mix of towns, villages, and rural communities. Larger settlements include Abingdon, Didcot, Henley and Newbury; market towns such as Wantage and Wallingford; and smaller villages across West Berkshire, South Oxfordshire, and the Vale of White Horse.

While some towns such as Abingdon, Didcot, and Henley act as commuter and economic hubs with strong rail and road links that connect via Reading to London, much of Ridgeway is rural, with lower-density settlements and open countryside.

As already highlighted, these areas were connected as part of Berkshire for centuries. Amateur football teams in southern Oxfordshire still compete in the Berkshire League. Some older residents, along with the campaigning group CountyWatch still hold allegiances to Berkshire and describe their transfer into Oxfordshire as 'cultural vandalism'.[33]

Across South Oxfordshire, the Vale of White Horse and West Berkshire, local identity is defined by the meeting of heritage, landscape and community stewardship — and the shared ambition is to manage change so that new growth belongs to place rather than replacing it.

The area's large geographic spread and varied settlement types mean services must be tailored to a wide range of needs. Coordinating transport, health, housing, and education at a local level will be vital to ensuring equity. Engaging directly with communities, particularly in areas facing disadvantage, will help shape responsive and inclusive services across Ridgeway's social and geographic landscape.

The longstanding links across this geography is reflected in the strong local political support for the creation of a Ridgeway unitary authority. In putting forward their two unitary Ridgeway proposal councils in West Berkshire, South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse highlight the strong demographic and economic similarities and significant historic ties. The only significant difference with the three unitary Ridgeway proposal is the line of its northern boundary with Oxford, with Greater Oxford taking in around 40,000 residents close to the city.

Graphics will follow to capture the following stats:

Residents in Ridgeway are older on average than Greater Oxford, with most settlements having average ages in the 40s. It has the highest proportion of people aged 65 and over, of the three unitary areas (20%), compared to 19% in Northern Oxfordshire and 15% in Greater Oxford. However, Ridgeway also has the highest proportion of children under 15 (19%)[34], pointing to a mixed-age population with intergenerational needs.

[32] Census 2021.

[33] Berkshire and Oxfordshire boundary debate still rages 50 years on, BBC News 2025

[34] ONS mid year population estimates 2022

Home ownership is highest in Ridgeway, with 69% of households owning their home outright or with a mortgage. This is above both Northern Oxfordshire (67%) and Greater Oxford (56%). Only 16% of households rent privately (compared to 27% in Greater Oxford), and social renting is also lower, at 14%, versus 17%[35] in Greater Oxford.

Ridgeway is the least deprived of the three areas, with a lower overall Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) score[36]. It has the highest proportion of residents who fall in social grade AB (35%)[37], and the lowest level of children in absolute poverty overall (8.5%)[38] of the three unitary authorities.

However, as is the case for both Greater Oxford and Northern Oxfordshire, Ridgeway is not an homogeneous area. While child poverty rates are low overall (around 5% in many areas within Ridgeway), there are places where poverty levels are much higher. In parts of Abingdon, Didcot, and Calcot for example, up to 16% of children live in absolute poverty[39].

Ridgeway is the least ethnically diverse of the three unitary areas. Around 92% of residents identify as White, compared to 87% countywide and 75% in Greater Oxford. The largest ethnic minority group is Asian, making up 3% of the population. However, more diverse populations exist in Didcot and Abingdon, where 80% of residents identify as White[40].

4.5 Voice

A New Democratic Vision for Oxfordshire

This proposal's overarching ambition is to establish the right powers, at the right scale, to deliver real change for our communities and places, leading to services and places designed with and for residents. In our LGR survey of 1,580 residents across Oxfordshire and West Berkshire, 69% agreed that: *councils are most effective when they are smaller and closer to the people they serve, enabling them to respond and adapt more easily to local needs.*

The proposed three unitary model achieves this by empowering Oxfordshire's towns and villages to speak strongly for their residents and businesses, at a scale and geography that more closely and accurately represents their interests. The model does the same for Oxford, where effective city-level governance is essential to managing the conurbation, and ensuring decision can be taken that prioritise its needs and maximises its growth potential. By creating an appropriately sized authority, communities can better hold politicians to account.

However, achieving real change is about more than getting the scale right. The success of the new authorities will also depend on their structure, size, and how effectively they engage and collaborate, formally and informally, with communities and partners. Our approach focuses on fostering strong strategic leadership, ensuring clear democratic accountability, and strengthening the community

[35] Census 2021.

[36] Indices of Multiple Deprivation 2025.

[37] Census 2021.

[38] Children aged 0-19 years old living in absolute low income families, DWP 2024

[39] Children aged 0-19 years old living in absolute low income families, DWP 2024

[40] Census 2021.

leadership role of local government. Together, these principles will ensure that Oxfordshire's future governance is firmly rooted in the communities it serves.

Effective decision making

With unitary powers and responsibilities, each authority can make impactful decisions that shape its area in line with local, regional, and national priorities. This approach aligns with a coherent geographic structure that maintains clear rural–urban distinctions, ensuring that the interests of cities and the countryside are not set in opposition. Realising this potential, however, depends on a governance framework that enables effective and streamlined decision-making. We therefore propose a modern constitution and tailored support for each authority, establishing proportionate governance requirements so that decisions are not mired in red tape and councillors can focus on delivery.

Larger unitary structures at a county level, or a two unitary division, would see a continuation of the decades old dynamic that has seen the interests of city and rural areas represented together in a vehicle which is unable to effectively speak for either, frustrating the ability of all Oxfordshire's places to reach their full potential.

Clear accountability and responsibilities

The current two-tier system can be confusing, leaving many residents uncertain about who is responsible for their services. Our proposal replaces this complexity with clear, single-point accountability.

With unambiguous responsibility, councillors will become more visible, influential, and effective advocates for their communities. Each new authority will be designed for decisive leadership, balanced by robust, transparent scrutiny and enhanced support for elected members. Together, these changes will create a system that can act with clarity and confidence, while ensuring decisions are well-considered and responsive to the needs of local communities.

Unlike the 2UA and 1UA options, the place-based scale of the 3UAs will also ensure the councils are accountable to their populations at the ballot box. As an alternative to this, Oxford's population would represent 22% of the wider 1UA population, meaning those making the decisions for the city, will not be as accountable to those that live there.

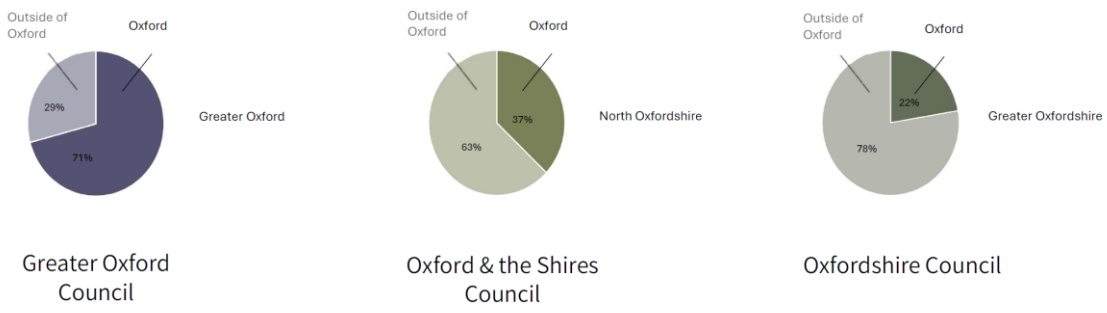


Fig 4.1: Proportion of Oxford population within proposed authority for each proposed option

Empowering Communities Through Genuine Localism

True localism moves beyond the council chamber to bring residents into the very heart of decision-making. We will establish active, formal structures for neighbourhood engagement, centred on new Neighbourhood Area Committees (NACs), in line with central government guidance and reinforced by the *Centre for Governance and Scrutiny Report* commissioned by Oxfordshire County Council.

These will grant communities a direct voice in contributing to and shaping priorities, real influence over decisions, and stewardship of local budgets. They start from the principle that people are experts in their own lives, creating spaces where residents, community groups, and local institutions collaborate as equal partners to co-produce outcomes, ensuring that local insight remains a central pillar of democratic governance. We also understand this approach as a means of building community capacity in its own right: strengthening the networks, confidence, and skills that underpin resilient neighbourhoods, and forming a foundation for wider, preventative, community-based service provision.

This model builds on the strong networks and relationships that already exist across local government and the wider system, while giving ward councillors clearer ways to champion the communities they represent. We will ensure full the NACs are fully coterminous with the planned Health Neighbourhoods set out in the NHS 10-year Plan. This hyper-local focus and voice, alongside the place-based scale of the 3UAs will create a local governance system that works best with the new MSA.

This aligns with the direction set out in the *English Devolution and Community Empowerment Bill*, embedding neighbourhood empowerment and accountability at the core of the new unitary authorities.

Devolution

Following the publication of the English Devolution White Paper in December 2024, devolution discussions are progressing positively, with full support for Oxfordshire and Berkshire as the core of a new Mayoral Strategic Authority. The area has not been placed on the Devolution Priority Programme (DPP) for 2026, but discussions continue to work towards a proposal for the Mayoral Strategic Authority (MSA). The specific boundaries, timelines and priorities for the proposed MSA have not yet been confirmed, but it is anticipated the MSA will vest in 2028 at the same time as the new unitaries.

There are clear advantages to the three unitary authorities model as part of the developing MSA and to ensure that it appropriately works towards its strategic priorities for the wider region while representing the distinct communities of Oxfordshire.

The three unitary authorities approach to LGR will provide multiple constituent authorities built on strong engagement and local democracy models to support the Mayoral Strategic Authority in delivering across the region. The three unitary authorities will provide a balance of three voices for Oxfordshire, representing distinct places within the county. It ensures that the population of Oxford and its specific urban strengths and challenges can be suitably represented at this level alongside the individual representation of the other main economic centres – Reading, Bracknell, Slough and Swindon (dependant on final Government decisions on the make up of the MSA) – but without overpowering the different priorities of the rural populations of the wider Oxfordshire.

Strategic planning with local delivery

A Mayoral Strategic Authority across the wider region will operate across multi-unitary authorities, taking on functions which require a wider strategic regional perspective. This includes management of the growth plan and associated place funding, managing the integrated settlement and investment fund. It will also take on the strategic elements of spatial planning which require work at this level, such as housing, skills, public safety, protecting the environment and tackling climate change, inward investment, economic development and regeneration, and health, wellbeing and public service reform. It will also be responsible for strategic transport planning and delivery.

As such, the role of the Mayoral Combined Authority will allow unitary authorities to focus on local service delivery. They will draw on their deep understanding of local communities' strengths and the support they need to thrive – particularly when those unitary authorities are structured around their distinct communities. By collaborating on joint initiatives and neighbourhood-led schemes, unitary authorities can build on their connections to place and drive health and wellbeing benefits which increase the quality of life for the residents they serve.

The strategic nature of MSAs and their implementation across the country has a clear context for LGR and the role of unitary authorities in the national hierarchy. Larger unitary authority proposals, such as 1UA, aim to provide the advantages of working at a strategic level across a sizable area, which risks not being suitably distinct from the MSA's approach and missing the opportunity to create authorities which can focus on their specific place. Working with smaller authorities, such as the three unitary authorities for Oxfordshire, would provide the strengths of place-based unitary authorities alongside the strategic advantages of MSAs. The three unitary authorities approach is therefore the best fit for the new national hierarchy of local government.

The ambitious housing targets of Greater Oxford could be supported by working with the MSA to create one or more Mayoral Development Corporations – or other, similar, vehicles – to assemble land. This will ensure that development benefits and land value are captured and reinvested into needed infrastructure and services for existing and future communities.

Strong decision making in the strategic authority

A three unitary model in Oxfordshire and West Berkshire, balanced with multi-unitary model across the wider MSA area, combines the benefits of strategic regional leadership, local democratic responsiveness and operational resilience.

While the precise boundaries of the new MSA have yet to be confirmed, whichever options for LGR are pursued would significantly streamline the number of councils across the region. This would entail a significant reduction and, as part of that, there will need to be a constructive balance between scale and efficiency and democratic deficit, which will support strong decision-making.

Devolution enables the MSA to take responsibility for strategic infrastructure planning and delivery, ensuring that these are developed around economic functionalities and not county administrative boundaries. Whilst individual authorities will be able to focus on their own activities, the MSA will be able to take strategic oversight and drive the more major infrastructure projects which would support the specific work of each authority.

Coming together as a Thames Valley area under one MSA will foster a shared identity and purpose, supporting civic pride and a stronger leadership to advocate for the region at a national level. Ensuring that this leadership truly represents the constituent communities requires creating the right unitary authorities to make this up. Creating three unitary authorities with strong models for engagement and participatory democracy will mean that the specific communities and priorities within this area are appropriately represented to the MSA, eliminating policy bias towards only urban or rural priorities.

4.6 Future-Fit

3UA will create three councils are financially robust and sustainable from vesting onwards. Our proposal is self-financing and does not require Exceptional Financial Support (EFS) or any central government subsidy to fund the transition. 3UA fully pays back in 4 years, through efficiencies and transformation savings delivered by streamlining seven councils into three. **By year 5 annual net savings of £48.6 million will be delivered**. The financial sustainability of the three unitaries is underpinned by local resources — including reserves and the Flexible Use of Capital Receipts allowances.

The analysis and modelling that underpins our 'future-fit' financial assessment of the three unitary councils has been reviewed by Pixel Financial, experts in local government finance and funding provide support to over 160 local authorities.

What sets this proposal apart: A blueprint for modern local government

This proposal lays the foundation for a fit-for-purpose, modern model of governance, one that brings together strategic scale, empowered neighbourhoods and robust shared oversight, enabling all partners to drive growth, while ensuring community perspectives are fully woven into decision-making.

First, it gives Oxford the scale and powers to deliver the homes, jobs, and infrastructure the nation needs. With a governance structure designed to support effective decision-making, the city will have the tools, as well as the space, to appropriately to grow its world-leading knowledge economy whilst protecting access to the county's cherished countryside. Unlike other models that prioritise consolidation over effectiveness, this approach balances ambition for growth with a firm commitment to place.

Second, it builds authentic localism into the system. Oxford speaks clearly for the city, while towns and villages across Northern Oxfordshire and Ridgeway are empowered to speak for themselves.

The public survey undertaken across the entire Oxfordshire and West Berkshire geography within which more than 60% of the 1,580 responses came from areas outside of Oxford, found most people agreeing that councils were most effective when smaller and closer to the people they serve. An overwhelming majority of people (80%) expressed a view that urban and rural areas often require different approaches to housing, transport, education and skills, and other key council services.

A right-sized approach to unitarisation means that power resides at a distance which is accessible to each community, rather than getting lost in a bigger authority. Through formalised engagement structures, NACs and parish and town councils, communities will be empowered to contribute to and

shape local priorities. Where other models risk blurring or diluting identity, this one reinforces it, ensuring both urban and rural voices remain strong.

Third, it embeds prevention into the fabric of governance. Stable housing, secure incomes, and resilient neighbourhoods provide the strongest foundations for better outcomes in health, wellbeing, and opportunity. By harnessing local insight and strengthening connections with partners through a clear and consistent approach, the system and its governance are designed to co-create solutions with communities rather than impose them from the top down, delivering more effective and efficient results.

Taken together, these principles create a model that is both ambitious and grounded: strategic in scale, local in voice, and preventative in approach. This is not about redrawing boundaries for their own sake but about implementing the right governance at the right geography, from council chamber to community hall.

Clear, efficient, and future proof, our proposal offers Oxfordshire a credible and resilient framework to meet the challenges of the next generation.

Building a future-proof foundation for Oxfordshire

This proposal provides the building blocks for organisations that are truly fit for the future. A system of local government designed around people, place, and prevention. It is rooted in a commitment to sustainable growth that increases prosperity and income for the new councils. It delivers transformed, prevention-focused services that enable residents to live high-quality, independent lives with reduced need for long-term intervention from the council.

This dual focus on economic resilience and improved quality of life ensures that the new councils can deliver services that work today while remaining flexible and financially sustainable for the future. Through strong local leadership and empowered communities, this model will embed pride in place and strengthen local accountability across Oxfordshire.

Financial sustainability through growth and prevention

Detailed analysis of the finances of the seven existing councils, and modelling of transitional and transformational costs and efficiencies has been reviewed by Pixel Financial. It shows our 3UA proposal is self-financing and does **not** require or seek Exceptional Financial Support (EFS) or any central government subsidy to fund the transition. Instead, it is underpinned by local resources — including reserves and the Flexible Use of Capital Receipts allowances. Our proposal fully pays back in 4 years, through efficiencies and transformation savings delivered by streamlining six councils into three. By year 5 annual net savings of £47 million will be delivered.

This is a self-financing proposal that reimagines traditional local government structures to deliver three modern organisations with **prevention at their core and growth as a key outcome**. By leveraging extended boundaries, the new authorities will broaden their council tax and business rate bases, driving stronger revenue generation. At the same time, a focus on prevention will help to curb demand-led costs through more proactive, targeted interventions. By doing this the right way, we will be on a better financial footing for the longer term.

We have reviewed thoroughly the current performance of adult and children's care services across Oxfordshire and West Berkshire with independent advisors, Inner Circle Consultancy. This work has been woven into this report and highlights the potential for significant preventive opportunities that will help to ensure the delivery of better outcomes for individuals in receipt of care and support, as well as more responsive and efficient services.

Our proposals provide a once-in-a-generation opportunity to establish services that are transformed from vesting day, designed to be future fit from the very start. We know costs are increasing both at a unitary level across social care services due to complexity of need, and market pressures.

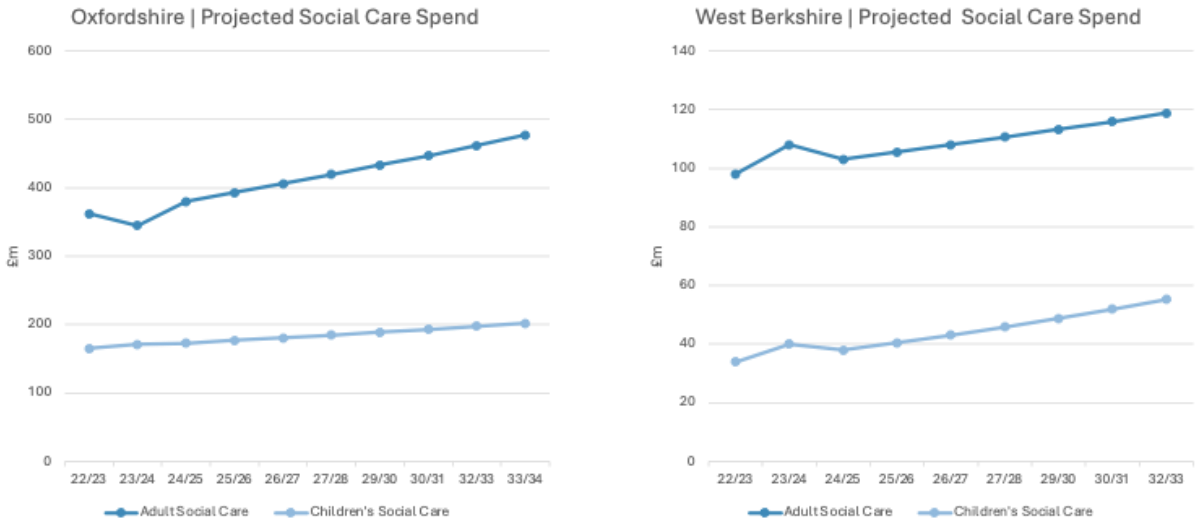


Fig 4.2: Projected Social Care Spend across Oxfordshire and West Berkshire

However, demand pressures are not unique to social care services. Oxford City Council has been recognised nationally as a beacon authority in development programmes which mitigate the rise of temporary accommodation demand and costs, delivering £8.5m in cost avoidance. Nonetheless, the annual pressure of temporary accommodation costs are expected to rise to £5.7m in two years, without further mitigation.

A proactive redesign approach is the key to unlocking both improved outcomes for residents and the financial sustainability required for long-term stability. It provides the foundation for councils that can deliver quality, prevention-led services, while driving growth and reinvesting savings back into their communities.

Building 21st century councils

New operating models for each of the three unitary authorities will deliver services that are fit for a 21st century council, that are efficient, modern, and responsive to local needs. They will prioritise the early resolution of resident queries, fully utilising technology and digital solutions to provide fast, seamless support, while maintaining a strong face-to-face offer for those who need it most. The ability to work at a local level means each authority can be responsive to the priorities of the specific communities they serve.

This future-ready approach will also ensure that the councils can adapt as services evolve and new opportunities arise. Innovative prevention and care services will be designed not only to meet current statutory duties for safe and legal practice, but also to anticipate future reforms and policy shifts.

Services connected to the community

Our transformation will consolidate prevention activity currently dispersed across multiple layers of delivery, enabling councils to streamline processes and embed data-led decision making. This will create a more holistic and efficient approach to prevention, one that avoids future costs by addressing root causes early.

Through community-rooted teams and proactive outreach, the new councils will work with children and families to prevent escalation of needs, reducing reliance on statutory intervention and legal proceedings. The focus of future Children's Services will be on building parental capacity and family resilience, enabling stable, loving family environments that promote permanence.

To address the national SEND challenge, our model will prioritise releasing sites to build specialist provision and strengthen inclusion within mainstream schools. Transformation in this area, underpinned by improved transport infrastructure, will reduce dependence on out-of-county placements and high-cost transport. By developing inclusive mainstream settings and multi-disciplinary teams around the school, we will ensure children and young people with additional needs can thrive, improving outcomes and reducing exclusions. Early intervention will help prevent many children from ever requiring an EHCP.

These community-connected services will all be underpinned by a deep understanding of place. The three unitaries will be smaller, more responsive organisations that reflect and respond to the unique needs of their communities, from the different priorities of families living urban over rural contexts, to the variations in provider markets across more rural footprints and those that are delivered via physical assets. Delivering services in this nuanced way is essential to achieving long-term, sustainable outcomes.

A financially secure, better future

Oxfordshire's future is one of rapid transformation shaped by population growth, economic expansion, and the opportunities created by the Greater Oxford area, but also across all of the 3UAs. The proposed three-unitary model is purpose built for this changing landscape. It combines the resilience and capacity required for growth with the agility to reflect the distinct character and needs of local communities. It fits the new model of national governance by giving local, place-based working which will feed local priorities into the strategic work MSA in a way which will balance the voices of Oxfordshire.

By aligning structure, scale, and local identity, this model will create councils that are future fit, financially secure, and community powered, able to deliver lasting benefits for residents and reinvest in the places they serve. Crucially, the three proposed unitary boundaries are designed to be future-fit and enduring, a structure that will stand the test of time, eliminating the need for further disruptive reorganisations in the years ahead.

4.7 Boundary proposal

The proposed lay-down of boundaries enables three viable unitaries, close to the people they serve, and each with a distinctive identity and profile for future generations. The inclusion of West Berkshire to extend the boundaries of the overall geography fits the legislative framework as a Type C proposal: a single tier that includes adjoining areas.

The redrawing of local government boundaries presents a nationally important opportunity for Oxford as a globally important city that is desperate to grow. The city already spills over its tight boundaries into three neighbouring districts. It attracts international investors keen to seize the opportunities in its knowledge economy. Yet long-standing divisions between the city and rural populations over the appetite for growth have held back the city's potential.

An unmodified three unitaries proposal on existing administrative boundaries would continue the artificial division for the city's communities. The two unitary proposal perpetuates the boundary problems and gives no scope to provide new housing and businesses in some of the most densely populated areas.

The proposal to extend to the Green Belt recognises that this is intrinsically connected to the city, a well understood and accepted geography created directly in relation to the city. Its villages and settlements predominantly look towards Oxford for work, leisure and services, and feel strongly linked to the city's fortunes and influence. Research spin outs provide business opportunities, science parks provide employment, and the population of students and academics shapes the foundational and cultural economy. Beyond the Green Belt, the influence of the university is felt much less, with the rural economy, manufacturing and tourism dominating employment, investment and skills.

The expansion of boundaries to create Greater Oxford absorbs city-adjacent areas of South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse. However, in all other respects our proposal for a Ridgeway unitary spanning across southern Oxfordshire and West Berkshire is the same as that presented in the 2UA proposal. It joins areas of common identity shaped by the historic links of these areas and their similar rural character.

The economic viability of the Northern unitary has been fully considered. This is an area with a good financial foundation, strong opportunities for future growth, and there is good alignment both politically and in the priorities of residents. There are growing economies in Bicester and Banbury , a strong and growing visitor economy, and significant plans for new housing including at Heyford Park, assuring financial resilience for the proposed unitary.

Oxfordshire's population today is in excess of 750,000 and growing - a single authority for the county would be well above the government's 500,000 guide figure. The creation of a Mayoral Strategic Authority removes the rationale for strategic scale unitaries that comprise it. Indeed, the creation of two strategic-scale organisations, at regional and at local government level, would leave a significant gap between residents and meaningful local government accountability.

Other options for the division of the area to preserve city governance have been considered, including a Greater Oxford within a 'doughnut' of an Oxfordshire authority and an authority based along the north-south knowledge spine. However, the proactive work between West Berkshire, Vale

of White Horse and South Oxfordshire to open discussions to coalesce as a unitary created an opportunity for alternative approaches.

The government requirement for better services alongside financial resilience and cost savings formed a key part of our overall approach. Our proposal creates the right size footprint for unitary councils to take a place-based approach to delivering integrated services, delivering transformation and putting a prevention approach at the core of delivery. Where the benefits of scale outweigh local adaptability we propose a shared service approach, such as the NHS joint commissioning fund for Children's Services.

Co-terminosity has been considered: the Oxfordshire Fire & Rescue Service (OFRS) performs well at an Oxfordshire-wide level, but Oxfordshire's police force and ICB both extend beyond our potential geography. The alignment of proposed timing for LGR and the creation of a Thames Valley MSA will enable a single transition for the OFRS, which is already expected to merge with Royal Berkshire Fire & Rescue Service.

Our proposal for boundary change is based on detailed work to ensure that it delivers on the criteria set by government, including making an exceptional case for boundary change. As well as expert analysis of the economic, geographic and demographic case for change, we have engaged widely with residents and stakeholders across the geography. We have shaped our proposal based on the needs of residents, businesses and future generations, to create places with a strong sense of identity, opportunity and accountability.

4.8 Public Engagement

Local government reorganisation in Oxfordshire needs governance that meets today's challenges and tomorrow's ambitions. The three unitary authorities (3UA) proposal delivers modern, efficient, and community-focused governance.

Thousands of residents, businesses, and stakeholders across Oxfordshire, and West Berkshire and regionally shaped this proposal through extensive engagement.

The engagement gave a clear mandate: people want governance that is closer to communities, more responsive, and more accountable. Business and economic partnerships backed the proposal for its ability to simplify planning, strengthen representation, and accelerate decisions.

Introduction and Strategic Context

Oxford City Council has engaged in wide-ranging and inclusive engagement to understand what people across Oxfordshire want from this once in a generation opportunity to reshape how local government is structured, to ensure that our proposal is responding to their priorities.

Engagement has indicated support for the proposal to create three new unitary authorities. There is strong support for a locally responsive option which would deliver more locally tailored services and strengthen local representation. Protection of local identity was noted, especially balancing growth with heritage and environmental priorities and where development could be directed to less sensitive areas.

Stakeholder and public engagement demonstrate support for this strategically sound option that reflects, a clear appetite for more localised governance, improved service responsiveness, and smarter, place-based decision making. The 3UA model achieves this most definitively.

In response to the feedback from engagement, the proposal will protect Oxfordshire's historic and cultural identity and align governance with community boundaries and their local identities. It empowers residents with greater influence over local planning and ensures services are tailored to the distinct needs of urban centres and rural communities.

This section outlines the extensive engagement and activities undertaken by the City Council to support the case for change, ensuring that the voices of residents, stakeholders, and communities were central to the development of the 3UA proposal.

Engagement is guiding how the City Council continues to collaborate as the proposal has evolved and the new unitary authorities are shaped in greater detail. Early and inclusive engagement has built trust and improved the quality of the proposal, reflecting a strong appetite for localised governance that meets community needs.

Stakeholders have consistently emphasised the importance of transparency and co-design in shaping future governance, alongside clear communication about service delivery, cost savings, and democratic accountability. These priorities have helped to embed a more responsive and informed approach.

Detailed information on the engagement activity and results from specific groups is outlined at Appendix D: Engagement Detail.

Oxford City Council has undertaken an extensive, inclusive, and impactful engagement programme across Oxfordshire and West Berkshire. This engagement was facilitated through a variety of channels, such as meetings, online surveys, social media, roundtable discussions, community-based events across Oxfordshire and West Berkshire, and short-form video content. This breadth of engagement ensured a representative and inclusive understanding of public and stakeholder views.

The engagement programme reached thousands of people through multiple channels, including:

- An Oxford Resident Panel survey on the 'Future of local Government for Oxford', with **266 responses**
- A public survey inviting Oxfordshire and West Berkshire residents, businesses and community groups to have their **say on proposals to reorganise local government, with over 1,580 responses , of which 61%** of respondents were from outside of the city.
- **340 residents engaged through 11 drop-in events** across Oxfordshire and one in West Berkshire
- Enhanced community engagement and inclusivity through targeted digital outreach, achieved **more than 2.6million impressions and strong interaction across six platforms**, with **TikTok boosting youth engagement**
- Engagement with more than **75 stakeholder organisations and statutory bodies**, including health, fire, police and neighbouring local authorities
- Engagement with **11 MPs** across Oxfordshire and Berkshire

- A second Oxford residents panel survey, which included questions on Local Government Reorganisation to the standard annual survey of residents' satisfaction with City Council services
- **35 responses** were received to the City Council survey with local businesses and employers, to gather their views on shaping Local Government Reorganisation in a way that best supports future housing and economic growth in and around Oxfordshire.

Public engagement

Key findings from the main public engagement survey show:

- **69% agree** "councils are most effective when they are smaller and closer to the people they serve, enabling them to respond and adapt more easily to local needs"
- **80% agree** "urban and rural areas often require different approaches to housing, transport, education and skills, and other key council services"
- **88% agree** "councils have an important part to play in supporting the local economy, including through housing, infrastructure and transport policies"

Some survey respondents commented:

Boundaries and Governance Models

> *"The existing boundaries of Oxford have long been too constrained to allow effective development of a globally important city, whilst protection of genuinely ecologically important sites. The so-called 'Green Belt', and the resulting 'County Towns' development policy, does not do this and has resulted in the major traffic flows into Oxford. The unitaries in the proposed 'single County' and 'two Councils' models seek to perpetuate the problem and are too large and diverse to be effective and democratic. They appear to have been proposed for political reasons."*

Advocacy and Strategic Oversight

> *"I think that the Greater Oxford model is optimal, enabling the City to be run more effectively as a cohesive whole. This should specifically include increased control over roads and traffic. However, ultimately the introduction of a Strategic Mayoral Authority is more important, as only at large scale can the main issues for the region be addressed successfully."*

> *"I strongly support the three-unitary model, particularly as it will mean that local, urban voices are not overridden by rural voices. I fear that in a county council unitary, rural funding pressures would come at the expense of investing in Oxford's urban and suburban needs. Oxford City Council's current boundaries mean it is tightly hemmed in with little opportunity to expand. This puts a lot of pressure on transport links, over which the current city council has no control."*

> *"I prefer the Greater Oxford council model since that will be focused on the housing and transport needs of the city and the nearby communities."*

"I very much welcome this proposal which recognises that Oxford's needs are quite different from much of rural Oxfordshire. Including some of the nearby urban areas outside the city's current boundary within a new Greater Oxford council would recognise their similar needs for affordable housing, good transport infrastructure and a system of education and training to provide staffing for a thriving local economy."

A three unitary model to address diverse and local needs

"Three unitaries will offer local government most tailored to the particular needs of the different areas served. A single unitary is too large and too distant from the public. The track record for service delivery by Oxfordshire County Council - and many large local authorities such as Birmingham - is not great. A one-size fits all approach doesn't work with such diverse populations."

"As a former County Cllr, I like the 3 unitary model. The needs of Oxford and surrounding areas are very different to the rest of the County and there is a cultural difference too. So it's good to split Greater Oxford from the rest of the County."

"Three unitary model sounds like it will best support the people who need it."

"Of the three proposed models, it's the one I prefer. I think Transport in Oxford, in particular, should be the responsibility of a smaller urban council and not the current county council, whose rural members make decisions about urban areas that don't affect them."

"I feel a three unitary model is the most appropriate given the huge gulf in needs between Oxford city and rural Oxfordshire."

"I like this proposal. Our local needs in the Ridgeway area (Faringdon and Wantage) are often ignored by County Council and have resulted in some heinous examples of local authority mismanagement and neglect of the transport infrastructure."

"I think the 3 unitary model is the best proposed. The others are too big and mix urban and rural areas with different priorities."

"This option seems to me to be the most effective at balancing the need to reduce the complexity of local government and providing a council that can accurately and effectively respond to the needs of the people it serves."

This feedback aligns directly with the foundation principles of the Council's three unitary proposal.

Two additional questions were asked in the Councils annual Residents Survey 2025 in relation to Local Government Reorganisation:

- The majority of residents **(62%) agree** that councils are most effective when they are smaller and closer to the people they serve, enabling them to respond and adapt more easily to local needs
- **An even bigger majority (72%) agree** that urban and rural areas often require different approaches to housing, transport, education and skills, and other key council services

- **A substantial majority of 90% agree** that the council should prioritise good quality services and responding to local need
- Whilst **levels of agreement (43%) and disagreement (40%) were fairly equal** on the council prioritising cost savings.[41]

Business engagement

The City Council engaged with local businesses and employers to gather their views on shaping Local Government Reorganisation in a way that best supports future housing and economic growth in and around Oxfordshire.

Insights from the survey will inform ongoing work to ensure Oxfordshire can meet its housing needs while fostering business growth and sustainable development. The feedback received has helped shape the three-unitary proposal and will continue to guide future planning policies and partnership initiatives across the city and surrounding areas.

35 responses were received to the City Council survey, across the Health, Technology, Engineering, Arts, Entertainment and Recreation, Education, University, Property, Retail and Voluntary sectors.

- **Over 80%** of **respondents** said being located in or near Oxford is very or extremely important to their business success.
- **Around 68% strongly agree** that Oxford should go beyond government's housing delivery targets.
- **Almost 85% agree** that affordable housing near Oxford is important for business growth.
- **46% favour** building additional homes close to the city, including suitable locations within the Green Belt. (23% would prefer development beyond the Green Belt)
- **Over half (54%) believe** future development should balance new homes with employment space.

The following is some of the feedback examples respondents told the Council:

> A commercial stakeholder commented: *"Clever and denser developments close to the city of Oxford that provide opportunities for a diverse range of commercial enterprises, and not just the well funded STEM variety are important in providing and balanced and sustainable community."*
>
> A stakeholder in the entertainment sector said: *"increased commercial development only works if there is the housing development to support it.*
>
> An educational stakeholder said: *"There is a healthy balance to be struck between supporting economic growth and increasing the availability of housing. A thriving economy supports the sustainability of the broader community."*

[41] Satisfaction with Oxford and Oxford City Council rise but concerns about housing, transport and crime remain, Oxford City Council 2025

A voluntary sector stakeholder stated: *"The Oxford economy seems to be vibrant to me with a major issue being recruitment, retention and pay of staff for the businesses. More, affordable housing might alleviate this somewhat, so providing homes and helping business."*

A developer said: *"Alongside new homes ambitious targets for employment growth will allow Oxford to better meet its full potential which for so long has been constrained by the tight administrative boundary."*

A major business said: *"As a major centre for national and international research and development, which is unlikely to change in the long term, it would be shortsighted not to ensure the City can continue to adapt to changes in technology and the need to accommodate high growth companies. A mixed approach also reduces the need to commute and drives services which can be shared with adjoining neighbourhoods."*

A university stakeholder commented: *"A single consistent focus on City Governance is essential in the 21st Century. We need to move away from governance structures which are a product of history or geography and therefore operate either within a limited, arbitrary boundary (such as the existing City boundary), or alternatively, are so big they encompass towns and rural areas which have different issues or priorities to the running of a modern City."*

Digital engagement

Through digital engagement, the City Council achieved significant reach and high engagement across six social platforms, connecting with thousands of residents and stakeholders.

- Delivered **32 content pieces** and **11 Facebook events**, driving both online and in-person engagement;
- Targeted communications reached audiences in Oxfordshire and West Berkshire, averaging **2.8 views per person**, with **TikTok generating standout engagement** among 18- to 34-year-olds;
- **2.6m+ impressions** and **38.8k link clicks**;
- **1,650 hours** of video viewed; and
- **8.3k reactions**, **2.7k comments**, **1.5k shares** and **1.1k saves**.

This digital engagement – considered by the City Council to be significantly broader than the engagement undertaken by the one unitary authority (1UA) or two unitary authority (2UA) proposers – combined extensive visibility with meaningful interaction, leveraging video and shareable content to deliver a precisely targeted strategy that resonated strongly with communities, residents, and stakeholders across Oxfordshire and beyond.

Participation from businesses, the voluntary sector, MPs, parish councils, universities, residents, and community groups responded positively to the increased local representation and engagement this model would offer, while businesses welcomed the potential for economic growth and streamlined services.

Strategic partnerships

Oxford City Council has an established strong network of local and strategic partnerships that underpin its approach to shaping inclusive, world-class services and provision.

Through sustained engagement with local, regional, and sector-wide stakeholders, the Council has for many years actively listened, collaborated, and co-designed solutions that reflect a broad spectrum of perspectives.

These relationships, spanning the city, Oxfordshire, the wider region and networks of similar local authorities have enabled Oxford City Council to draw on external expertise and voices beyond its own boundaries, ensuring informed and shared priorities and collective ambition. The other District Councils and County Council – which together with Oxford City Council will form the new unitaries – have similarly worked collaboratively across many of these shared partnerships.

Key partnerships include the:

- **Oxfordshire Leaders Joint Committee**: the statutory partnership of the six Oxfordshire councils working together to deliver the county's Strategic Vision for sustainable development, coordinating efforts on housing, infrastructure, economy, and climate to secure inclusive growth and net zero by 2050
- NHS Buckinghamshire, Oxfordshire and West Integrated Care Board - **Place Based Partnership**: bringing together health, social care, local authorities, and community partners at a local level to integrate services, reduce health inequalities, and improve outcomes for residents
- **Oxfordshire Health and Wellbeing Board**: the statutory partnership of local government, the NHS, and community representatives that provides strategic leadership to improve health, reduce inequalities, and oversee joint plans and priorities for the county's health and care system supporting integrated health and social care strategies
- **Oxfordshire Health Improvement Board**: a partnership under the Health and Wellbeing Board that works to prevent ill health, reduce health inequalities, and promote wellbeing through coordinated action on priorities like physical activity, healthy eating, mental health, and wider determinants of health
- **Oxfordshire Children's Trust**: assembles public, private, and voluntary sector partners to improve outcomes for children and young people by coordinating strategic planning, promoting integrated services, and ensuring their voices shape decisions
- **Oxfordshire Inclusive Economy Partnership**: which originated from City Council-led initiatives and now operates countywide to tackle inequality and promote opportunity. Uniting businesses, public bodies, education, and community groups to tackle inequality and create a fairer, more inclusive economy across the county.
- **Oxfordshire Zero Carbon Partnership**: which also originated from City Council-led initiatives and now operates bringing together other local authorities, businesses, and institutions to accelerate climate action and achieve a net zero and climate-resilient Oxfordshire by 2050
- **Oxford Strategic Partnership**: integrates public, business, community, and voluntary sector leaders to shape Oxford's future, tackle key challenges, and promote a thriving, inclusive, and sustainable city

- **Fast Growth Cities Group**: aligns Oxford, Cambridge, Milton Keynes, Norwich, Peterborough, and Swindon to champion investment, infrastructure, and devolved powers that unlock their economic potential, drive innovation, and support sustainable growth for the UK economy
- **Oxford Safer Communities Partnership**: a multi-agency collaboration that works to prevent and reduce crime, anti-social behaviour, and community safety risks in Oxford by coordinating local authorities, police, health, and voluntary sector partners
- **Oxford Children and Young People Partnership**: unites public bodies, health, education, police, voluntary sector partners, and young people themselves, to improve wellbeing and life chances for children and young people, ensuring their voices shape services and strategic priorities.

These established partnerships create a platform for integrated action across Oxfordshire and the wider region, with a collaborative infrastructure strengthening the three new unitary councils' ability to respond to complex challenges and deliver outcomes that are inclusive, innovative, and aligned with the long-term vision for Oxfordshire, the region and nationally.

By leveraging these strategic alliances, the new unitaries will continue the existing countywide commitments to partnership led governance and joint capacity to mobilise a wider system for transformative change.

Detailed information on key Oxfordshire local government partnerships is outlined at Appendix D: Engagement Detail.

The Council worked through established partnerships and networks across Oxford, Oxfordshire, and the wider region to ensure the LGR Proposal reflected a shared, informed approach:

Locally, it engaged with the Oxford Strategic Partnership – uniting public, private, and voluntary sector leaders to shape city priorities - and collaborated with the Oxford Economic Growth Partnership, and other county-wide forums to align with growth and investment strategies.

Regionally, the Council drew on its membership of the Fast Growth Cities Group (consisting of Oxford, Cambridge, Milton Keynes, Norwich, Peterborough, and Swindon) and the *Case for Cities* group (consisting of Oxford, Cambridge, Exeter, Gloucester, Ipswich, Reading, Lincoln, Peterborough, Swindon and Norwich).

Feedback from these partnerships refined the proposal by highlighting shared ambitions, identifying challenges, and shaping actions that address local needs while aligning with regional and national priorities.

Transparency in Action – engagement feedback, questions and concerns

We have carefully considered the wide-ranging feedback received through extensive and inclusive engagement across Oxfordshire and West Berkshire. The Council is grateful to everyone who shared their views and have reflected on the key themes, concerns and aspirations raised coming out of engagement.

This proposal has been shaped by meaningful stakeholder input, placing Oxfordshire and West Berkshire voices at the centre of decision making. The Council acknowledge the concerns expressed and, in the section below, outlines how the proposal addresses common questions and concerns.

Topic	Area of concern	How this is addressed in the 3UA Proposal
Population and Sustainability	• The proposed 3 unitary authorities are too small to fit the minimum population model • None of the authorities will have a big enough population size to make it financially sustainable	Government has stated that authorities will be able to make the case for Unitaries of less than 500,000 population - this is guidance not a hard floor The three unitaries will be median in size for English unitary councils at outset and top third in size by 2040. Balance sheet analysis shows that all three councils fully meet government criteria on financial sustainability, with strong balance sheets and significant future growth benefits which underline financial sustainability and resilience of the three unitary councils.
Service Delivery and Capacity	• Oxford City Council has no experience delivering key services like adult social care, SEND, and education. • What are the set-up and ongoing costs for services in three unitary authorities? • Concerns about service continuity during transition	The three new unitary councils will incorporate two existing social care and SEND services. Service leadership will be recruited to oversee the safe, legal and innovative delivery of those services and the vast majority of people delivering the services in the new councils will be the same people already doing so today. Quality assurance will be a core part of the service delivery, and the quality of the service will be externally validated by Ofsted and CQC. The set-up and ongoing costs for services are set out in detail in 5.6 Transition Costs. The Implementation plan across section 7 covers how services will be delivered across the transition period
Financial Concerns	• Future council tax levels • a three unitaries authority model will not make the savings required	All three LGR proposals will involve council tax harmonisation. Future arrangements for Council Tax is described in the Council Tax section of Finance (5.9). It should be noted that there are no decisions or recommendations here and at this stage the proposal sets out the options.

	• Will savings from LGR be absorbed in existing debt	There are no current concerns over debt levels or assets which are not performing as expected. Therefore, savings would not be absorbed in existing debt. This is noted in Stranded Debt section of Finance (5.5) The proposal delivers significant Transformation Savings Finance section (5.7)
Governance and Representation	• Parish Councils may be bypassed or lose status • Ward boundary changes and community connections will be disrupted • The balance between efficiency and effective representation, and the preservation of local identity	Parish Councils will retain their importance and have a crucial role to play in connecting the new structure with the community, set out in 6.3 Council Size and Structure. The proposal talks consistently (particularly in 3.4 Voice) about building on existing structures, including parish councils. Where possible, existing administrative boundaries have been retained. Where the unitary authorities have required new boundaries, the building blocks of these proposed changes are based on parish councils to preserve local community identity. The creation of three unitaries responds to a desire for local decision-making. This means that the Northern Oxfordshire and Ridgeway unitaries can both respond to their own needs in the best ways for them, and likewise Greater Oxford.
Identity and Community Cohesion	• Local areas within the proposed new boundaries have distinct identities not aligned with Oxford City • Loss of community identity and character	Extended boundaries will work in a place-based way and the Greater Oxford council will ensure that these are considered as their own places in their context around the outside of Oxford, strengthening the transport links to enable people to get the advantages of proximity to Oxford while keeping their identity as smaller, suburban/rural settlements. By creating a single Greater Oxford unitary rather than combining with Oxford and the Shires these communities can have their voices heard better as a more distinct part of the population.

Green Belt and Environmental Protection	• Development in the Green Belt • Urban sprawl threatens the countryside, wildlife, and biodiversity	Only 2.6% of the green belt is proposed for release, as set out in 4.2 Homes. Through targeted land value capture, this limited release enables investment in the wider green belt, enhancing its ecological and community value. This approach could support initiatives such as expanding Shotover Country Park or advancing the Berks, Bucks and Oxon Wildlife Trust's vision to connect the habitats of Otmoor and Bernwood (outlined in 4.2 Homes). By improving access and biodiversity, the remaining green belt becomes more meaningful and beneficial for residents' health and wellbeing. Focusing development at density in small areas near Oxford reduces pressure on more rural locations, reduces overall land take for new housing, reduces commuter journeys and helps protect the broader countryside.
Housing and Development	• Overdevelopment and misuse of land • the need for more affordable and social housing • a focus on office, laboratory and commercial development over housing	Oxford's housing targets include a substantial proportion of affordable homes, as detailed in 4.2 Homes. The proposal demonstrates a clear ability to meet these targets in line with local needs. By strategically releasing small areas of green belt land, place-based planning can ensure land is used optimally - supporting housing delivery as well as providing much needed commercial space to unlock economic growth.
Transport and Infrastructure	• Traffic congestion and inadequate transport infrastructure • Current infrastructure capacity may be insufficient to support the scale of proposed growth • Transport and connectivity, especially in rural and outlying areas	The proposal concentrates development around existing urban areas, enabling stronger connections to active travel routes and public transport. Concentrating new development beyond the Green Belt would lead to more commuting. Housing and transport planning within single authorities ensures a coordinated, place-based approach that reflects local needs (Homes 4.2). This proposal supports local area energy planning and aligns with the wider ambitions of the MSA. Ridgeway is an energy powerhouse

			and the strong networks there can be used to ensure robust planning to meet needs. Agglomeration directly supports the viability of public transport services. By engaging communities directly, the proposal allows for tailored transport solutions and locally supported initiatives, ensuring infrastructure is designed with residents in mind (TOM for Place).
Strategic Planning and Structure	•	Fragmentation and disaggregation of services	As outlined in Table 7.1, the Council will map critical services and implement continuity plans to ensure a smooth transition. Prior to vesting day, accurate and complete data will be securely transferred to the appropriate unitary authority to support the safe and lawful continuation of services and minimise disruption. While shared services may be considered where appropriate, most services will be duplicated across the three authorities to reflect local priorities. The cost of duplication is expected to be offset by long-term savings achieved through reduced demand and more effective, place-based delivery. Disaggregation plans are informed by best practice from previous local government reforms and the establishment of new authorities.

Prosperity

Businesses and developers welcomed the growth potential, streamlined services, and opportunities for economic development. SMEs expressed interest in equitable service provision and local accountability. Residents called for better transport links, including bus and rail services, particularly in rural areas.

Oxford City Council's longstanding leadership that has led to a decision to reopen the Cowley Branch Line demonstrates how local engagement drives real solutions - connecting deprived communities, easing congestion, and unlocking growth.

Although not the transport authority, the City Council's leadership on this issue that was so important for our place in terms of the economy and housing meant that in the absence of actions from the transport authority, the City Council stepped in and delivered a scheme with investment from the private sector and national government support.

By working directly with residents and partners (including with Oxfordshire County Council, ARC Oxford, The Oxford Science Park, and the Ellison Institute of Technology), the City Council is already addressing key issues like traffic and access. This targeted, place-based approach supports inclusive prosperity and demonstrates the value of retaining strong local governance.

Homes

There was strong support for building more genuinely affordable housing in the right places, with affordability and access to jobs being key priorities. People were concerned that the current infrastructure can't support the growth outside of Oxford's immediate hinterland, so the proposal focuses housing growth in areas adjacent to Oxford city. These locations are better positioned to support new development through existing and planned transport links, services, and facilities. This approach enables Northern Oxfordshire and Ridgeway to concentrate on meeting their own housing needs under the new Standard Method, while safeguarding rural character and limiting development on open countryside.

Quality of Life

The proposal is designed to enhance quality of life for residents by prioritising the delivery of high-quality public services. Engagement findings indicate that 90% of residents prioritise service quality over cost savings, underscoring the importance of maintaining standards that directly impact wellbeing. In addition, feedback from the voluntary and community sector highlights the value of accessible, person-centred services and the preservation of green spaces - both of which are recognised as essential contributors to physical and mental health.

To address increasing service pressures, particularly the rising number of children and young people with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), the proposal sets out a framework for integrated care across health, education, and social services. It embeds preventative approaches and promotes cross-sector collaboration to enable earlier identification of needs and more coordinated, effective interventions.

By aligning services and reducing duplication, the proposal aims to improve outcomes for individuals and communities, while also strengthening long-term resilience. This future oriented proposal supports the sustainability and fairness of service provision, ensuring that public services continue to meet the evolving needs of residents and contribute positively to their quality of life.

Voice

Residents, community groups and the voluntary sector supported the proposal's potential to enhance local voice and participatory governance. Parish councils expressed interest in clearer roles and funding, with many welcoming greater localism.

This proposal responds to that and strengthens local voice by embedding participatory governance at every level. The proposal gives Oxford, Oxfordshire's towns, and villages distinct democratic platforms - each empowered to represent their communities, drive place-based priorities, and contribute to strategic leadership.

Our proposal to establish active, formal structures for neighbourhood engagement, centred on new Neighbourhood Area Committees will grant communities a direct voice in contributing to and shaping priorities, real influence over decisions, and stewardship of local budgets. It also aims to put local voices at the heart of decision making to make sure that decisions are made alongside the people who live and work in Oxford and Oxfordshire.

Identity

There was a clear desire to preserve local identity and concerns about villages becoming urban extensions of Oxford. Cultural organisations emphasised the need to embed Oxfordshire's cultural heritage and amenities in future planning.

People were concerned that rural communities would lose their identity. The proposal responds to that and acknowledges the distinct identities and governance needs of Oxfordshire's rural communities. By establishing a three unitary authority, it enables areas to articulate and pursue their local priorities without being subsumed by the strategic focus of the city. For areas that would be incorporated into Greater Oxford, the proposal ensures that their community interests are safeguarded through appropriate representation and tailored service delivery within the new structure.

This proposal will help people stay locally rooted, with better access to public transport. By avoiding scattered development, it safeguards the distinct character of Oxford, Oxfordshire, and historic and local landscapes, ensuring that community identity and rural heritage are preserved for future generations.

Future-Fit

Stakeholders strongly endorsed differentiated strategies for urban and rural communities (72% agreement), recognising that a one-size-fits-all model is no longer viable. There was a call for transformative reforms across welfare systems, sustainable transport, and integrated health and social care - key pillars of a future-fit public service ecosystem.

The engagement process highlighted the critical role of smaller, place-based councils in cultivating meaningful local relationships. These councils act as agile connectors between residents, community groups, and local authorities, enabling more responsive and resilient service delivery.

There was consistent and widespread support for a place-based, community-led approach. Participants advocated for services that are locally tailored, inclusive, and reflective of the distinct needs and aspirations of each area. This feedback presents a clear mandate to design governance structures that are adaptive, participatory, and capable of delivering equitable outcomes.

The Council has embedded these principles into its proposal.

Engagement Strategy and Timeline

Oxford City Council adopted a phased and inclusive engagement strategy to inform and shape the proposal. Key milestones included:

Fig 4.4: Timeline of Engagement

5 The Financial Case

All seven councils included in this proposal – the Oxfordshire authorities plus West Berkshire – shared data to support the financial modelling undertaken in the development of the three proposals. As the granularity of information provided varied across the councils some assumptions were required. A common high level approach to modelling, including use of 2025-26 Revenue Account returns, non-inclusion of projections for Fair Funding impacts on business rates, and data on assets, staffing, etc. was agreed by the Section 151 Officers of all councils with the objective of enabling a like-for-like comparison of the financial benefits identified for each proposal.

Pixel Financial, experts in local government finance and funding, worked with Oxford City Council officers in a number of areas to undertake the financial modelling and assessments, with further support from consultants at **LGFin** and **Inner Circle Consulting**.

Pixel Financial undertook specific work including grants and business rates disaggregation and other metrics used to disaggregate revenue expenditure; detailed modelling on Council Tax harmonisation; and a review of the overall modelling of transitional and transformational costs and benefits. LGFin undertook specific work on balance sheet disaggregation. Inner Circle Consulting provided overall support across the financial section and a review of the financial modelling.

The analysis below show that the three unitary authorities (3UA) proposal fully meets Government criteria on financial sustainability:

- Strong balance sheets and significant future growth benefits underline the financial sustainability and resilience of the 3 unitary councils.
- A manageable revenue position on formation of the unitaries based on disaggregation of their 2025-26 budgets.
- Payback of transitional costs of £36.2 million and the transformation of services could be achieved within a 4-year period with no need for any Government support.
- By year 5 annual net savings of £48.6 million per annum will be achieved through transitional and transformational efficiencies which is broken down as follows:

Table 5.1: Transformation and Transition Costs and Benefits

Year 5 Transformation and Transition Costs and Benefits	Greater Oxford	North Oxfordshire	Ridgeway	Total
	£000's	£000's	£000's	£000's
Transformation Benefits	-9,210	-8,407	-10,648	-28,265
Transformation Costs	4,419	4,530	4,732	13,681
Transition Savings	-7,070	-8,910	-18,072	-34,052
Net Benefits	-11,861	-12,787	-23,988	-48,636

The additional commercial and housing growth enabled by the creation of Greater Oxford is not included in the above table of transitional and transformational benefits, but is very significant (set out in Section 5.11 below):

- By year 5 (2032/33) Greater Oxford's growth will yield an additional £8.4m per annum in business rates and an additional £11.8m in council tax receipts.
- By 2040/41Greater Oxford's growth in commercial floor space and housing will yield an additional £41.9m per annum in business rates and an additional £72.8m per annum in council tax receipts

5.1 Financial Position

The baseline position has been analysed using the 2025/26 budgeted position of each of the Councils in Oxfordshire plus West Berkshire. A summary of the current position is shown in the following table:

Table 5.2: Financial Position of Existing Local Authorities

	Net revenue Expenditure Budget	Forecast Total Funding	Forecast Net position (Surplus(-) / Deficit)	General Fund Allocated Reserves	General Fund Unallocated Reserves	Total Long Term General Fund Borrowing (Capital Financing Requirement)	General Fund External Debt	Total General Fund Property and Equipment Assets
	£ million	£ million	£ million	£ million	£ million	£ million	£ million	£ million
Cherwell	32.8	-34.7	-1.9	1.9	39.3	235.5	139.0	173.4
West Oxfordshire	12.1	-13.6	-1.5	3.6	27.8	29.4	0.0	129.6
Oxford City	27.8	-30.5	-2.7	11.6	48.8	45.3	0.0	343.2
South Oxfordshire	18.3	-18.4	-0.1	2.2	63.8	-0.1	0.0	58.0
Vale of the White Horse	20.1	-19.2	0.9	10.0	27.2	0.3	0.0	86.8
West Berkshire	336.4	-340.6	-4.2	7.8	13.9	319.7	202.7	422.4
Oxfordshire	1,129.1	-1,138.9	-9.8	58.6	238.1	505.5	259.9	724.3
Total	1,576.6	-1,595.9	-19.3	95.7	458.9	1,135.6	601.6	1,937.7

This section will show several key aspects of the 3 unitary proposal:

- All of the forecast opening revenue surpluses and deficits are relatively small and would be manageable through the normal budgetary process.
- Depending on how the new authorities decide to manage it, could be achieved between one and two years
- The Housing Revenue Account (HRA) currently operated by Oxford City Council adds the benefit of supporting the growth agenda and providing increased affordable dwellings
- The housing company, OX Place, provides an opportunity both to develop new housing and for the HRA to manage on behalf of the citizens of the new unitary
- Oxford Direct Services Limited and its sister company Oxford Direct Services Trading Ltd will continue to thrive and deliver dividends back to its shareholders. The increased boundaries of Greater Oxford and the potential to work in partnership will give the potential for the companies to continue to grow

- The balance sheet analysis shows that all three proposed unitary authorities will have strong financial resilience
- All of the new authorities would start with above average levels of usable revenue reserves along with the strong balance sheets.
- The proposed unitary authorities will have the resources to finance the necessary transition and could also release capital resources to take advantage of the proposed flexible use of capital receipts.
- The analysis of the costs and benefits of transition to unitary status and the transformation of service provision shows payback over a four-year period (three years for Ridgeway) with an ongoing financially sustainable position thereafter for all of the three unitaries in this proposal
- None of the unitary authorities in this proposal will be looking for exceptional financial support
- This proposal will deliver growth which will benefit the citizens of the area and also the wider national economy.

5.2 Existing council budgets and pressures

The district councils in Oxfordshire are experiencing many of the same pressures faced by local authorities nationally with the main pressure coming from demand for temporary accommodation and other demand-led services. As the main urban centre in Oxfordshire, Oxford City Council is experiencing the greater increase in demand for temporary accommodation. The temporary accommodation (TA) placement rate has risen from an average of 4.26 households placed per week in 2022/23 to 10.20 in the current financial year. The Council currently has a Temporary Accommodation stock of 188 dwellings and will grow this to over 300 by 2026, with a mixture of purchases, long term leasing and conversion of existing units. Whilst this stock will grow, the council will continue to incur a significant expenditure on short term hotel and B&B accommodation in the short term. Demand is also forecast to continue to grow and alternative measures are being introduced to further mitigate costs, including the purchase of additional housing, taking our TA housing stock to around 560 by 2029-30, introducing a face to face offer to improve homelessness assessments and decrease the placement rate, as well as introducing a new IT system for Housing Needs which will increase staff productivity.

To deal with the financial pressures, most councils have responded with prudent financial management, delivering in-year underspends, replenishing reserves, and in some cases forecasting surpluses. West Berkshire Council asked for and received a £16 million loan from the government to cope with "tremendous financial demands". Of this, £13 million was to provide reserves for future sustainability while the remaining £3 million was to fund a gap in the 2025/26 budget. As can be seen from the later analysis, the combination of West Berkshire Council into the Ridgeway Unitary will support the future financial position and, along with transition and transformation savings that are available to all of the unitary authorities in the proposal, this will allow the new unitary overall to be financially sustainable in the future.

In accordance with the Local Government Act 2003 all council chief financial officers are required to assess the robustness of their budget estimates and the adequacy of reserves. In the case of West Berkshire Council, the budgets and reserve levels were signed off assuming the receipt of the government exceptional financial support (which was received) and noted that this was a one-off

measure and that there is a clear path to securing a balanced financial position in the immediate future. In these assessments all the chief finance officers signed off their budgets but some with reservations over the longer term. The opportunities afforded by the transition to unitary status will, as shown later in this chapter, deal with the concerns over the future financial position.

Our three unitary model delivers the optimal balance between scale, resilience, and local accountability. It creates councils that are financially sustainable, operationally efficient, and close enough to their communities to design services around local priorities. The model spreads transformation effort and cost, reducing implementation risk and ensuring that efficiencies are achieved without over-centralising decision-making. Savings would primarily derive from:

- **Consolidation of management tiers and corporate services** within each unitary;
- **Reduction in duplication** of governance and back-office functions across districts and county;
- **Rationalisation of estate and ICT systems** through harmonised transformation programmes;
- **Stronger procurement leverage and shared commissioning frameworks** at a sub-regional level; and
- **Transformation of major services** such as Adult Social Care, Children's Service, Early Intervention Programme.

Three unitary authorities also create a more balanced distribution of financial risk. Concentrating all fiscal exposure in a single authority would heighten vulnerability to demographic and economic shocks, such as rising demand in adult social care or business rate volatility. A tri-structure allows for differentiated fiscal strategies, greater flexibility in financial management, and collaboration where shared arrangements deliver best value. This approach builds long-term resilience and aligns with the Government's commitment to fiscal devolution and empowered local leadership — ensuring decisions about tax, spending, and reform are made at the level where they can deliver the greatest impact.

Proposed Unitary Model

Our proposed three unitary authority model for the future of local government in Oxfordshire will result in significant financial benefits by reducing duplication, achieving economies of scale, without being so big that diseconomies of scale creep in, and capitalising on opportunities for service transformation and improvement. This would be achieved whilst retaining good local democratic representation and being responsive to the needs of local communities in a way that a larger more remote Council would not.

Oxfordshire currently has six councils; five district councils and one county council. The proposal is also bringing in West Berkshire Council which is currently a unitary council. This proposal replaces these with three new unitary councils comprising:

- Greater Oxford - Oxford City Council plus parts of its Green Belt (surrounding parishes from Cherwell, South Oxfordshire, and Vale of the White Horse Councils)
- North Oxfordshire - West Oxfordshire Council and the balance of Cherwell District Council
- Ridgeway - West Berkshire Council and the balance of South Oxfordshire, and Vale of the White Horse Councils

5.3 Financial Disaggregation and Aggregation Process of Baseline position

Revenue Baseline

The baseline position for the new unitary organisations has been estimated using Revenue Account (RA) returns for 2025/26. These are returns that every Council must submit to the Government reporting a breakdown of budgets. The figures for each of the Councils has been disaggregated using various appropriate metrics such as Population, Dwelling numbers, and various relative needs formulae. The figures have then been aggregated into the totals for each proposed unitary Council. The totals of the original RA returns and the revised totals on aggregation have been checked to ensure that the same figures are resulting.

The revised totals have then been compared to a calculation of the total Council tax which will be raised by each Council using the detailed Council Tax setting data.

Based on the assumptions above, the initial results show that each of the three new Unitary authorities is financially viable based on the assumptions used, with the largest variance being Greater Oxford at a £2.0 million deficit and Ridgeway at a £1.1 million surplus based on the 2025/26 budgets. While the shortfall in Greater Oxford would require attention, it is relatively small in the context of local government and given the size of the revenue expenditure for each new Council of between £396.3 million and £748.9 million; these variances would be manageable through routine financial management measures and the normal budgetary process.

Table 5.3: Baseline Financial Position For Unitary Councils

	Greater Oxford £ million	North Oxfordshire £ million	Ridgeway £ million	Total £ million
Revenue Expenditure	396.3	431.4	748.9	1,576.60
Grant Funding	-169.7	-180	-347.9	-697.6
Transfer to Reserves	6	6.5	6.8	19.3
Collection Fund Surpluses	-3.1	-3.7	-2.9	-9.7
Retained Business Rates	-62.7	-51.3	-58.4	-172.4
Net Council Tax Requirement	166.8	202.9	346.5	716.2
Estimated Council Tax Chargeable	164.8	203.8	347.6	716.2
Variance	2	-0.9	-1.1	0
	Deficit	***Surplus***	***Surplus***	

Building on the starting position for each unitary above, work has been progressing to identify the one off and recurring cost of setting up and transitioning to the new unitary authorities as well as the costs and benefits that may arise from service transformation. This is shown in following sections.

5.4 Balance Sheet Disaggregation

Methodology

We have taken the balance sheets from the published draft 2024/25 statements of accounts of all Oxfordshire authorities and the West Berkshire unitary and then apportioned these into the proposed unitary authorities. The apportionment has been undertaken using populations of the current and proposed areas applied to apportion Oxfordshire County Council's balance sheet between the proposed unitary authorities and also Cherwell, South and Vale between Greater Oxford, North Oxfordshire and Ridgeway. Having established balance sheets for the proposed unitary authorities using this apportion methodology, the results have been compared to national benchmarks over a number of financial health measures.

Overall Results

The table below shows a summary of the financial health measures for the three proposed unitary authorities.

Table 5.4: Financial Health Measures for Unitary Councils

Area	Measure	Greater Oxford	North Oxfordshire	Ridgeway	England Average	Unitary Average	HRA Unitary Average	Non-HRA Unitary Average
		HRA	non-HRA	non-HRA			HRA	non-HRA
Net Assets	Net Assets (excl. pensions)/CSP	684%	279%	280%	426%	354%	419%	233%
	Usable Reserves/CSP	138%	104%	92%	74%	61%	67%	51%
Usable Reserves	URR/CSP	71%	65%	48%	41%	35%	37%	30%
	DSG Balance/CSP	-10%	-11%	-10%	-6%	-7%	-6%	-9%
	URR and DSG Balance/CSP	61%	54%	38%	35%	27%	31%	21%
	HRA Reserves/ Dwelling Rents	34%					47%	
	Current Resources/CSP	128%	94%	83%	68%	54%	61%	43%
Capital Health	CFR/CSP	241%	158%	118%	229%	222%	238%	192%
	Debt Gearing	32%	46%	38%	39%	42%	40%	50%

The measures are colour coded showing green where the measure is better than the benchmark average and yellow where it is worse than the benchmark average. Where the measure is marked as yellow, the reasons for this are explained in the narrative below. There is no colour coding for asset and debt measures because these are heavily affected by whether an authority has an open Housing Revenue Account (HRA) as HRA and non-HRA authorities have different benchmark averages. This will also be considered in the narrative below.

Net Assets

Net asset levels are heavily influenced by whether an authority holds an HRA or not. For this reason, the graph below shows Net Assets excluding pensions compared to Core Spending Power (CSP) and distinguishes between HRA and non HRA authorities.

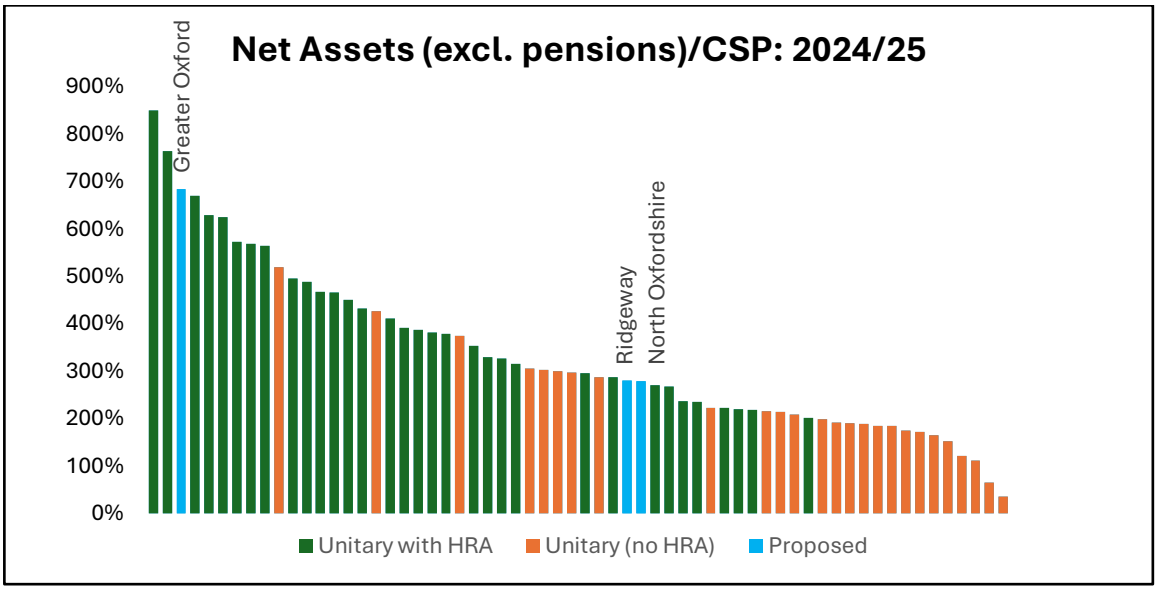


Fig 5.1: Net Assets / Core Spending Power

Both Ridgeway and North Oxfordshire have lower average net assets compared to the average whereas Greater Oxford is in the top quartile. This is to be expected since neither Ridgeway nor North Oxfordshire will have an HRA. The graph therefore is designed to show HRA and non-HRA authorities separately with HRA authorities as green bars and non-HRA authorities as orange bars.

Both Ridgeway (280%) and North Oxfordshire (279%) compare favourably on net assets to the upper tier non HRA benchmark of 233%. The conclusion is that all proposed authorities are therefore resilient in respect of balance sheet net assets.

Usable Revenue Reserves

The graph below shows the Usable Revenue Reserves (URR) of each unitary compared to CSP.

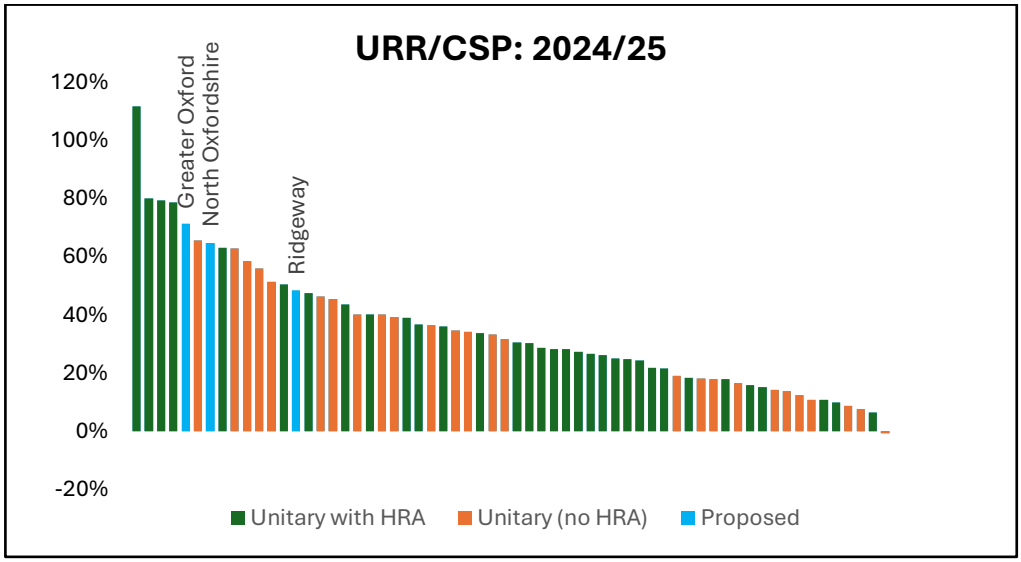


Fig 5.2: Usable Revenue Reserves / Core Spending Power

All proposed authorities have above average usable revenue reserves. Ridgeway's levels will be lower than the other two unitary authorities due to West Berkshire having relatively low levels of URR in 2024/25.

Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG)

All proposed authorities will have higher than average DSG deficits. This is because both Oxfordshire and West Berkshire have higher than average DSG deficits in 2024/25.

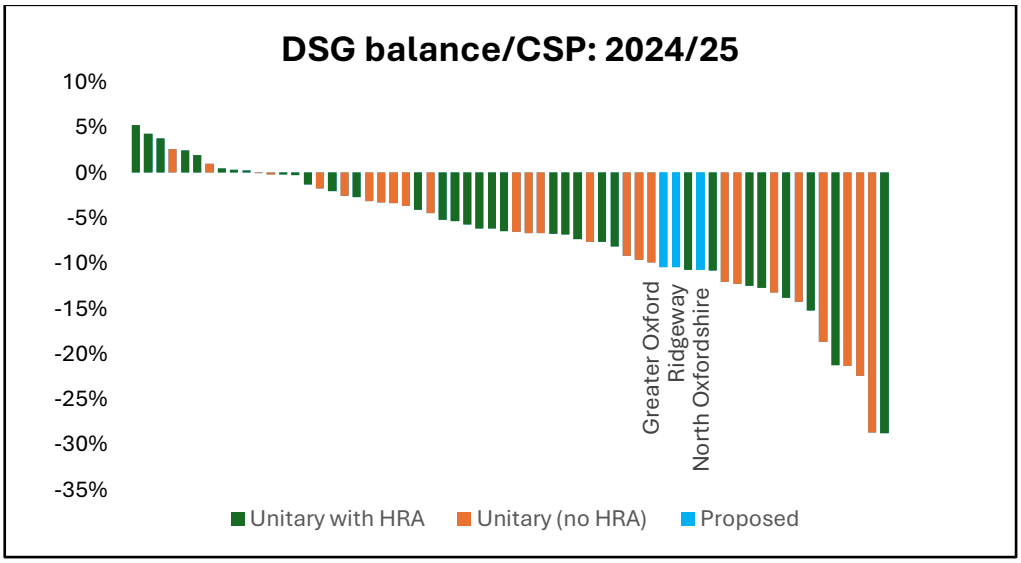


Fig 5.3: Dedicated Schools Grant / Core Spending Power

There is a national issue with Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG). The statutory reporting requirements for the accounts require the closing deficit balance on the Dedicated Schools Grant to be held within the Dedicated Schools Grant Adjustment Account, which is an unusable reserve. There is an existing statutory override in place that supports this accounting treatment which was due to end on 31 March 2026 but the Government has now extended this until 31st March 2028.

The Oxfordshire DSG deficit balance has increased from £45.8 million as at 31st March 2024 to £80.3 million as at 31st March 2025, an increase of £34.5 million in the year. This is clearly an issue for the Oxfordshire area, however the Government has recognised that there is a structural problem in the system with associated large financial implications and the Government has stated that they are going to implement measures to rectify the position. A consultation is expected in the Autumn. Additionally when looking at the overall position of the Dedicated Schools Grant Adjustment Account plus Usable Revenue Reserves, this shows that Oxfordshire is more resilient overall than many others.

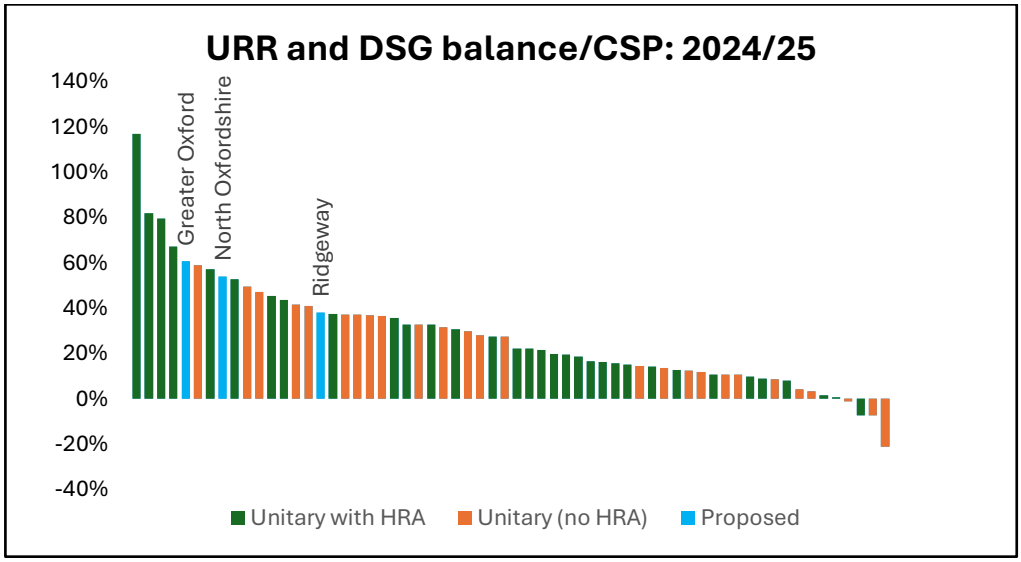


Fig 5.4: Usable Revenue Reserves & Dedicated Schools Grant / Core Spending Power - All

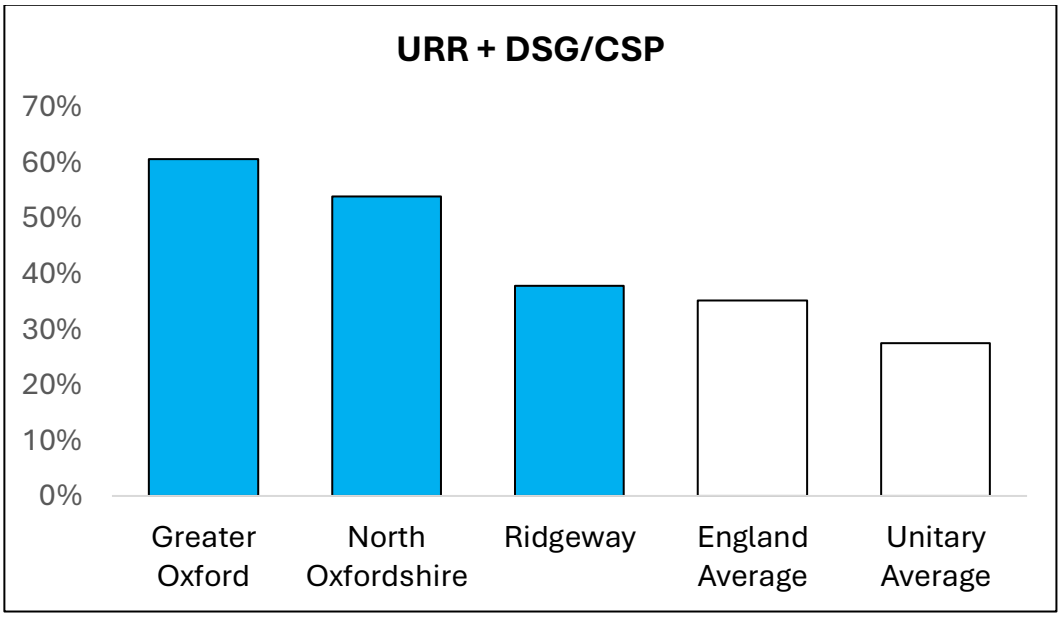


Fig 5.5: Usable Revenue Reserves & Dedicated Schools Grant / Core Spending Power – Average Comparison

Despite higher than average DSG deficits, all three proposed unitary authorities have better than average resilience when adding those deficits to existing levels of usable revenue reserves.

Capital Financing Requirement (CFR)

Greater Oxford will have a higher need to borrow than the overall average benchmark averages. This is to be expected since Greater Oxford will have an HRA. Consequently, the graph below to shows HRA and non-HRA authorities separately with HRA authorities as green bars and non-HRA authorities as orange bars.

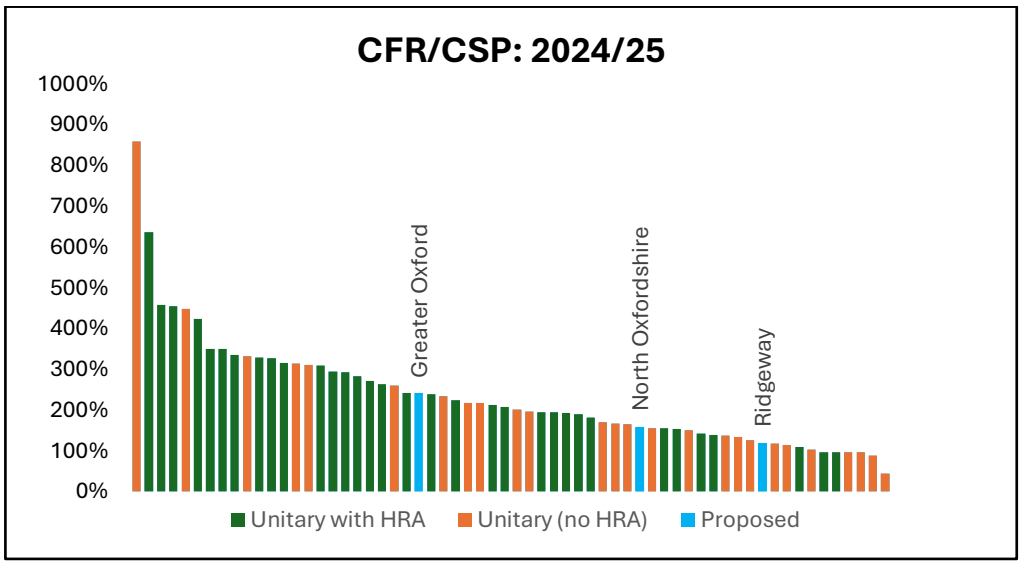


Fig 5.6: Capital Financing Requirement / Core Spending Power – Average Comparison

The Greater Oxford CFR to CSP is 241% which is in line with the unitary with HRA authority average of 238%.

Debt Gearing

Debt gearing is an important measure to ensure that authorities are not overborrowed compared to the underlying value of their long term assets. The comparison between the proposed Oxfordshire unitary authorities and the rest of the country can be shown graphically as follows:

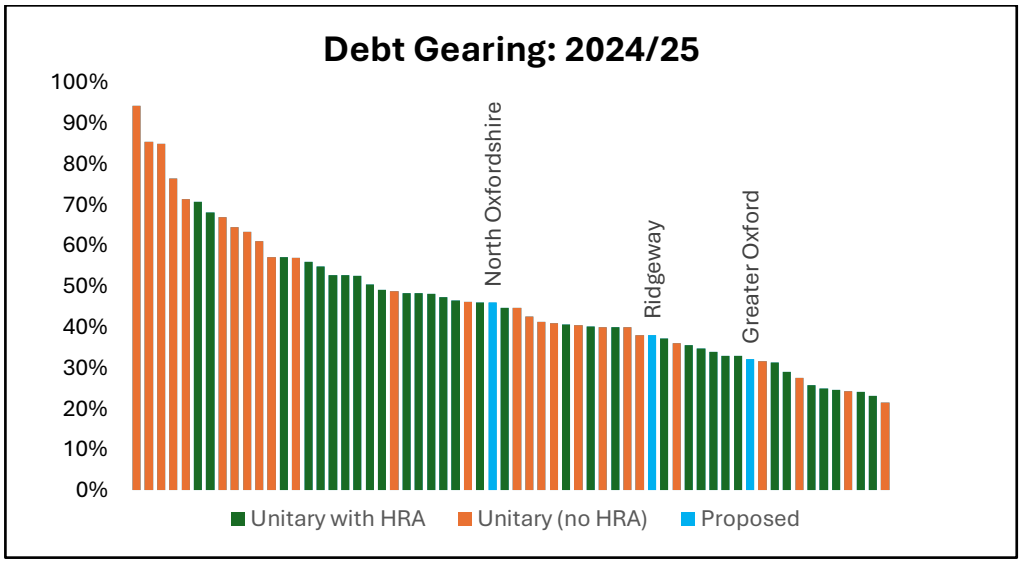


Fig 5.7: Debt Gearing

North Oxfordshire is projected to have higher debt gearing than both the unitary and the all England averages, however it is lower than the non-HRA Unitary average.

Revenue and Balance Sheet Conclusion

CIPFA (Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy) provides a Financial Resilience Index for UK local authorities, which uses a range of indicators to assess financial health. Whereas some of these indicators are useful, they do not properly take account of the differences between HRA and non-HRA authorities. Some of the indicators measure aggregate authority totals (i.e. debt) with general fund only metrics which make authorities with an HRA appear to be high risk for some of the indicators. This is misleading and so we have provided metrics above which allow comparison between similar authorities. The balance sheets of the current authorities were disaggregated in to balance sheets for the 3 unitaries by a Finance Specialist at LGFin. This showed that, from a balance sheet perspective, the new authorities would have a sufficient level of assets and resources to be financially sustainable. Various measures of financial health show that the new authorities will start on a strong financial basis when compared with like authorities.

None of the unitary authorities in this proposal will be looking for exceptional financial support; the base disaggregation of the existing revenue and balance sheet positions would not indicate that the new unitary councils would need to seek exceptional financial support after the savings from transition to unitary status and the transformation of services.

The balance sheet analysis shows that all three proposed unitary authorities have strong financial resilience when compared with relevant benchmark averages and there are no wide and unexpected variances in financial resilience measures between the proposed unitary authorities. Greater Oxford has a higher level of net assets and debt which is entirely consistent with being an HRA authority.

With the exception of DSG deficits, which the Government has pledged to resolve, the key balance sheet measures are around or better than the average national position.

All authorities would start with above average levels of usable revenue reserves and strong balance sheets. On this basis it is anticipated that all three of the proposed unitary authorities will have the resources to finance the necessary transition and could also release capital resources to take advantage of the proposed flexible use of capital receipts.

5.5 Current Debt Position (and stranded debt)

Background

In the context of UK local government reorganisation, stranded debt refers to the liabilities of a dissolving council that cannot be covered by its assets or future revenue. This issue arises when a local authority with significant debt is broken up or merged with others, leaving a financial deficit that needs to be settled and this debt cannot be taken on by the successor authorities without putting them in a financially unsustainable position. In general terms debt becomes "stranded" if the revenue-generating assets that were originally intended to service that debt are not transferred or do not perform as expected. It can also arise if an authority has overborrowed such that it now cannot service its debt from its normal revenue stream.

Debt position

The level of local authority debt across the Oxfordshire and West Berkshire areas is variable between authorities. The current levels of debt can be seen in the table below:

Table 5.5: Long Term External Debt

	Long Term External Debt £ million
Cherwell	139.0
West Oxfordshire	0.0
Oxford City	288.5
South Oxfordshire	0.0
Vale of the White Horse	0.0
West Berkshire	202.7
Oxfordshire	259.9
Total	890.1

Compared to the other districts, Oxford City Council appears to have a high level of debt, however this is due to the council being the only council in this proposal to have a Housing Revenue Account (HRA) (see more detail in the section below). For this reason, the Oxford City Council debt needs to be split between the HRA and the remainder of the General Fund.

There are not currently any concerns over debt levels or assets that are not performing as expected within the areas under consideration. In addition, Oxford City Council currently has capital plans that will require borrowing in the future, most of which on the Housing Revenue Account. This borrowing requirement would transfer to the new Greater Oxford unitary and is shown in the table below.

Table 5.6: Oxford City Council Planned Borrowing

	HRA Borrowing Capacity	Oxford City General Fund Future Planned Borrowing
	£ million	£ million
Current Capacity	57.3	0.0
2025/26	121.6	0.0
2026/27	72.0	10.1
2027/28	64.0	32.0
2028/29	57.5	62.2
2029/30	175.3	17.7
Total	547.7	122.0

There will therefore be enough capacity within the Greater Oxford unitary HRA to absorb any existing external debt that cannot be supported by the other unitary authorities.

5.6 Transition Costs, Efficiencies and Longer-Term Transformation Savings

Introduction

For Greater Oxford, the transition to unitary status is not seen as simply a change to the structure of local government. This is a once in a generation opportunity to reshape how services are delivered for the urban centre of Oxfordshire. Greater Oxford will be an organisation that is financially resilient, efficient, and innovative through creating a council that is leaner, more agile, and better able to meet residents' needs in a rapidly changing social and financial environment. Longer term, the organisation will invest in digital capability and capacity and provide innovative service models which focus on preventative measures rather than reactive management. Initially, it is important to demonstrate that the new unitary, along with the other two unitary authorities, is financially viable on transition.

In calculating the projected financial effects of this proposal we have been careful not to overstate the benefits or to be too optimistic about the timing of changes and Pixel Financial Management has reviewed the cost and savings calculations used. To ensure that we have not underestimated additional expenditure we have built in a contingency of 10% on costs, however the calculations

show that the unitaries would still pay back within a 5 year period with a 30% contingency. This can therefore be seen to be both a prudent and a realistic proposal.

In the Interim Proposal we said: *Pixel Financial has estimated realistic transition costs of between £5-10 million per district and existing unitary (West Berkshire) moving into three new unitary authorities.* Our estimated transition costs, including redundancies and project management, are estimated at £36 million for all 3 unitaries. This is within the expected range of £30 million to £60 million.

We are mindful that during any transition or transformation process it is imperative to maintain full continuity of service. Also, the larger and more the complex the service the more time it will take to get the process right without an adverse effect on citizens. This will inevitably mean that the benefits will phase in over time. We have taken this into account when considering the costs and benefits of our proposal. In our opinion any proposals that suggest they will break even or start paying back in the first year are being extremely overly optimistic.

The county council's RO expenditure, medium term financial strategy and council tax baselines currently include costs and funding for Oxfordshire Fire and Rescue Service. In the longer-term these will sit with the mayoral strategic authority. It is assumed that the costs and income related to Fire and Rescue Service will be transferred and will have a net nil effect on the overall financial position of the proposed unitaries.

Given the relative sizes of organisations (aggregate net expenditure of districts can be around only 10% of the county net expenditure), in all the unitary proposals the majority of any savings must come from current county services. If any one unitary authority (1UA) proposals suggest an early payback period one must question why the savings are not being made now without the conversion to unitary. A key basis for the Greater Oxford proposal is that, in addition to keeping services closer to and more responsive to citizens and their needs, we believe that taking the approach to service provision that is currently employed at Oxford City Council, we can make overall savings in the costs of local authority services currently not provided by the City Council.

Overall Results for the Oxfordshire and West Berkshire Unitary Authorities

In line with guidance, the financial modelling has been completed at today's prices, not considering the impact of inflation and not discounting future cash flows.

Each of the individual savings, additional costs and transition costs have been phased in line the expectation of when it is anticipated these will be realised or incurred. Some transition costs will be incurred ahead of vesting day and these are shown against the relevant year in the overall costs. The financial case has been modelled up to year five after vesting day.

Based on our detailed analysis of costs and savings, the overall result of converting the councils to unitary status can be summarised as follows:

Table 5.7: Financial Impact of All Unitary Authorities in Oxfordshire

Aggregate of All 3 Unitaries		Year	One off Costs £000's	Recurring Costs and Savings £000's	Net Impact £000's	Cumulative Net Impact £000's
Pre vesting	0	2026-27	-900	-90	-990	-990
	0	2027-28	-29,926	-2,992	-32,918	-33,908
Vesting	1	2028-29	-12,284	1,537	-10,747	-44,655
	2	2029-30	-8,615	4,524	-4,091	-48,746
	3	2030-31	-5,313	37,152	31,839	-16,907
	4	2031-32	0	45,136	45,136	28,229
	5	2032-33	0	48,636	48,636	76,865

This is broken down between the three unitary authorities as follows:

Table 5.8: Financial Impact of Greater Oxford Unitary

Greater Oxford		Year	One off Costs £000's	Recurring Costs and Savings £000's	Net Impact £000's	Cumulative Net Impact £000's
Pre vesting	0	2026-27	-300	-30	-330	-330
	0	2027-28	-7,835	-783	-8,618	-8,948
Vesting	1	2028-29	-3,821	-2,250	-6,071	-15,019
	2	2029-30	-2,071	-1,757	-3,828	-18,847
	3	2030-31	-1,771	9,653	7,882	-10,965
	4	2031-32	0	10,991	10,991	26
	5	2032-33	0	11,861	11,861	11,887

Table 5.9: Financial Impact of North Oxfordshire Unitary

North Oxfordshire		Year	One off Costs £000's	Recurring Costs and Savings £000's	Net Impact £000's	Cumulative Net Impact £000's
Pre vesting	0	2026-27	-300	-30	-330	-330
	0	2027-28	-9,235	-923	-10,158	-10,488
Vesting	1	2028-29	-4,479	41	-4,438	-14,926
	2	2029-30	-3,472	994	-2,478	-17,404
	3	2030-31	-1,771	6,943	5,172	-12,232
	4	2031-32	0	11,249	11,249	-983
	5	2032-33	0	12,787	12,787	11,804

Table 5.10: Financial Impact of Ridgeway Unitary

Ridgeway		Year	One off Costs £000's	Recurring Costs and Savings £000's	Net Impact £000's	Cumulative Net Impact £000's
Pre vesting	0	2026-27	-300	-30	-330	-330
	0	2027-28	-12,856	-1,286	-14,142	-14,472
Vesting	1	2028-29	-3,984	3,746	-238	-14,710
	2	2029-30	-3,072	5,287	2,215	-12,495
	3	2030-31	-1,771	20,556	18,785	6,290
	4	2031-32	0	22,896	22,896	29,186
	5	2032-33	0	23,988	23,988	53,174

This shows that payback for each of the three unitary authorities is around year 4 after vesting day on 1st April 2028 for Greater Oxford and Northern Oxfordshire and year 3 for Ridgeway and that the authorities between them incur around £31 million of one-off costs in the pre-vesting period. This is in line with analysis of previous unitary authorities provided by Pixel Financial Management Ltd which therefore supports our figures from this detailed localised work. As with other proposed unitary authorities it is assumed that these one off costs will be funded locally through reserves and realisable assets. The analysis of the balance sheet strength of the authorities shows that these costs can be covered without government support.

Fair funding is currently out to consultation and the provisional finance settlement is not expected to be announced until December, the Chancellors Budget having been pushed back to 26th November. There is considerable uncertainty around this funding and therefore no projections have been made on this.

The Proposal

The disaggregation of existing councils and consolidation into the new unitary councils will involve taking the services provided by the five district councils and allocating these to the new unitary authorities plus splitting up the services currently provided at the Oxfordshire county level so that they can be delivered by the three new councils. West Berkshire services will transition into the Ridgeway Council and become part of that unitary. This process will affect both frontline services and back-office functions.

The transition process will include:

- Redundancy and early retirement programmes.
- Establishment of programme delivery teams.
- Creation of shadow authorities.
- Closing down existing councils and transferring staff, assets, and services.
- Designing harmonisation plans for council tax.

Local Government Reorganisation will change the boundaries of local authorities but more importantly it involves two distinct but interconnected changes. Firstly, it will involve the consolidation of seven existing organisations into three and then secondly, the transformation of those three new councils into agile, efficient, and responsive authorities.

This process will involve bringing together both frontline resident services and back-office functions and transforming them into agile and services responsive to the needs of the communities within the area. It will be necessary for upper-tier functions, such as highways, social care and education, to be disaggregated amongst new unitary authorities, providing opportunities for better outcomes through service alignment.

Costs

The main costs of disaggregation arise from:

- Recreating senior posts (such as Directors of Children's Services) for each unitary (incorporated into the senior management calculations below)
- New IT systems (incorporated into the IT transitional savings calculations below)
- Project Management
- Public Engagement
- Contingency

Project Management

Managing the transition from a two tier system to a unitary system of local government will require significant project management over a prolonged period. It is estimated that the cost will be circa £5 million per unitary for providing resources such as a programme director, project officers and external report over the life of the project. This cost is consistent with other Local Government Reorganisation business cases already submitted.

Public Engagement

There will be a need to 'get the message out there' both pre vesting day and post vesting day in terms of public engagement and media publications. It is anticipated that costs of circa £300k per annum, based on other business cases put forward, will be required to provide for the costs of this public engagement.

Contingency

With a multi-million programme of re-organisation planned one can never predict costs with complete accuracy. A contingency of 10%, based on the gross annual cost, has therefore been assumed over the 7 year life of the programme (including the 2 years in the lead up to vesting day).

Savings

Key initial savings arise from:

- Senior Management
- Councillor numbers and governance; Members' allowances
- Elections
- External audit costs
- IT Transition
- Additional adult social care precept (covered in the section on Council Tax)
- Transformation (see separate section)

Senior Management

We have specifically modelled new senior management structures (top three tiers). This work has incorporated reductions in staff in some areas and increasing staffing in others (such as Directors of Children's Services). Data on the number of senior staff for each authority in Oxfordshire and West Berkshire has been obtained and broken down into the different levels of senior management as follows

- Tier 1 – Chief Executive (Head of the Paid Service)
- Tier 2 – Executive Directors
- Tier 3 – Assistant Directors

The number of senior managers for all authorities has then been compared to the benchmarked structures of senior managers based on unitary population sizes based on guidance from the Local Government Association and the Local Government Boundary Commission for England and adjustments made from the combining authorities either by reducing or increasing the number of posts.

Where posts are reduced an appropriate level of redundancy is calculated.

Democratic Service and Elections

Members allowances

The current cost of members in the form of allowances has been obtained from the most recent Statement of accounts and the current number of councillors and ward members obtained from publicly available data. Our data shows that there are currently 331 members across Oxfordshire and West Berkshire at a total cost of circa £3.8 million. The revised number of members for the 3 new unitary authorities is estimated at 214.

Elections

The current cost of elections for Oxfordshire and West Berkshire is estimated at £5 million. Unitary authorities generally have 1 election per four years and savings have been calculated on this basis – other than the two-yearly cycle proposed for Greater Oxford.

External Audit

Local government reorganisation will deliver a benefit from the external audit fees compared to the predecessor authorities. External audit fees have been obtained from the latest statement of accounts and our assumption is that external audit fees will vary according to the population size of authorities. The audit fee for Oxfordshire County Council will be a saving to the audit fees going forward and hence it is allocated as a saving based on population across the new three unitary authorities.

IT Transitional Savings

There is some consistency in the use of ICT systems across the current 7 authorities with 6 of the authorities using the same financial management system, 2 use the same HR and Payroll system, all use the same elections system and there are only 2 different systems for revenues and benefits. Whilst the Greater Oxfordshire and Northern Oxfordshire authorities would require a system to deal with adult social care and children's services, the costs for which have been factored in to the transitional analysis, there will be savings to be generated from the combining of contracts in the other systems once they expire. A modest 5% saving has been assumed albeit from 2030-31 onwards.

5.7 Transformation Savings

The areas where savings from transformation could be achieved include:

- Asset rationalisation and proactive management of assets
- Service Transformation
    - Adult social care, children services and Early intervention programme
    - Environmental and Regulatory
- Enabling Services
- Growth; not included in the overall costs and savings summary table (see section below); growth is in addition to the other benefits

5.7.1 Asset Management

Overall Position

Information taken from the latest Statement of Accounts indicates a net book value of approximately £2 billion across Oxfordshire and West Berkshire. A rationalisation of assets including disposal of property either in terms of the freehold or a long-term lease has been assumed to release around 10% of the property in each new unitary. This is consistent with other business plans and in the case of Greater Oxford is corroborated via an exercise undertaken by the councils Property team. Based on net book values of assets as at 1st April 2025, rationalisation of assets translating into a revenue saving of around £3 million per annum has been calculated for Greater Oxford (see below). Clearly since this is based on net book values the saving is likely to be higher than this, so this is considered prudent and potentially able to realised across the whole portfolio of property.

Greater Oxford Analysis

Oxford City Council has a strong track record of actively managing its asset portfolio and it is assumed that Greater Oxford will continue with this approach. A common assumption adopted across all of the unitary business cases is that assets will transfer to successor authorities based on their physical location. The asset lists from each of the existing authorities has been reviewed and categorised by establishment type to understand the opportunities which may be available in the Greater Oxford authority. As a result of the detailed work undertaken to assess asset rationalisation opportunities across the Greater Oxford geography, the identified 10% savings figure has also been used to model similar opportunities for Northern Oxfordshire and Ridgeway.

It is assumed that the property transfer will be undertaken at book value since the asset transfer will follow the disaggregation and reaggregation of the balance sheets of the respective authorities.

Based on this, the assets to be transferred will predominantly consist of operational assets; the investment portfolios are small and mostly land and most of this sits outside the Greater Oxford boundary. The review of the asset portfolios has however highlighted a number of opportunities to consolidate operational services and reclassify assets as part of the investment portfolio. It is anticipated that once the full detail of the portfolio is better understood there is likely be further opportunities, however these have not been included in the costings.

The information available is not comprehensive enough to fully establish whether there are any opportunities for growth, although potential opportunities that need further investigation have been identified. As the key information available is book value has been provided, it has been assumed in the modelling that where the asset is not needed, the Greater Oxford Council would dispose of the asset either by way of freehold transfer or, more likely, by way of long lease.

Further Assumptions

The following **Establishment Types** have been assumed to be required to be retained in their entirety:

- Schools and Nurseries
- Fire Stations
- Children's Homes
- Libraries
- Gypsy and Traveller sites
- Elderly persons homes

For **Staffing and Office Space**, it is assumed that staff working within the Greater Oxford Authority would predominately work from home, using the Town Hall as a city centre base and making better use of Community Centres and libraries for locality working.

In East Oxford there would be the **Consolidation of Services** for Community and Health facilities which is likely to lead to a disposal of one centre. Similarly, in Berinsfield there is the assumption one of the buildings would be redeveloped following consolidation of services.

If all other assumptions remain true, a **Cost of Delivery** allowance of 25% of the additional income/savings should be made to deliver the consolidation works required. This would also cover staff time. When the Council reviews options for each of the identified properties, the cost and mechanism of delivery would be considered as part of the business case. This would be expected to be contained within the 25%.

Values

Savings, Income and Capital Receipts have been calculated using the book value not market value, since this is the information available on a comprehensive basis. The exception to this is in relation to infill sites which have been valued at £200k per acre based on recent transactions undertaken by the City Council. Although flagged for disposal and costed into these calculations, the infill sites would present an opportunity for the wholly owned housing company which would improving the profitability of the company and hence the dividend return to the shareholder. In the event the property is developed by the housing company, the company would have to pay the going rate for the property and so any development by the company would be over and above the benefits included here.

Opportunities for growth

The data provided does not allow a full review of opportunities for growth within the portfolio and while, for the purpose of this exercise a capital receipt has been assumed, it is likely there would be opportunities for growth. A fuller options appraisal would need to be undertaken to better understand the opportunity.

Results

The number of assets transferred from Oxfordshire County Council, South Oxfordshire Council, Vale of the White Horse District Council and Cherwell Council together with their estimated disposal value or revenue streams is summarised below

Table 5.11: Net Book Value Of Assets Transferred

Council	Assets Transferred	Total Book Value
	Nos	£
County	227	187,615,797
South Oxfordshire	19	1,264,353
Vale of the White Horse	11	1,067,079
Cherwell	20	6,566,826
Total	277	196,514,055

The review indicates there is around £17.6 million of capital receipts available, predominantly from the County portfolio, plus additional Revenue Income and some revenue savings. It is expected that there will be additional opportunities for savings or additional income once each of the opportunities is reviewed in more detail, however the amounts below are a comfortable estimate.

To assess the annual impact of this, the capital receipts have been converted to revenue by assuming a 4% saving on borrowing interest costs and a 2% saving on the principal element representing a reduced minimum revenue provision charge. The property team estimate that there would be a 25% cost relating to additional staffing and other costs associated with selling or converting the assets. An additional 10% cost contingency has also been included to account for ay cost overruns. It is also assumed that the full benefit would not be achieved until 2030/31 representing the lead-in time to realise the benefits. This would result in the following:

Table 5.12: Revenue Impact Of Asset Rationalisation For Greater Oxford Unitary

Capital Receipt, Revenue Income or Revenue Saving	Value	Revenue Benefits
	£	£
Capital Receipt	17,598,352	1,055,901
Revenue Income	160,000	160,000
Revenue Saving	3,840,000	3,840,000
Total benefit	21,598,352	5,055,901
Assumed Related Cost Implications		1,263,975
Cost Contingency		505,590
Net Benefit		3,286,336

For the Greater Oxford unitary a 10% benefit would achieve a benefit of £3.3 million. This granular work therefore supports the use of 10% saving for the unitary projections.

5.7.2 Service Transformation

Taking the opportunity to redesign services not only provides improved quality of life and services to residents but also the ability to unlock financial benefits and enable the new unitary organisations to be financially sustainable.

Our benefit modelling includes each unitary being provided the tools to embark on a programme of ambitious redesign and innovation – rather than simply amalgamating new services and continuing with the status quo.

Not all services will benefit from transformation programmes in the medium term although over the longer-term new managers will bring in new ideas and savings going forward may be established from changing the long running practices that have prevailed over the years. No assumption has been made around these longer-term savings although there are some areas in County Council and other services where in the medium-term, we believe savings can be generated as follows.

Early Intervention & Prevention, Social Care & SEND Transformation

The approach we have taken to creating our recommended Target Operating Models for the new unitary authorities began with understanding the current baseline activity for services across both district and unitary services. Combining detailed analysis of local data sources and benchmarking with national returns, we were able to identify where additional interventions could release financial benefits and improved outcomes for residents.

We have ensured that our service design will align to coming and expected reforms, including the Families First Partnership Programme within Children's Social Care, the Fit for the Future plan within the NHS and anticipated further reforms in SEND and Adult Social Care.

Through consolidating cross-cutting prevention activity currently dispersed across layers of delivery, we will be able to build on existing best practice prevention innovations and take these further – streamlining processes and embedding data-led ways of working. This consolidation will also enable us to make efficiency savings and right sizing the organisation to ensure that we wrap around the right skills and expertise to residents at the right time.

Our preventative approach to service delivery will avoid additional cost on temporary accommodation, through reducing the number of residents who are made homeless through proactive data-led identification of households at risk and intervention to prevent them falling into crisis[42].

A more holistic approach to prevention will also avoid the need for long-term spend on Adult Social Care. Through deploying digital tools to resolve client queries early, and through community-based signposting, more people would have their needs met without a need for long-term care. Where residents may need additional support, short-term TEC-enabled reablement will be used across the footprint building upon existing offers for older adults and expanding this to be available to all residents who may require short-term support[43].

A deep knowledge of local places and community-based providers will also enable a focus on working closely with young people and their families to undertake a programme that sees children and young people supported in placements that are close to their communities, and are family-based wherever possible, reducing overall spend. This includes exploring reunification where safe and appropriate, preventing the need for long-term spend on care.

This local knowledge will also be deployed in deploying Teams Around the School[44], which will work in a develop deep relationships with SENCOs, teachers, young people and their families to identify and support additional needs without an escalation in need either to exclusion or additional support, reducing the need for additional spend.

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[42] Luton's data-led approach identified 78 at risk households, of which 22 were supported the authority to manage finances and avoid crisis – Policy in Practice

[43] Herefordshire Enablement Team saved approx.. £800k in its first year of operation, reablement functions across the country (including in Leicestershire, Rochdale and Southwark) have led to fewer people requiring long-term support following an intervention (LGA)

[44] Blackpool's Team Around the School pilot saw a positive impact on children & families, and reducing escalation to crisis (DfE)

In the longer-term, transformation also expects each unitary to develop a vibrant and local provider market – leveraging local spend into improved outcomes for residents and reduced spend[45]. We also anticipate opportunities to be unlocked via housing development in both specialist housing for adults with support needs, and young people, reducing high-cost spend in both residential and supported living sectors as people are able to move into these schemes or stepped down out of more acute support.

We believe that this programme of transformation will deliver savings as set out below. This is £15.9 million of annual cashable savings and cost avoidance from year 5 onwards:

Table 5.13: Revenue Impact Of Social Care Innovation

Area of innovation	Total Ongoing Saving as at year 5		
	Greater Oxford £ million	North Oxfordshire £ million	Ridgeway £ million
Early Intervention & Prevention	3.9	2.6	4.1
Adult Social Care	0	0.3	0.5
Children's Social Care	1.3	1.4	1.8

Other Service Areas Considered

Education

While the three unitary approach will enable a more focused approach to meeting the distinct support needs of schools serving urban and rural and rural areas, there is limited scope for changes that would deliver transformational cost savings.

Highways and Transport

There is an existing £840 million 8 + 6 year Milestone highways contract which will remain in place and will be managed collaboratively. The costs of this will be apportioned over the three unitary authorities but with West Berkshire's own highways continuing to be separately until the services can be combined.

Service delivery for Greater Oxford is safeguarded through as now through the wholly owned company, Oxford Direct Services (ODS) who collaborate and partner with an extensive supply chain to minimise risk and ensure lower fixed costs by deploying sub-contractors where needed to deal with fluctuations in demand. ODS also provides services commercially, delivering some £4m worth of schemes in 2024/25 with margins that result in returns to the shareholder, currently Oxford City Council. No savings on highways are currently being assumed; any savings in costs are assumed will be used to improve the road network.

[45] Self-Directed Futures is a social enterprise that works with local authorities to make their commissioning approaches more localised and focused on the individual, including working with Somerset to make smaller providers available to those on direct payments.

Public Health

There are currently two Public Health teams serving the Oxfordshire and West Berkshire geography, which would continue to be the case with one team serving Ridgeway and the other a shared service between Greater Oxford and Northern Oxfordshire. No transformational savings have been identified. However, longer-term it is expected that the alignment of MSA and Integrated Care Board geographies may create opportunities for a more strategic approach to public health commissioning across the Thames Valley area.

The current Oxfordshire public health budget is £47.75 million, equating to £63.67 per head. Proposed budgets for unitary authorities are weighted by population and deprivation, e.g., Greater Oxford's weighted budget is £16.73 million. A 5% efficiency gain is targeted through service integration, co-working, and better use of voluntary sector resources.

Housing

The Housing Revenue Account (HRA) currently operated only in the Oxford City Council area, will continue to operate as a separate function. The formation of the Greater Oxfordshire unitary will provide more opportunity for OX Place the housing development company operated by Oxford Council to broaden its operation boundary, providing it access to much needed land for future development (see the section on growth below).

In respect of homelessness challenges, Oxford Council is already responding to the financial challenge by the purchase of new dwellings and moving homeless families out of expensive hotel accommodation. The Greater Oxford Unitary should allow it greater access to accommodation together with the scale of operation and the associated services within social care, giving the authority the ability to deal with these financial pressures.

Cultural Leisure Services

No transformation savings proposed.

Planning and Development

The combination of district and county services would amalgamate the district and county level planning functions. Savings from Development Management would be expected to be realised in senior management savings which have been captured in the transition calculations. There may be some small savings at an officer level but broadly as the geographical area changes, the officer cover is just reapportioned so no net savings have been built into the business case in respect of this. With respect to the Committee system it is anticipated that any additional work required at Planning Committee level would be alleviated by redesigning the scheme of delegation such that more decisions would be delegated to officers.

Policy wise, a Mayoral Strategic Authority would take on the strategic planning role with the unitary authorities producing shorter time-horizon local plans. This would be expected to shift costs around rather than change the overall cost aggregate. The costs of the work of the current district planning service is already included in the district level costs and the additional responsibility for public realm

etc would be covered, capacity-wise, with the disaggregation of County costs to the unitary authorities and the consequent transfer of staffing.

AI and digitisation are likely to yield efficiencies and savings, although these will need to follow after systems and function integration and would therefore be more in the medium term. It is not possible to cost the savings impact of this at this stage and so therefore no savings have been built in to this business case.

Enabling Services

Support services include finance, ICT, Human Resources and payroll, legal and democratic, internal audit, revenues and benefit, procurement, counter fraud and customer services. Baseline data has been taken from information provided by each of the individual authorities which indicates a mixture of in-house provision of services and outsourced management arrangements through private sector companies and a wholly owned Teckal company. Enabling services will be provided separately for each council, either directly or through outsourcing arrangements.

People services will be critical to enabling the CEOs of the new authorities to create the shared organisation identity and purpose that is crucial for success. A priority will be to embed high-performance cultures in the new authorities, based on putting residents first, effective collaboration, and providing rewarding roles with strong career development.

ICT services underpin the ability of councils to deliver service integration and transformation to better meet the needs of residents. Alongside the essential deliverables of providing a secure digital environment that enables collaboration and communication, ICT will enable future innovation through common data platforms, automation and digital service design. Customer self-service opportunities will continue to develop with the rapid advance of AI technology, which will also support improved back-office functions. Data-led decision making will ensure a focus on effectiveness and efficiency. This will be supported by the technology and expertise, skilled for and applied across all service areas.

Through the transformation process we will analyse the best delivery model which will drive savings but also retain resilience and quality. We will seek to redesign and innovate processes and procedures and drive savings we believe are achievable from 2028-29, with an emphasis on data-driven decision-making and greater use of digital and AI to streamline processes and improve appropriate automation. A reduction of 10% full time equivalents has been assumed, which is prudent compared to other business cases put forward which indicate ranges of 10-20%.

Some enabling services, such as finance, HR and ICT, will require resource to manage the merger of existing systems, staffing and resources, and to support the transition process. The cost of this is factored into the prudent level of savings assumed.

5.8 Environmental and Regulatory

All of Oxfordshire's local authorities are among the highest performing waste collection and disposal authorities in the country, with residents recycling 57.6% of their household waste against the national rate of 44.6%. However, recycling performance has flatlined over the last few years and the

cost of disposing of residual waste is the highest in the country[46]. In addition, much of the county's waste infrastructure, consisting of 31 sites, most of which are end of life, requires considerable investment to meet the needs of residents and businesses in the future.

A business case has been prepared for four authorities, Oxford City Council, Cherwell Council, West Oxfordshire Council and Oxfordshire County Council to work in partnership to deliver waste and environmental services in a co-ordinated and integrated way across the county to deliver improvements in operational performance; in environmental sustainability and biodiversity and substantial efficiency savings.

The Waste and Environmental Services Transformation Programme (WESP) business case outlines a new operating model for waste collection, disposal, and environmental services. It identifies significant opportunities that can be achieved through integrating operations both vertically throughout the waste system as well as geographically. The scope of the WESP business case includes:

- Waste collection: household waste, food waste, garden waste.
- Recycling: recycling centres, recycling management.
- Waste disposal: waste processing, energy from waste.
- Business waste: trade waste, hazardous waste.
- Street cleaning: street sweeping, gully clearance.
- Grounds maintenance: verge management, open space management.

Decisions by the participating councils on implementation of WESP are expected to be made ahead of the Government's announcement of its preferred LGR option for Oxfordshire. Therefore, WESP cost savings have *not* been included in the transformational cost savings projected in any of the unitarisation proposals put forward for Oxfordshire.

If implemented, WESP would be expected to deliver net savings of c£6m in the 2027/28 financial year, rising to ongoing net savings of c£14m across the 3UA unitaries from 2030/31 onwards. £63.5m of net benefit will be delivered in the first five years (by 2032/33), with £59m of this achieved in Greater Oxford and Northern Oxfordshire. Transformation savings have been modelled for each of the three unitary proposals and can be found in Appendix F.

WESP would see the creation of a shared company hybrid model to provide an agile approach to transform and respond to the significant changes Government is introducing to reduce the environmental impacts of waste and support a circular economy. WESP would ensure full alignment of commercial and regulatory incentives to minimise waste arisings and maximise the recycling of waste that is collected. In addition to helping meet Government and Oxfordshire waste and climate change targets, it would deliver very significant cost savings, improve the commercial performance of paid-for services and deliver operational benefits to both residents and businesses.

South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse District Councils have chosen not to partner with WESP and have taken the decision to award an outsourced contract for waste collection and street cleansing that will start on 29 June 2026 and run for eight years, with a possible break after four years. Upon vesting in 2028, Ridgeway Council will need to operate separate arrangements for waste

[46] WRAP UK Gate Fees Report 2024-25

collection and disposal across southern Oxfordshire in parallel with West Berkshire's existing contract with Veolia that runs to 2033. It is assumed that at this point Ridgeway would either choose to integrate the operations in its former South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse area with those covering West Berkshire, or to join WESP and integrate across the wider geography including Greater Oxford and Northern Oxfordshire. No modelling has been undertaken to assess the further efficiencies that either of these choices would likely deliver.

5.9 Council Tax

Council tax is integral to council finances for ensuring the financial sustainability of any new unitary council. Inevitably different Councils have different levels of council tax charge which is the result of annual incremental political decisions at the different councils over many years. Through the creation of unitary councils, bringing together areas which have historically different levels of council tax charge, result in the need to harmonise those council tax charges over time.

Harmonisation must take place by day 1 of year 9 from vesting day, although if you move too quickly some residents receive a high council tax increase whereas if you go too slow residents on the same council tax bands get charged different levels of council tax for a longer period. Ultimately the levels of council tax and speed of harmonisation will be a political decision for the Shadow Authorities. For the purposes of equity between Council taxpayers, it is preferable to have the shortest period of harmonisation possible. However, this must be taken in the context of affordability and the impact on Council Taxpayers of the annual increase. It therefore may be necessary to harmonise over a longer period than one year.

An additional nuance of the proposed Unitary models in Oxfordshire and West Berkshire is that there is a difference balance of service delivery between the district council and the parish council in different areas. For instance, the average parish Council band D charge in Oxford City is £21 but in the rest of Oxfordshire the average parish Council band D charge is £114. Differences in the provision of services between different areas must be adjusted using a mechanism of special expenses which is an adjustment between areas made in the council tax setting process.

Special Expenses

Special expenses are applied when a main precepting body i.e. a district or unitary Council, provides a service in a parish (or unparished area) which is provided in other parishes by a town or parish council. To avoid double taxation the cost of this service must be met by the council taxpayers of the town or parish where the service is being provided so a special expense is charged to the council taxpayers of that parish or area. It should be noted that special expenses are not additional spending over and above the budget set by the Council but a classification within the overall budget.

Legislation (Section 35 of the Local Government Finance Act 1992) specifies the items which are to be treated as special items for the purposes of calculating the Council Tax. These items include:

1. A precept relating to part only of the Council's area e.g. parish precepts;
2. The whole of the expenses (or only some) of those incurred by the Council in performing in a part of its area a function performed elsewhere in its area by a Parish Council; and
3. Any net expenses which arise out of the Council's possession of property held in trust for a part of its area.

It is item 2 in that list that needs to be considered in respect of the unitary proposals. The types of costs included in this item would normally include (not exclusively):

- Cemetery provision
- Community Centres
- Allotment provision
- Parks, Open Spaces and Recreation Grounds

5.9.1 Council Tax Harmonisation

Current Band D levels for each existing authority are:

Table 5.14: District/ Unitary Authority Band D Council Tax 2025-26

Billing Authority	2025/26 Overall Band D (excluding police) £
Oxford	2,252.70
South Oxfordshire	2,062.64
West Oxfordshire	2,040.78
Vale of the White Horse	2,073.09
Cherwell	2,069.90
West Berkshire	1,921.41
Highest Band D	2,252.70
Lowest Band D	1,921.41

As already identified, harmonisation of Council Tax in the shortest period possible within affordability and financial impact considerations is desirable to achieve equity across the new unitary authorities with all service users in a new council paying the same rate. In doing this, Councils will likely want to ensure that they maximise income to deal with financial pressures facing councils in both year one and every subsequent year. The new unitary authorities will also likely want to comply with the referendum limits. The choice of methods and timeframe for harmonisation will be a decision for the new unitary authorities; these options are provided therefore for indicative purposes, and the results have not been included in the overall costs and savings figures. The harmonisation analysis has been undertaken using 2025/26 council tax figures since these are a known factor; any projection to estimated 2027/28 council tax levels for analysis purposes would have the same overall results since consistent percentages would be applied to get to the estimated figures. 2025/26 council tax figures also have the benefit of being recognisable and published figures and are consistent with the use of 2025/26 budget information for baseline calculations.

There are four options for Council Tax Harmonisation that have been assessed:

1. Harmonising to the Highest Band D with a 4.99% increase
2. Harmonising to the Highest Band D without a 4.99% increase
3. Harmonising to the Lowest Band D with a 4.99% increase
4. Harmonising to the Weighted Average Band D

More detail on these options can be found in Appendix E.

Harmonising to the Highest band D with a 4.99% increase

Council tax referendum limits apply to the overall weighted average band D of an authority. Harmonising to the highest band D in each unitary area after applying the annual referendum limit would inevitably breach the referendum limit.

This option has issues for the following reasons:

- A Council cannot breach the referendum limit without undertaking a referendum, the results of which would be uncertain
- The councils will not be fully established when the Council Tax needs to be set, and a referendum would likely be an unpopular move and a poor start to the relations between the new council and their stakeholders.

Harmonising to the Highest band D without a 4.99% increase

Council tax referendum limits apply to the overall average band D of an authority. Harmonising to the highest band D in each unitary area but without a 4.99% increase would allow for harmonisation over a shorter period or with less adverse impact on those lower council tax areas.

Applying this option would result in a loss to all the Councils compared to applying rises based on a weighted average. This may be considered an acceptable cost to the new unitary authorities to ease the cost burden on individuals and / or to speed up harmonisation. Any council tax setting which does not take the maximum increase to the Band D charge will have ongoing year on year effects and the reduced council tax yield would roll forward from year to year and would be exacerbated by the loss of future percentage increases on the “lost” Band D charge.

Harmonising to the Lowest Band D with a 4.99% increase

Harmonising to the lowest band D in each unitary area would result in a lower council tax yield than the maximum increase that each council could levy without breaching the referendum limit.

If this option were to be chosen, the following would need to be considered:

- Councils generally are under increasing financial pressure and increasing demand for services and council tax is a key income stream for councils to deal with the costs of demands on their services
- Any reduction in the Band D charge will have ongoing year on year effects and the reduced council tax yield would roll forward from year to year and would be exacerbated by the loss of future percentage increases on the “lost” Band D charge.

Harmonising to the Weighted Average Band D

Council tax referendum limits apply to the overall average band D of an authority. Harmonising to the weighted average band D would move all Council taxpayers to the weighted average with some moving up and some moving down.

Although it is preferable from an equity perspective to harmonise over one year, it may be preferable to smooth the impact through an extended harmonisation period. This would reduce the year-on-year effect to individual council taxpayers. Potential phased harmonisation for Greater Oxford City Council could be as follows:

Table 5.15: Greater Oxford Council Tax Harmonisation

Greater Oxford	Over / (Under) the average £	Harmonisation effect over 3 years (per year) £
Oxford City	68	-23
South Oxfordshire Parishes	-122	41
Vale of White Horse Parishes	-112	37
Cherwell Parishes	-115	38
Maximum Variance	-122	41
Minimum Variance	68	-23

(N.B. a positive variance means the council tax would come down; a negative variance means that it needs to go up)

The difference between the highest and lowest Band D in the new North Oxfordshire and Ridgeway unitary authorities is not as large as that for Greater Oxford therefore the harmonisation could be undertaken over a shorter period:

Table 5.16: North Oxfordshire and Ridgeway Council Tax Harmonisation

	Years to Harmonise	Maximum Average Harmonisation upwards £	Maximum Average Harmonisation downwards £
North Oxfordshire	1	-15.00	14.00
Ridgeway	2	-44.00	32.00

Unitary status and need for additional special expenses calculations

Council tax charging in Oxford City is different to that in the non-City areas being brought into the greater Oxford area. This is because the non-Oxford City areas rely more heavily on services being provided by the parishes. Due to this there is a relatively large difference between the district council tax of the City area and the new areas brought into Greater Oxford.

Based on the 2025/26 council tax levels, the average council tax for the new Greater Oxford area would be £2,184.88 excluding the parish charge and existing Oxford City Special Expenses.

However given the amount of the difference between the district charge from the City and that of the parished areas brought into the new unitary, along with the differences in the parish related band D, this is likely to be due to a disparity between the services provided by parishes in the Oxford City Area and those provided by parishes in the parished areas being brought into Greater Oxford. When there

is a difference between areas for charging purposes there must be an adjustment called "special expenses" to remove double taxation. This would be in additional to the special expenses currently forming part of the council tax calculations for the current City Council. A rough estimate of the effect of this would produce the Greater Oxford harmonisation position as the following:

Table 5.17: Greater Oxford Council Tax Harmonisation Including Special Expenses Adjustment

Current Council	2025/26 Overall Band D (excluding police) £	Increase / (Decrease) to Weighted Average £	Increase / (Decrease) %	4.99% Increase on Weighted Average £	Total Increase £	Revised Council Tax £	Total Increase %
Oxford *	2,180.65	(41.27)	(1.89)	106.75	65.48	2,246.13	3.00
South Oxfordshire	2,062.64	76.74	3.72	106.75	183.49	2,246.13	8.90
Vale of the White Horse	2,073.09	66.29	3.20	106.75	173.04	2,246.13	8.35
Cherwell	2,069.90	69.48	3.36	106.75	176.23	2,246.13	8.51

Weighted Average = Total Council Tax Requirement divided by Tax base	Gap from largest to smallest
2,139.38	118.01

* Excluding All Special Expenses

This would also influence the phasing of harmonisation that could be applied. This can be shown as follows:

Table 5.18: Greater Oxford Council Tax Harmonisation Modelling Including Special Expenses Adjustment

Greater Oxford	Over / (Under) the average £	Harmonisation effect over 3 years (per year) £	Harmonisation effect over 2 years (per year) £
Oxford City	41	-14	-21
South Oxfordshire Parishes	-77	26	39
Vale of White Horse Parishes	-66	22	33
Cherwell Parishes	-69	23	35
Maximum Variance	-77	26	39
Minimum Variance	41	-14	-21

Adult Social Care Premium

Districts and Borough Councils can only increase council tax up to their referendum limit of 2.99% without undertaking a costly and uncertain referendum. On creation of the unitary authorities, the district element of the precept would become part of the new unitary council precept to which the unitary cap of 4.99% would be applied. With increasing social care costs, it is assumed that the social care precept of the additional 2% will continue. This therefore would result in additional Council Tax income that is not included in existing financial projections.

The benefit would occur every year and compound on the previous benefit. A summary of this benefit by unitary of a single year effect is as follows:

Table 5.19: Estimated Financial Impact of Adult Social Care Premium

	Greater Oxford	North Oxfordshire	Ridgeway
Taxbase relating to District Area	75,437	99,143	104,446
Weighted Average Band D Council Tax (£)	2,184.88	2,055.58	N/a
County Council Element (£)	1,911.40	1,911.40	N/a
Weighted Average Band D District Element Council Tax (£)	273.48	144.18	156.21
District Element Council Tax (£)	20,630,237	14,294,778	16,315,463
Additional 2% increase (£)	412,605	285,896	326,309

5.10 The Oxford Model

The Oxford Model is an innovative approach adopted by Oxford City Council to enhance its financial independence, maintain high-quality services and support local employment. It involves "insourcing" services rather than outsourcing them to private companies. This model allows the Council to retain control over service quality, keeps more of its spend and employment local, and ensures that profits are reinvested back into the community rather than going to external shareholders.

As part of this approach, Oxford City Council owns two wholly owned companies:

- Oxford Direct Services (ODS): Responsible for waste collection, street cleaning, property maintenance HRA and GF, highways, and other direct services including fully commercial services.
- OX Place: Focuses on designing and building new homes for Oxford, contributing to affordable housing development in the city.

The model generates around £10 million annually, which supports frontline services and other Council activities. The profits made by these companies go directly back to the Council, helping to fund essential public services, reducing dependency on government funding, and enhancing financial stability. By keeping services in-house and more of its spend local, the Council creates high-quality local employment opportunities and maintains control over the quality and delivery of its services. This approach aligns services closely with local needs and expectations. The Council's companies are also empowered to bid for external contracts, providing additional revenue streams and reinforcing the financial sustainability of the model.

The Oxford model will also contribute towards delivery of the growth agenda that is proposed to be adopted by the Greater Oxford unitary council. OX Place is well placed to contribute to the delivery of housing across new sites released through a Green Belt review. These are by their nature likely to be less challenging or costly to develop than many of the small, constrained sites within the city that it has brought forward. ODS could relatively easily expand direct service operations it currently delivers within the to the wider Greater Oxford geography.

No assumptions are made about the nature of service delivery by the Northern Oxfordshire or Ridgeway unitary councils. Across the Northern Oxfordshire geography the existing West Oxfordshire and Cherwell District Councils have a track record of primarily Teckal company and in-house service delivery, while across the Ridgeway geography the existing West Berkshire Council and South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse District Councils have a track record of primarily outsourced service delivery.

5.11 Growth

Council Tax

Oxford City Council has a demonstrable track record of delivering strong growth even though the boundary of the authority limits land availability and provides additional difficulties due to the urban nature of the area. The new Greater Oxford unitary would look to continue the drive for growth both in dwellings to meet housing need and in commercial capacity.

The Council has identified areas of green belt to provide sufficient supply to build 40,000 new dwellings, 16,000 more than the Standard Method. For the purposes of providing an indication of the additional income arising from the growth, completions have been assumed to start from 2030/31. The council tax band D used for these indicative figures is the weighted average for the Greater Oxford unitary using 2025/26 council tax levels; this ensures comparability with the rest of the financial analysis within this proposal.

This growth would result in an increase in Council Tax income from the current baseline as follows:

Table 5.20: Financial Impact of Greater Oxford Dwelling Growth 2030-31 to 2040-41

	2030/31	2031/32	2032/33	2033/34	2040/41
Additional Number of Properties (Cumulative)	1,081	3,243	6,486	10,810	40,000
Band D Equivalent	900.3	2,700.8	5,401.5	9,002.6	33,312.0
Additional Council Tax (Cumulative) (£'s)	1,966,951	5,900,853	11,801,707	19,669,511	72,782,650

Business Rates

The Greater Oxford proposals would see the creation of up to 12.8m sq. ft of employment space. We have modelled potential Business Rate income based on an assumed 5.9 million – 9.6 million square feet of research and development and laboratory space and 2.1 million – 3.2 million square feet of other commercial space which is split between retail, hospitality and leisure accommodation and office space.

The calculation of Rateable Values varies depending on use, location and size. Since all of this additional growth would be outside the current City boundary, the rates have been taken to be out of town and then apportioned between the different size categories of properties based on the existing business rates profiles with the existing City boundary. Properties have been assumed to only start being completed from 2030/31 and then to follow a bell curve profile. The tables below show exemplifications of additional business rates income based on the lower end of the development area and the higher end of the development so that the range of potential additional income can be seen. The figures do not include any inflationary increases and so are at 2025/26 rates multiplier

levels and do not make any assumptions about future business rates resets. The expected total development area is in the following range:

Table 5.21: Estimated Development Area Growth in Greater Oxford

	Development Area (Million square feet) Lower End	Development Area (Million square feet) Upper End
Research & Development	0.27	0.44
Laboratory Space	5.63	9.16
	5.90	9.60
Retail, Hospitality and Leisure	1.45	2.21
Office Accommodation	0.65	0.99
	2.10	3.20
Total Assumed Commercial Development	8.00	12.80

This results in the following business rates growth, shown below on a cumulative basis:

Table 5.22: Estimated Business Rates Income Growth in Greater Oxford

	2030/31 £	2031/32 £	2032/33 £	2033/34 £	2040/41 £
Additional Business Rates (Cumulative)					
Lower End	1,300,951	2,601,902	5,203,804	7,805,706	26,019,020
Upper End	2,096,828	4,193,656	8,387,309	12,580,962	41,936,539

The level of additional revenue from business rates, even at the lower level, is significant and, when combined with the additional council tax income, demonstrates that the Greater Oxford growth strategy would aid in the future sustainability of the new council in addition to benefits to the residents and the economy.

Other benefits of growth

There are direct benefits of this growth to housing need and the economy. If the new council follows Oxford City Council's current planning policies, 40% of the new homes (estimated total of 40,000) would be required to be social housing. These could then be brought into the Council's existing Housing Revenue Account, increasing the number of new council homes by over 16.000 and thus contributing significantly to dealing with the demand for low cost good quality housing.

For the affordable housing production that followed the model established within Oxford City of the City Council's wholly owned housing company developing affordable and social housing for the City, surpluses from the development of these homes would be retained in the public sector to improve

local services and to improve the financial position of the new Greater Oxford unitary council. The additional financial return from dividends paid by the company has not been included in the finances within this proposal since profit would be dependent on the specific schemes; the additional returns from the company would further improve the financial position and sustainability of Greater Oxford.

5.12 Housing Revenue Account (HRA)

Background

The Housing Revenue Account (HRA) was established under the Local Government and Housing Act 1989 as a ring-fenced account within the General Fund which must be kept separate from the rest of the General Fund. It records all income and expenditure relating to the ownership and management of a council's social housing stock. Typical income streams include rents from tenants and service charges. Expenditure covers housing management costs, repairs and maintenance, capital investment in the stock, and the servicing of housing-related borrowing. In many local authorities, the housing stock has been transferred to another registered provider but where the houses have bene retained by the council, the HRA plays a central role in delivering local housing strategies: maintaining and improving existing homes, ensuring compliance with housing standards and decarbonisation targets, and in some cases funding the development of new council housing.

The Oxford City HRA

Oxford City Council has retained its housing stock and, unlike many authorities, continues to grow its housing stock each year. In 2024/25, the HRA dwelling stock increased by 193; 97 houses and 96 flats. For Greater Oxford the assumption is that Oxford City Council's HRA will be wholly subsumed into the new Greater Oxford unitary authority since the entirety of the current boundary of Oxford City Council will be within the Greater Oxford area. This means the HRA, and its financial trajectory, will directly underpin the new authority's housing strategy from vesting day.

Oxford City Council's HRA budget for 2025/26 includes £60.9 million income from rents and service charges and expenditure of £59.7 million. This expenditure includes £15.3 million net interest costs. The surplus on the HRA for the year needs to be taken in the context of the longer term; the HRA is managed using a 30 year business plan to ensure that the account is viable over the long term.

The current HRA position is summarised as follows:

Table 5.23: Oxford City Council HRA Financial Metrics 2025-26

	Revenue Expenditure Budget	Forecast Total Funding	Forecast Net position (Surplus(-) / Deficit)	HRA Allocated Reserves	HRA Unallocated Reserves	Total Long Term HRA Borrowing (Capital Financing Requirement)	HRA External Debt	Total HRA Dwelling Assets
	£ million	£ million	£ million	£ million	£ million	£ million	£ million	£ million
Oxford City HRA	59.7	-60.9	-1.2	4.3	10.9	345.8	288.5	865.2

There are pressures on the HRA, partly due to national policies:

- Rent Increase Restriction - Rent increases were capped at 7% in 2023/24, even though inflation (CPI) was 10.1%;
- Foregone Rental Income - The rent cap led to weekly rent foregone of an aggregate of £76,724 for the 7,134 properties below formula rent.
- For 2024/25, the total rental income foregone due to the caps amounted to £4.1 million.

These restrictions on rent restrict the resources available to the HRA to produce additional social housing.

The Oxford City Council HRA is managed using three key metrics to ensure long-term viability:

- Interest Cover Ratio (ICR) - Target Minimum of 1.25 (2024/25 actual was 1.27)
- Loan to Value (LTV) - Maximum LTV of 65% (2024/25 actual was 40%)
- Debt / Turnover - Guideline of 5.0 / 6.0 (2024/25 actual was 4.9)

Adherence to these metrics gives confidence that the HRA is viable and sustainable in the longer term. If these targets are not achievable then the Business Plan budgets can be adjusted until they are.

The HRA is asset and capital investment driven, backed by income from rents. A long-term view therefore must be taken of any investment in the HRA. The current HRA capital includes the following key investment areas:

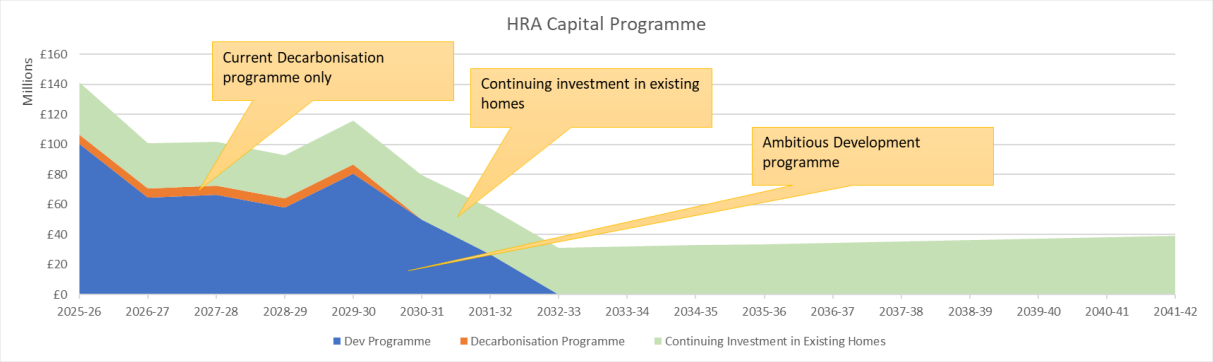

Fig 5.8: HRA Capital Programme

This shows that despite the financial pressures placed on the HRA through national policy, the Oxford City Council HRA has been well managed and is able to deliver new affordable housing. It is anticipated that a new Greater Oxford unitary council would continue to build on these achievements.

Delivery of new homes requires a high level of borrowing and to maintain the Interest Cover Ratio, the level of expenditure on new dwelling is necessarily limited. The current HRA business plan shows that the HRA will only just maintain the Interest Cover Ratio up to 2030/31 but will have additional capacity after that point:

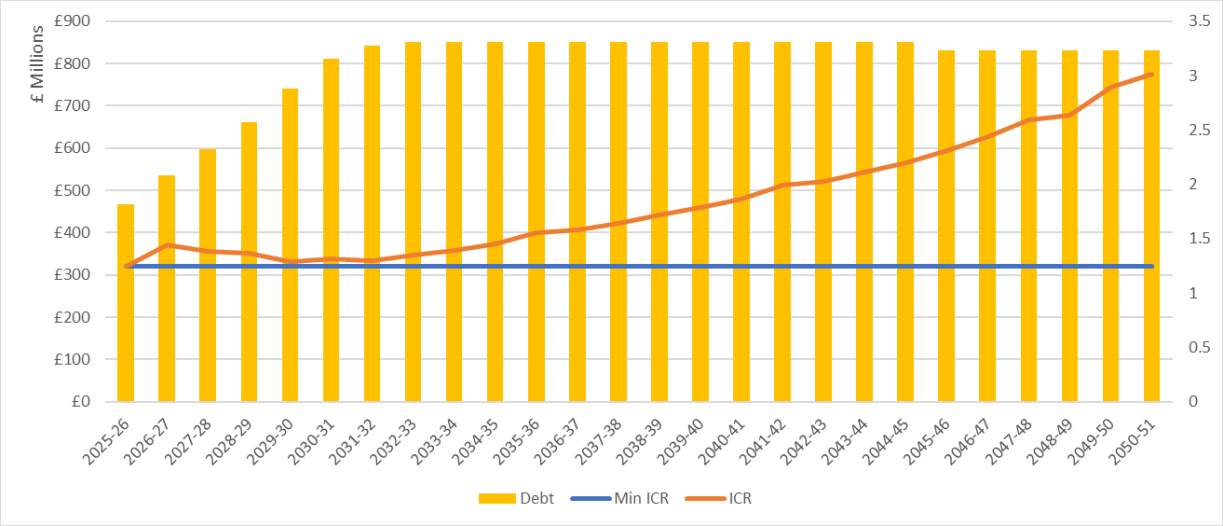

Fig 5.9: HRA Interest Cover Ratio (ICR) 2025-26 Business Plan

This profile aligns with the timing of the growth projections that could be achieved by the Greater Oxford unitary, demonstrating that the new unitary would have the capacity in the HRA to take additional dwellings arising from the growth agenda.

HRA Summary

The Oxford HRA contains some risks that will need to be managed, as Oxford City Council has done over the years, to ensure continuing sustainability. It also represents a major opportunity for the new Greater Oxford unitary. It brings with it a substantial income base, a large housing stock, and strategic capacity for new build. The capacity for new build will support the proposed continued growth agenda and be supported by the wholly owned housing company to deliver new stock and by the wholly owned company, Oxford Direct Services Limited, that delivers the maintenance and repair work on behalf of the HRA. Continuing the financial discipline currently employed in the HRA, the HRA could underpin the wider growth and regeneration strategy of the new authority.

Northern Oxfordshire and Ridgeway

Other than Oxford City Council only Cherwell District Council owns council housing across the proposed three unitary authorities' geography, with all other councils having previously transferred their stock to housing associations. Cherwell's 146 units include specialist assisted housing and general needs properties. This is below the 200-dwelling threshold required for an HRA. Therefore, it is assumed neither the proposed Northern Oxfordshire nor Ridgeway Councils would create an HRA.

5.13 Financial Conclusion

The opening position for the Greater Oxford unitary based on the disaggregated 2025/26 budgetary position is a deficit of £2.0 million and the other two unitaries have forecast small surpluses. While the shortfall in Greater Oxford would still require attention, all the forecast surpluses and deficits are relatively small in the context of local government and, given the size of the revenue expenditure for each new Council of between £396.3 million and £748.9 million, these variances would be manageable through routine financial management measures and the normal budgetary process.

Council tax harmonisation is one area that would have to be managed to balance between the financial impacts on the taxpayer and the equity between different council payers. Whereas the actual method chosen for harmonisation is a decision for the new unitaries, harmonisation could be achieved between one and two years. The challenge for the shadow authority will be to select an approach that secures long-term sustainability while distributing impacts fairly across communities.

The Housing Revenue Account (HRA) currently operated by Oxford City Council adds further weight to Greater Oxford's position, both from the perspective of showing how Oxford is different to its surrounding authorities, but also how a Greater Oxford unitary, in continuing the growth agenda currently adopted by Oxford City Council, could capitalise on the use of the HRA to take additional affordable housing stock. Oxford City Council's HRA currently manages over 8,000 homes and, along with the housing company, OX Place, provides an opportunity both to develop new housing and to manage that housing for the future on behalf of the citizens of the new unitary.

The balance sheet analysis shows that all three proposed unitary authorities have strong financial resilience when compared with relevant benchmark averages and there are no wide and unexpected variances in financial resilience measures between the proposed unitary authorities. Greater Oxford has a higher level of net assets and debt which is entirely consistent with being an HRA authority. Except for DSG deficits, which the Government has pledged to resolve, the key balance sheet measures are around or better than the average national position.

All authorities would start with above average levels of usable revenue reserves and strong balance sheets. On this basis it is anticipated that all three of the proposed unitary authorities will have the resources to finance the necessary transition and could also release capital resources to take advantage of the proposed flexible use of capital receipts.

The analysis of the costs and benefits of transition to unitary status and the transformation of service provision shows payback for the three unitary authorities is around year 4 after vesting day on 1st April 2028 for Greater Oxford and Northern Oxfordshire and year three for Ridgeway and that the with an ongoing financially sustainable position thereafter for all the three unitaries in this proposal. This position does not include the effect of the planned changes in waste collection and transfer, the additional council tax from the adult social care precept and the additional revenue from council tax and business rates growth. Combined with the strong balance sheet position this shows that none of the unitary authorities in this proposal will be looking for exceptional financial support. Additionally, this proposal will deliver growth which will benefit the citizens of the area and the wider national economy.

6 New Target Operating Model

This section sets out the proposed target operating model for the three unitary authorities (3UA). In this we will describe how services will be brought together to deliver better outcomes for residents across Oxfordshire. Grounded in the principles of early intervention and prevention, the model aims to anticipate need, reduce long-term demand, and support communities before challenges escalate.

The model uses place-based design to empower Oxfordshire and West Berkshire's towns and villages to support the priorities of their residents and businesses, while the city can provide for the city. Services will be co-designed and delivered through "right-sized" services, ensuring consistency where needed and flexibility where it matters.

6.1 Overview of New Unitary Authorities

One of the key opportunities of LGR is the ability to design authorities from first principles to address the distinctive challenge and opportunities of their specific place.

This is no mere administrative reorganisation – this is a once in a generation opportunity to create authorities that can efficiently and effectively meet needs and priorities of local communities. These councils will be focused on joined up delivery of services to provide integrated care and support to those who need it, ensuring that services are delivered in person-centric ways which respond to the specific priorities of each place. Through the prevention of crisis there will be savings to the cost of services through lower requirement for intensive interventions. But crucially more people will be supported before they require a statutory council service – including those most at risk of or already experiencing deprivation first hand.

The operating models for the new unitary authorities leverage fully the potential of unitarisation and devolution within their specific places. They provide a platform for deep transformation which improve outcomes while yielding optimal savings for services. The key to making savings for these new authorities will be through their preventative work.

Delivery of services will be tailored to meet the unique geographies and priorities of each place. This prevents services from being absorbed into larger authorities where the greater mix of needs will mean the complexities of each place would be lost in the scale of organisation. Working at this level means that Greater Oxford can deliver its full ambitions for growth of housing and businesses, enabling Northern Oxfordshire and Ridgeway to grow in the ways which work best for them in the context of their settlements and rural communities.

Bringing together social care, education, housing and public health functions sets the foundation strong public service reform. This will enable all three unitary authorities to achieve their ambitions to achieve healthier, longer, more prosperous lives for all.

6.2 Key Service Target Operating Models

6.2.1 Target Operating Model at a Glance

The three unitary approach sets out a bold ambition to unlock Oxfordshire's full future potential by delivering the best possible outcomes for our people, places, and economy. To deliver this, we have set out a target operating model that is both robust and deliverable, ensuring safe, legal, and effective services, while capitalising on this once-in-a-generation opportunity to design innovative, future-ready organisations that are built to meet the evolving needs of our communities.

At its core, the target operating model is driven by the six critical dimensions outlined in the Case for Three Unitary Authorities at section 4:

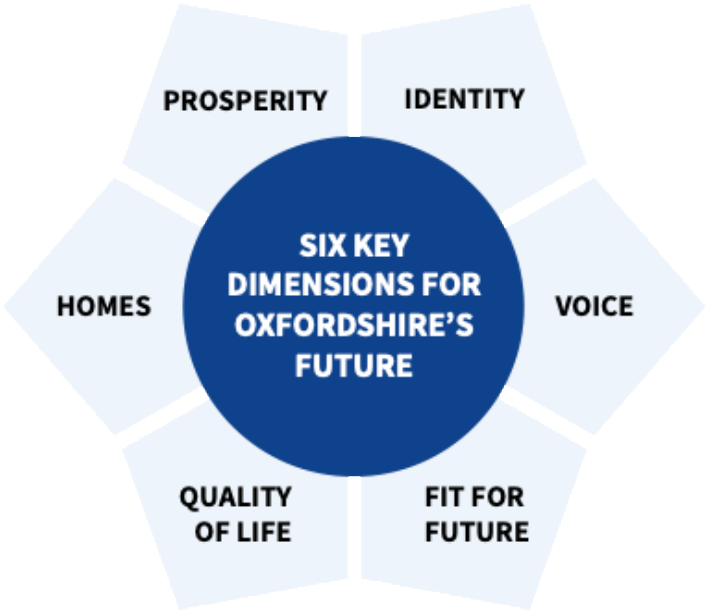

Fig 6.1: Six key dimensions for Oxfordshire's future

Each part of the operating model, from Place to Enabling Services, is intentionally designed to make the most of the opportunity LGR presents to build services from first principles that better meet the needs of the people they serve. Individually, each component builds on deep understanding of the local areas and communities, to innovate and reimagine how services are organised and delivered. Collectively, they form a coherent, future-ready system that gives each individual authority, and Oxfordshire as a whole, the strongest possible foundations for achieving its vision.

We will realise this vision by focusing on three transformative shifts:

- **Driving housebuilding and economic growth:** Enabling unitary authorities to plan and deliver the required number of homes where they are needed, promote growth and prosperity across the city region while protecting and enhancing access to Oxfordshire's countryside.
- **Putting residents at the centre:** Empowering Oxfordshire's towns and villages to speak for their residents and businesses, while the city speaks for the city. Delivering meaningful localism through an engaged community and a networked, prevention-led public sector that is responsive and supportive.

- **Focus on prevention:** Unlocking the strength of communities to create successful places, rooted in stable work and good homes, to work together to build resilience and tackle local challenges, reducing the need for council intervention, and enabling services to be delivered in a cost-effective, efficient and considerate manner.

We have outlined how the same principles apply consistently across Greater Oxford, Northern Oxfordshire, and Ridgeway. Each area has distinct priorities and profiles, and therefore place-based models will adapt to reflect local circumstances. It is our intention to collaborate with partners in these areas to design in consistency and join-up where beneficial, while enabling locally led delivery wherever possible.

6.2.2 Early Intervention and Prevention

The new operating model across each of the three unitary authorities will have, at its core, a focus on prevention. We do not propose to respond to the national demand and resource challenges across Adults, Children's, SEND and homelessness by delivering services in the same way across a larger footprint, but by purposefully pivoting to prevention-first, community-centred approaches.

We know that most people within Greater Oxford, Ridgeway and the Northern Oxfordshire unitary areas rely on support from friends, family, and local community networks, which helps them to thrive and navigate challenges before they escalate. For those with weaker community connections or more complex needs, public services are essential in providing additional support and supporting local connection.

A similar approach is already being implemented in organisations from London Boroughs and city unitary authorities to county unitary authorities, based on an understanding that investment in tailored prevention approaches results in improved outcomes and reduced costs[47].

Case Study: Rose Hill Community Centre, Oxford

Enabling community connection

Opened in 2016, Rose Hill Community Centre brings together community facilities, and personal support networks under one roof. The centre is home to the Rose Hill & Donnington Advice Centre, which works with residents to provide advice on benefits, debt and housing issues. It is also home to the Early Pregnancy Assessment Unit and the Thames Valley Police.

A well-used and vibrant community space, it serves a wide and diverse community. Facilities include a gym, a dance studio, a library and other rooms for hire – which serve groups from the Syrian Sisters, a refugee support group, to a weekly food larder. At the heart of the centre is the cafe, bringing diverse groups together.

Whether used for a cup of tea and a chat, or to attend a range of community events, Rose Hill Community Centre is a place that enables community cohesion, trust and a sense of belonging. These feelings help prevent isolation, reduce a risk of crisis and enable people to seek help early – reducing demand into statutory services and spend on long-term acute support.

[47] ICC work in Cheshire East, Fife, Swindon and Liverpool

The operating model of the new authorities will focus on a collaborative approach with residents, partners and with the other new unitary authorities. It will empower local community-led prevention, fostered through an enabling approach towards communities and partners to support residents. This will be supported through social infrastructure, community governance that centres resident voices and adaptive commissioning and grant processes.

This depth of understanding will be enabled by having three smaller, more responsive organisations, underpinned by a strong insight and data-led approach, that deeply understand their resident needs and communities, as opposed to being lost within a much larger footprint – as is the case in some current service delivery. The recent report from Collaborate CIC highlights that place-based, relational approaches – working locally, focusing on relationships and prevention – can deliver better outcomes as well as delaying and prevent demand.[48]

There will be a single pathway into the prevention offer delivered by the three unitary authorities, which will be complementary to that offered within the community. It will focus on building resilience, through collaborating with partners, co-locating support and services and using shared insights to design better, and more connected, support pathways.

This pathway will bring together services currently delivered across different layers of government and within different teams – including housing adaptations, homelessness prevention and information and advice typically located within social care services. The ethos of early intervention and prevention will be felt within all the people-focused services across the three unitaries. This means that all statutory services will have a 'no wrong door' approach to residents starting their contact with the local authority and will enable a holistic approach to supporting resident need and resolving challenges.

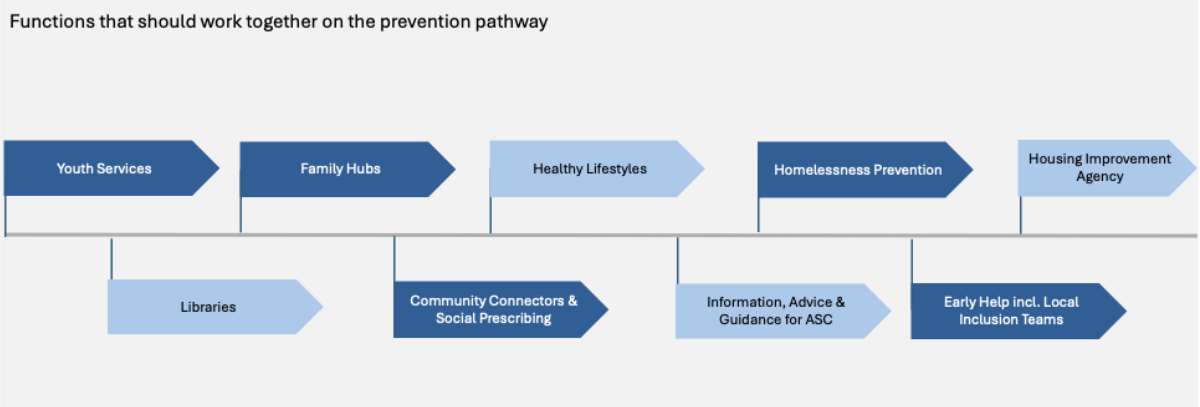

Fig 6.2: Recommended teams who would work together on the EI&P pathway

The early intervention and prevention approach will deliver effective early help through community-based support to enable everyday wellbeing, digital advice and guidance to give timely access to information and advice, and links to statutory services where a household's needs are more complex. A coordinated, integrated approach will ensure that people get the right help at the right time from people they trust.

[48] The case for putting place-based, relational approaches at the heart of local government reorganisation, Collaborate CIC 2025

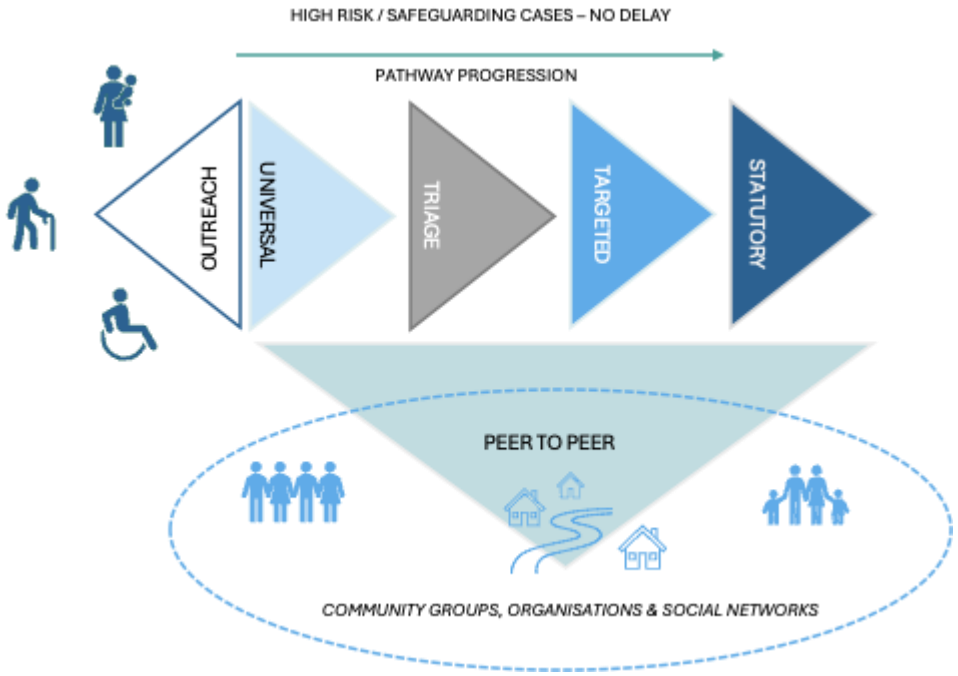

Fig 6.3: The Early Intervention & Prevention Pathway

Through co-design with residents and partners, each of the three unitary areas will have the opportunity to develop a response to their specific opportunities, rather than delivering a one-size fits all approach to service delivery.

This offer will be enabled by a newly developed Data and Insights function, which would bring together data from statutory services, nationally available data sets, and information on resident journeys, to be able to pinpoint both the root causes of demand and the moments where intervention is required to prevent someone from falling into crisis – either now or in the future, and enabling action.

This will provide the basis for proactive outreach to wrap around short-term support to residents and households to prevent a longer-term crisis – this may be a holistic approach to council tax arrears over a movement to punitive action, connecting a bereaved family who have used 'Tell Us Once' to update their status with community support or organising a Team Around a Child where school absenteeism has become a challenge.

Staff have the capacity to undertake this work through the new unitaries better utilising Artificial Intelligence and digital solutions for those who are digitally connected – using good practice such chatbots to connect residents instantly to further information or enabling the completion of self-assessments and referrals online.

Existing community assets, such as libraries, community centres, children's centres and leisure centres, will be used as hubs for the early intervention and prevention pathway – bringing together a wide range of council and partner services. This way of working will align with the Family Hub and Neighbourhood Health approaches – which requires hubs that either contain or can connect to services ranging from early years play activities and health visiting, to debt and housing advice.

As an example, libraries could provide local face to face support for residents via drop ins and advice sessions; spaces for community-led activity such as parent/guardian-led homework clubs along with digital skills training and cultural programmes to combat isolation and free computers, digital support and Wi-Fi will be maintained in every branch. This enables the library and wider cultural offer to continue to play a part in developing thriving communities with a sense of belonging, whilst also playing an essential role in connecting residents to support.

Case Study: Westgate Library, Oxford

Improving service accessibility through a 'one stop shop' approach.

In January 2022, Oxford City Council relocated its face-to-face customer service offer into the Westgate Library, co-locating for the first time with Citizen's Advice Oxford. The space was developed further in September 2023, to provide greater privacy for people seeking advice and support.

Being in a central shopping area has increased accessibility and encouraged residents to engage with and receive advice in a non-threatening environment. The accessible nature of the space saw customer volumes increased by almost 8% compared to the previous year. Co-locating with Citizen's Advice has enabled more direct access to independent debt and housing advice, especially in the context of the rising cost of living. It has also enabled the service to be delivered in a more cost-effective way.

The library also hosts the Digital Cafe, a partnership with Oxfordshire County Council and the ICB, supporting residents to develop their digital skills, reducing isolation and exclusion.

The people who use the service rate their satisfaction at 97% - a testament to the impact of the wraparound support available.

Delivering services locally or through mobile options improves accessibility, especially for those on low incomes or with mobility challenges, while tailoring provision to local needs and strengthening community capacity and resilience.

We will embed close working with the Public Health function across the three unitaries, to ensure a focus on reducing health inequalities and improving overall wellbeing. Our proposal suggests a single Director of Public Health for Greater Oxford and Northern Oxfordshire, and one to cover Ridgeway – building on existing infrastructure in the two areas. Embedding public health approaches, and the close integration with health partners through strong governance will reinforce our commitment to truly partner-led ways of working.

A focus on health and wellbeing will be further enhanced by the embedding of the Active Wellbeing Offer approach across the three-unitary footprint, aligning with the direction of travel from Sports England and the LGA, as contract terms end and offer the opportunity for innovation and transformation. It is recommended that new services feature close partnerships and governance arrangements with community partners, including residents, the VCSE and health.

This not only enables the co-location of health, wellbeing, and prevention services presents a transformative opportunity but the embedding of the principles of the offer, unlocking long-term improved wellbeing for residents:

- **Preventative focus**: Leisure centres and services should help to prevent ill health, not just respond to it
- **Co-location & placed-based planning:** Bringing together leisure, health care and social services, in places people already use to address wellbeing holistically
- **Stronger health outcomes:** Leisure providers will be judged on health and wellbeing outcomes (such as improved mental health and social inclusion), as well as more traditional metrics like membership numbers
- **Sustainability & affordability:** With the market facing challenges following long-term impacts of Covid-19 and rising costs, there will be an emphasis on making leisure services both environmentally and financially sustainable
- **Equality, diversity & inclusion**: A drive to reduce inequalities in access to activity, especially for people and communities who have traditionally been less active or served by leisure facilities.

Our ability to deliver prevention-forward solutions to resident needs will also be supported by our wider commitment to housing growth from the three unitary model – with Greater Oxford delivering 40,000 new homes (of which 40% would be affordable), alongside the Heyford Park new town in Northern Oxfordshire and other settlements continuing to grow with home building appropriate to their local context and character. This will reduce demand for temporary accommodation, as well as providing the opportunity for other accessible housing that could provide lifelong independence for residents.

Greater Oxford

Greater Oxford is area of contrasts, with some of the most affluent areas in the country alongside neighbourhoods facing significant deprivation, health inequalities, and economic challenges. While the city benefits from world-class academic institutions and overall good health indicators in many wards, issues of deprivation continue to impact vulnerable populations. The pressure on services is intensified by complex needs that fall below statutory support thresholds and the high cost of living. Greater Oxford faces the most significant housing pressures, with high levels of both private and social rented housing, higher rents and significant amounts of supported accommodation.

An early intervention and prevention (EI&P) approach within the city region should consider how to build resilience within the population, with a particular focus on connecting residents to stable employment, support on debt management & benefit advice, rent and tenancy support & advice and mental wellbeing support.

At its core, the EI&P function will be focused on working alongside communities, bringing currently disparate functions together to provide a single seamless service. By concentrating on the strengths of households and therefore reducing the level of crisis that residents experience, it will also reduce the long-term support they would require from the council. The new unitary authorities will work alongside communities and partners taking a systems leadership role to support more resilient and better-connected communities.

Case Study: Oxford Hub Slow Cooker Project

Place-based community-led action

Oxford Hub is a place-based charity that connects people and organisations to create positive social change across Oxford. They support community-led projects that address local challenges such as inequality, social isolation and environmental sustainability. Through volunteering, training, and collaboration, Oxford Hub empowers individuals and groups to act on issues like education, mental health and food insecurity.

The recent Slow Cooker Project is a grassroot community that has promoted sustainable access to healthy, affordable food by teaching families to cook nutritious, diverse meals with minimal resources. Families have learned to create healthy meals using affordable ingredients, minimising food waste and energy use. The grass root community now has 16 participants a week, feeding up to 90 people per week for under £2 per head.

Northern Oxfordshire

Northern Oxfordshire faces some of the opportunities and challenges that are typical of many rural areas with market towns, where communities are dispersed across a large geographical footprint. Areas of deprivation, with challenges around child poverty, can be found around the more urban area of Banbury – with affluent rural areas found elsewhere in the authority's boundaries. Increasing pressures around homelessness have been emerging in recent years, with a particular challenge around rough sleeping in the West of the unitary. This area had the highest self-reported level of middling health and wellbeing, alongside the largest population of adults with no qualifications, speaking to a need to meet a range of needs.

Across Northern Oxfordshire, a prevention approach should focus on enabling quality lives across the footprint. This should include targeted healthy lifestyle interventions to ensure lifelong wellbeing, support managing private tenancies, domestic abuse outreach and training and reskilling support for residents who wish to access employment.

Given the rurality of Northern Oxfordshire, delivery of this support will consider the use of social, digital and mobile approaches to provide services. This will mitigate against a postcode lottery of support and reduce the risk of rural isolation.

Ridgeway

Ridgeway will have the lowest levels of deprivation out of the three areas but have a comparative higher number of older adults living in the area. Whilst data indicates generally positive health outcomes in the area, a prevention approach should focus on ensuring people are able to age well and independently.

This approach will connect residents to community and peer support to establish and build upon social relationships, and ensure households have the information available to continue to manage finances into older age, including keeping homes safe and warm, especially given the prevalence of owner-occupiers in the area. Delivery of support will be sensitive to the rurality of the area, considering mobile delivery and mitigating risks of digital exclusion.

Further detail on local context and constraints across Oxfordshire that we have considered in the model development, as well as further blueprint detail on the recommended EI&P operating model can be found in Appendix G.1.

6.2.3 Adult Social Care

The three unitary authorities (3UA) model is the best way to achieve our vision for delivering Adult Social Care across the Oxfordshire and West Berkshire footprint. This is a vision that sees person-centred care, delivered locally and tailored to the demand and cost pressures that each of the three unitary authorities experience. Service delivery approaches will be rooted in in a detailed understanding of local community strengths, assets and challenges, and partnership working notably with community partners and the NHS.

The recent Impower/DCN report 'The power of prevention and place in new unitary councils' highlights the opportunity local government reorganisation provides to develop a localised, place-based ethos into adult social care. The 3UA responds to this opportunity.[49]

This vision also aligns with the government's 10 Year Health Plan, with its focus on community support, digital opportunities to enable wellbeing and a focus on prevention. Building upon the role that districts already play in supporting the reduction of health inequalities in their local areas[50] the shift to neighbourhood working can be much more effectively delivered through a smaller and more local model of service delivery. In a social care context, this could include working in collaboration to avoid hospital admissions through embedding multi-disciplinary approaches in line with the early intervention and prevention approaches.

Building upon the existing 'Oxfordshire Way' strategy held at county level with an emphasis on community resilience, and work underway within the different districts, the unitary model will enable service delivery that is more closely connected to their communities, and that places their co-production at the centre of service delivery, enabled through being delivered closer to communities, in geographies that make sense to them.

Our proposed way of working also seeks to ensure Adult Social Care works alongside other areas of the local authority. This includes collaborative working on the prevention pathway, to ensure fewer residents require long-term support and engagement with housing pathways that ensure homes are safe and support independence. It also centres working with Children's Social Care in delivering an All-Age Disability approach that stops young people feeling 'in limbo'[51] in their teenage years and instead is focused on enabling young people to build an independent life, whatever that may look like for them.

Both existing unitary services across this footprint have been noted by the Care Quality Commission as providing 'Good' services, with marked areas of strength. However, there were areas of critical improvement identified. For Oxfordshire, these included meeting complex & diverse needs, rushed hospital discharge, a lack of urgency in managing all safeguarding enquiries and varied support between urban and rural areas. West Berkshire had improvement areas highlighted in ensuring services are genuinely prevention-focused and developing a vibrant, modern care market. We believe

[49] The Power of Prevention and Place in New Unitary Councils

[50] King's Fund & DCN, Delivering Better Health Outcomes

[51] Quote from young resident voice in Oxfordshire's Care Quality Commission report

all these challenges can be effectively met within a three unitary authority model and set up the organisations to be ready for any further reforms in the years to come.

Whilst having distinct service delivery models will enable the unitary authorities to tailor services to their local populations, we also see partnership working as being central to this model. We would envision retaining the close collaboration with Buckinghamshire, Oxfordshire & Berkshire West (BOB) ICB whilst they go undergo transformation. This includes exploring how existing strong collaboration at a county-wide level through Section 75 funding arrangements and innovative use of the Better Care Fund could continue across the 3UA footprint. Continued funding collaboration with Health may also support the unlocking of shared assets and joint working around specialist housing and health developments that would achieve preventative outcomes for the whole health and care system.

We would also propose working with the other two unitary authorities to collaboratively commission services that cross boundaries, to mitigate against localised competition for placements, and enable collaboration with the wider provider market.

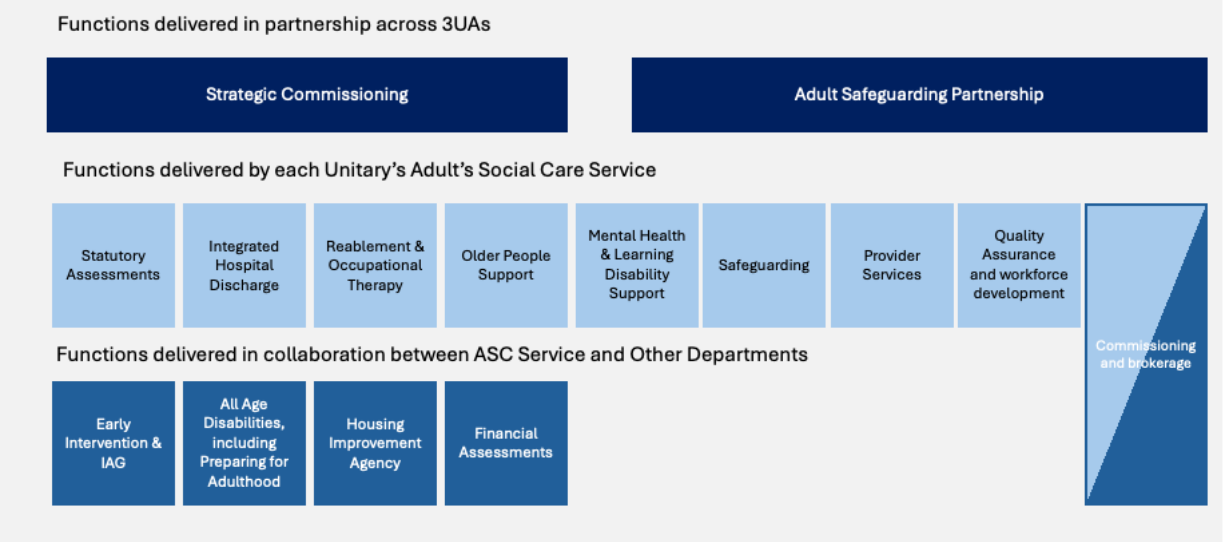

Fig 6.4: Functions of the future ASC model

Greater Oxford

Greater Oxford's adult population is markedly distinct from the wider Oxfordshire area, characterised by fewer older adults and a higher proportion of working-age residents, in part inflated by the presence of the university, but also typical of an urban region. This demographic profile means that adult social care in the city must deliver both preventative and long-term support to a diverse and growing community. This includes the highest proportion of adults with mental health needs (45% of Oxfordshire's current demand for support[52]) an older population experiencing significant loneliness and a high rate of hospital admissions due to falls[53].

Social care support will focus on enabling independence for all age groups, especially through short-term support and meaningful employment pathways. The city's proven strengths, especially in innovative housing solutions, position it to pioneer a transformative approach to accommodation for

[52] Oxfordshire JSNA

[53] Oxfordshire JSNA

both older adults and those with learning disabilities and mental health needs, shifting away from expensive residential placements.

Case Study – Oxfordshire Health & Homelessness Inclusion Team

Preventing homelessness and enabling independence after a hospital admission

This team was established in 2021, with the explicit aim of preventing rough sleeping, supporting planned, timely discharges from hospital and preventing (re)admissions where a person's needs can be better met in the community.

It brings together teams from health, housing, adult social care and the voluntary sector to deliver a person-centred approach to stepping a person out of hospital and into long-term housing with wrap-around transitional support.

The initial evaluation of the team's work found that in 2021/22 it had delivered savings across multiple systems, including: 89% reduction in hospital bed days, saving £657,00; £483,000 saved on preventing hospital admissions; and c£100,000 preventing rough sleeping and homelessness. In 2024-25 they supported 300 people out of hospital into settled accommodation, with only one person returning to rough sleeping and a 51% reduction in mental health readmissions. Community-based services supported 200 people to maintain or move into new accommodation.

North Oxfordshire

According to Newton analysis provided by the county, North Oxfordshire will see a 14% increase in demand for services by 2040 – rising to have the highest level of Adult Social Care demand in Oxfordshire under the current model of service delivery. North Oxfordshire also has a comparatively high disabled child population, that will need effective support as they step into adulthood. This will be a model case for the need for a collaborative approach between Adult Social Care and Children's Social Care, that will be designed into the ways of working for the service.

The new unitary should consider how it can develop hyper local methods of support for residents in rural areas to tackle risks around isolation and long stretches of time spent travelling to physical support services, including considering how technology can be used to maintain relationships and enable self-management of conditions.

As part of the new unitary authorities' approach to service delivery and market management, there is an opportunity to review the comparatively high number of bed-based care schemes in North Oxfordshire and the wider market with a focus on enabling people to live and age well at home.

Ridgeway

On vesting day, Ridgeway will have the largest population of residents drawing on support from Adult Social Care – aligned with both the unitary authorities' size and the larger number of older adults living across the area. With around a third of districts within the footprint experiencing geographical deprivation – being at a distance from social or health physical infrastructure – there is an opportunity to ensure that residents are enabled to live well at home for as long as possible, in partnership with the Early Intervention & Prevention offer.

The new unitary will have the opportunity to design new models of service delivery, that connect communities to access support independently (via travel training and investment in rural transport networks) and to develop localised community-led methods of support, building upon local community assets.

There will also be a focus on delivering person-centred, independence-focused care for all residents, and particularly those on mental health pathways. Multi-agency teams will be utilised to support residents leaving hospital to support them into safe and secure housing, employment and to enable management of ongoing mental health needs.

Existing county wide partnerships where there is a strong case for continuing (e.g. the Adults Safeguarding Board) should be retained to bring together statutory and non-statutory organisations and support these through their connection to a more localised service delivery model. Precise arrangements will need to be agreed by all affected unitaries. Market sustainability will be addressed through a joint commissioning function.

Further detail on local context and constraints across Oxfordshire that we have considered in the service model development, as well as further blueprint detail on the recommended operating model for Adult Social Care can be found in Appendix G.2.

6.2.4 Children's Social Care, SEND and Education

Children's Social Care

The three unitary authority model is optimal to deliver Children's Social Care across the Oxfordshire and West Berkshire footprint through establishing individual sovereign services. This provides an opportunity to deliver services on a smaller footprint, strengthen local leadership, partnerships and integration, and create greater alignment to place-based priorities. The Staff College notes the importance of local leadership in delivering children's services[54]. The creation of three sovereign services ensures clear accountability and improved local leadership.

This local offer will encompass local land-use to boost placement sufficiency and enable adoption of housing-led innovations to improve outcomes for children and young people including better preparation for their transition into adulthood. This will translate to more local in-house provision predicated upon hyper-local insights, enabling children and young people to remain closer to their communities and family networks; engagement with children and young people to ensure their voices shape services will continue, building on the success of Oxford's Children and Young People Partnership.

The three unitary authorities will be committed to implementing the Family First Partnership Programme reforms and principles to ensure that early intervention and crisis prevention is at the heart of service delivery, enabling families to remain together.[55] Each unitary Children's Social Care Service will build on the existing Family Solutions model delivered through children and family centres and locality-based multi-disciplinary teams across Oxfordshire. This enhances existing

[54] New Handbook Launched to Support Local Leadership of Children's Services in Unitary Councils, Staff College 2025

[55] The Families First Partnership Programme Guide

workforce structures, partnerships and practices (i.e. team around the family and family group decision making) to establish a seamless continuum of support services that families can receive at the earliest possible point. The Children's Wellbeing and School Bill will also strengthen the role of education in multi-agency safeguarding arrangements to better protect the welfare of children and young people. These system changes will reduce family break down and prevent children and young people entering the care system.

Families across the three unitary authorities will have access to locality hubs and community venues across Oxfordshire that will be based closer to home and in areas of high need, encompassing co-located Family Help Teams and partners who operate on an integrated, shared practice model; overseen by qualified Family Help Lead Practitioners (FHLP). This will benefit families through proactive identification and engagement at the earliest point of need, with minimal handoffs and consistent support throughout social care in the form of an FHLP, who will foster and build trusted relationships with families and remain their lead point of contact. FHLPs will engage Lead Child Protection Practitioners (LCPP) and Multi-agency Child Protection Teams (MACPTs) to reduce the number of children and young people subject to child protection plans and prevent escalation of needs. MACPTs will also take ownership of achieving permanence for children in care.

Case Study: Youth Hub

Successful preventative work through co-location of activities and co-design with young people

The City Council's Youth Ambition Service has worked in collaboration with the County Council's Targeted Youth Support Service to build a state of the art Youth Hub within the Leys Leisure Centre which opened in July 2025.

The aims are to deliver a strong prevention-based model that provides young people with new opportunities to improve their mental and physical wellbeing, build skills for life and work and deliver a space to enjoy themselves and boost their confidence.

The Hub is deigned to expand and diversify the current youth offer and includes social areas, quiet rooms, a teaching kitchen, a music/ media studio, a digital space and a climbing wall. Community partners and stakeholders have all been invited to collaborate and work in supporting our young people in this inspiring and safe environment.

The space has been co-designed with young people, and they have even supported in recruitment.

The Hub development has been funded by the Youth Investment Fund and has also been awarded a full 3 years of revenue funding to underpin its sustainable evolution.

Each of the three unitary councils will assess its own unique context and design reforms based on local priorities and the voices of families and communities. Critical strategic and operational considerations will be evaluated including deprivation levels, the urban versus rural distribution and existing local initiatives. This will ensure service configuration and workforce capabilities are best suited to address identified and anticipated needs, allowing national reforms to maximise its intended impact. For example, expertise possessed by LCPPs will vary based on local factors contributing to the requirement for initial child protection conferences. Further local initiatives and innovations based on best practice from Families First for Children pathfinder authorities will also be

considered. This includes using funding for family network support packages to allow family networks to step in, reducing dependency on children's services and preventing care entries.

Collaboration will continue across the county to maintain shared benefits and economies of scale on critical areas including joint commissioning of specialist provision, provider market engagement and development, foster carer recruitment and safeguarding partnerships, whilst retaining the ability to innovate and develop policies, practices and procedures based on local challenges and improvement levers. Precise arrangements will need to be agreed by all affected unitaries.

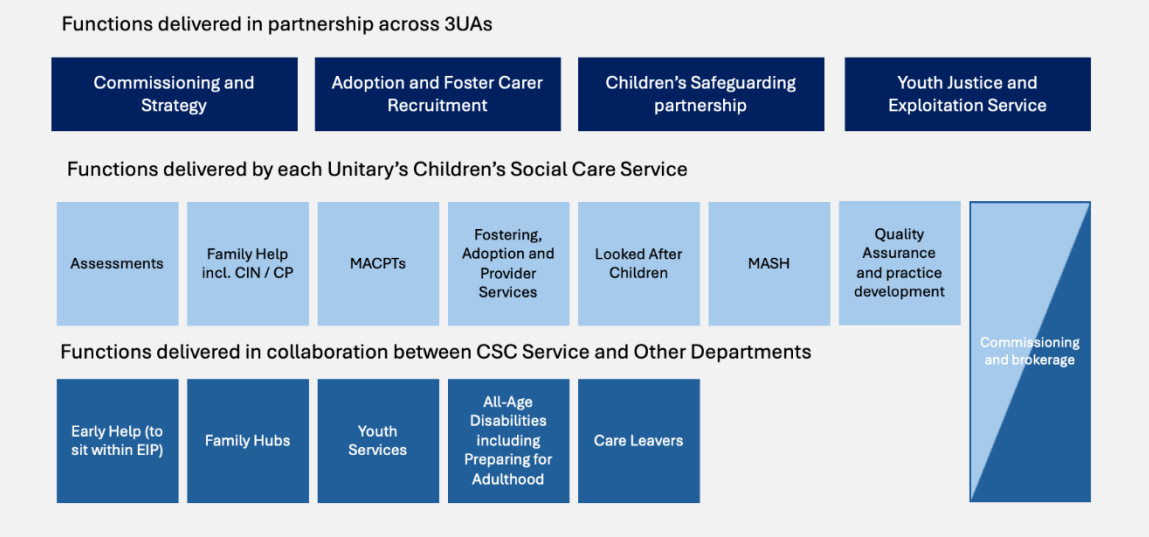

Fig 6.5: Functions of the future CSC model

Greater Oxford

For Greater Oxford this will mean developing a bespoke offer for its residents who inhabit an urban-city geography which presents its own set of challenges that adversely impact family resilience and contribute to its breakdown. This includes significant deprivation, long-term unemployment, complex mental health needs and substance misuse issues. Locality-based data and insights from partners will be harnessed to proactively meet need and respond rapidly to household requirements. Non-statutory assessments and functions including Early Help will be embedded within the early intervention and prevention function to coordinate appropriate support services, addressing concerns as they emerge. This will enable areas around the city region to benefit from existing strong good practice they may not currently be available to children and families.

North Oxfordshire

North Oxfordshire has the lowest number of children in care out of the three unitary areas, however it has the second highest proportion of children and young people subject to early help (32%), child in need (33%) and child protection cases (35%). This requires a bespoke local strategy to manage demand and prevent escalation of needs which could contribute to a significant number of children coming into care. Root causes contributing to family breakdown including poor health and housing instability (North Oxfordshire has the highest level of demand for secure suitable and permanent or long-term temporary accommodation for eligible cohorts) will need to be addressed.

Child poverty rates are higher in North of Oxfordshire compared to the South, alongside significant levels of social housing and unemployment (North Oxfordshire has the largest proportion of adults with no qualifications out of three unitary authorities). This context can lead to children coming into care as it contributes to relationship breakdown and child neglect. Areas where deprivation is prevalent (i.e. Banbury) experience particular risks to children including criminal exploitation (county lines).

Ridgeway

Ridgeway has the largest population out of the three unitary authorities which correlates to it having the highest number of service referrals (42%), early help assessments (45%), child in need (42%) and child protection cases (43%) across Oxfordshire. Given the rural geography of Ridgeway, more services are required within communities with access enabled through affordable transport infrastructure.

Whilst Ridgeway has the lowest level of deprivation out of the three unitary authorities and the highest level of owner-occupiers - the unitary is a mixture of affluent and deeply deprived areas. This requires services to be placed in areas of high need to ensure wider social determinants (i.e. parental mental health) that dictate child vulnerability are addressed through multi-agency ways of working; the EIP function will be critical to coordinating and providing this response. Service design and staff expertise will also be aligned to local requirements, including deployment of Specialist Lead Child Protection Practitioners who are adept in addressing the types of harm more prevalent in rural geographies (i.e. intrafamilial).

West Berkshire's existing CQC and Ofsted 'Good'- rated Children's Services team forms a strong foundation for extending provision across the southern Oxfordshire geography. This also mitigates potential risks around disaggregation of Oxfordshire County Council social services, with several operational staff being TUPE'd across from one existing Children's Services structure into another.

The existing safeguarding arrangements in the form of the Oxfordshire Safeguarding Children Partnership should be retained and expanded to include West Berkshire. Precise arrangements will need to be agreed by all affected unitaries.

Further detail on local context and constraints across Oxfordshire that we have considered in the model development, as well as further blueprint detail on the recommended Children's Social Care operating model can be found in Appendix G.3.

SEND and Education

The three unitary authorities model provides an opportunity to best deliver on the UK Government's ambition to create a more inclusive and accountable national system, that enables early identification of need and provides evidence-based support that helps children and young people with SEND to fulfil their potential and be set up for long-term success.

It is acknowledged SEND services across the country have experienced rising demand - Oxfordshire saw a 14% increase in the number of children and young people with EHCPs from 2023/24 to 2024/25, with key gaps in provision and limited capacity across critical areas including special school placements and specialist resource bases. These pressures have been further compounded by

widespread systemic failing across Oxfordshire's SEND Local Area Partnership as found by the Ofsted and Care Quality Commission assessment in 2023, including low parent and carer confidence, a disconnect between strategy and practice and sufficiency of provision; it is hoped that improvements have since been made and will be assessed part of the inspection, undertaken in October 2025 with no published report available at the time of writing.[56] Findings from this report will be incorporated into the design of the three unitary authorities, during the implementation period.

The 3UA proposal is best placed, with its strong local ethos, to land the significant systems reset needed with the children, parents, education and care providers of the wider SEND community. Many of the failures in the inspection can be seen as characteristic of a larger remote authority, something the 3UA would be able to address.

The County Council has reached a fiscally unsustainable position with its high needs block deficit to reach a £100m by March 2026. The deficit is primarily driven by expensive private and independent (out of area) placements due to an insufficient number of special schools. Home to school transport expenditure has also steeply risen because of the rural geography and dispersed placement of services. Most importantly, this has contributed to a negative experience for children and families, who have found the current system difficult to navigate and insufficient capacity has meant that children and young people are not able to continue their development in settings most appropriate for their needs. Data from March 2023 showed 33.5% of children were placed out of county and more than 20 miles from home. Home to School transport costs have risen significantly (around £40 million per annum in 24/25)[57] and now exceed annual expenditure to place children in Maintained Special Schools across Oxfordshire (£35m per annum in 23/24).[58] This money would be much better spent on supporting the provision of SEND education.

The three unitary authorities' model will establish sovereign SEND services built on local delivery with control over SEND budgets to design and deliver services based on each area's unique geography and needs profile. This model will enable enhanced integration and strengthened partnerships which can be coordinated effectively on a unitary footprint to drive operational efficiency. Each Unitary will work collaboratively with schools and education providers including Multi-Academy Trusts (MATs) to support early identification of needs and development of inclusive learning environments. Early intervention will also be further supported through multi-disciplinary Teams Around Schools and Inclusion Support Teams to improve outcomes for children and young people. This includes avoiding exclusions (Greater Oxford made up 65% of all exclusions in 24/25).

Central to the three unitary proposal is the expansion and acceleration of delivering SEND provision – each unitary will have control over its capital programme planning to develop better alignment between housing and school growth plans, enabling the ability to rapidly identify and release sites for special schools and resource bases.

In Greater Oxford, the opportunity to repurpose space and capacity created by falling rolls to build bespoke provision for the SEND cohort will be explored. This will contribute to the critical strategic objective of mobilising more local provision that enables children and young people to thrive within and remain close to their communities, maximising their time on developmental activities.

[56] Area SEND inspection of Oxfordshire Local Area Partnership, OFSTED 2023

[57] Home to School Transport Update July 2024

[58] County LGR Briefing

Operational staff will focus on building trust with parents to ensure the system is not perceived as being 'adversarial' but rather designed to meet the current and evolving needs of their children, ensuring that they are being set up to live independent lives as they enter adulthood. To meet this aim, SEND case workers will play a pivotal role in school transport decisions to boost independent travel where it is safe to do so, and wider improvement levers including procurement and commissioning will be identified to reduce spend. Improving the overall transport infrastructure to address transport poverty across the three unitary authorities, particularly Ridgeway will be a county-wide priority. Unitary authorities will also work closely with education partners to improve education, employment and training outcomes.

The SEND white paper which will outline a blueprint for system recalibration will be welcome and align to the ambition of the three unitary authorities proposal as the fundamental vision is to deliver high-quality support, strengthen mainstream schools to be more inclusive, restore parental faith in the system and better manage demand and expenditure through reducing reliance on costly provision that is contributing to the national crisis.

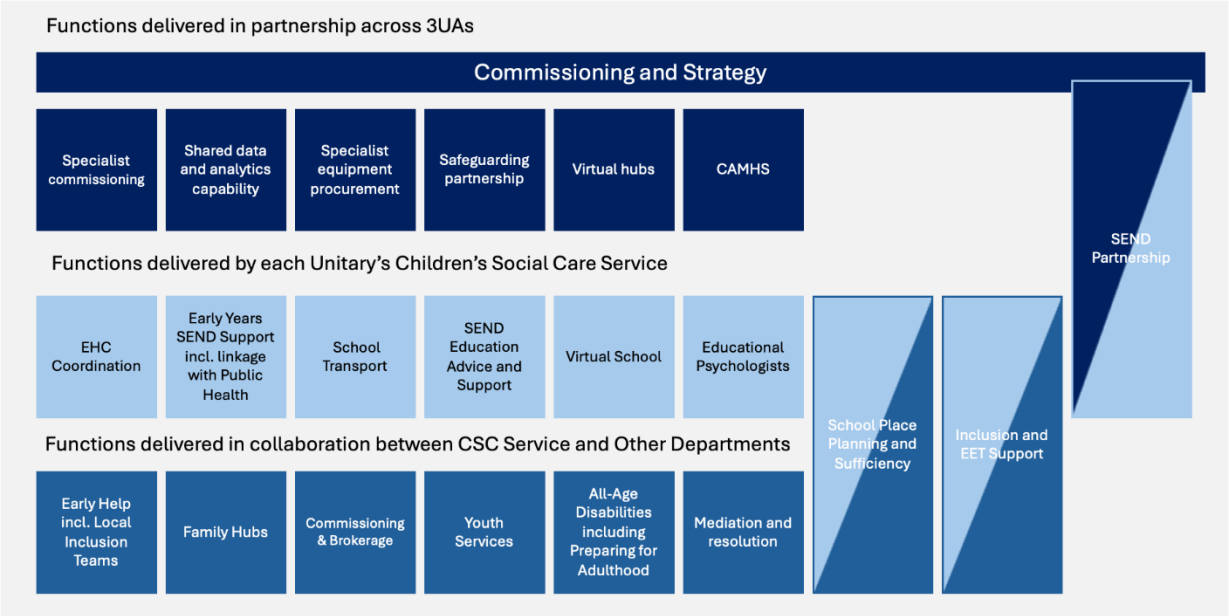

Fig 6.6: Functions of the future SEND model

Case Study: River Learning Trust

Providing better support by working locally to meet specialist needs

Oxfordshire's largest MAT, River Learning Trust, has demonstrated the success of smaller, locally embedded units that cater for the specialist needs of around a dozen children near to where they live. Its enhanced provision for deaf pupils at the Willows, is located on the site of the mainstream New Marston Primary School in Oxford, catering to children aged 5 to 8 with a specialised curriculum led by a qualified teacher and supported by experienced staff. This provision helps children who are not yet placed in specialist settings access the national curriculum and develop essential personal and social skills.

Since opening in September 2024, The Willows has helped students achieve significant milestones in communication, attention, and learning. As proved popular with pupils that may struggle in other settings, and with their parents, it delivers enhanced learning for children with SEND at a cost only just above mainstream, and a fraction of the cost of out of area special school's provision.

Further detail on local context and constraints across Oxfordshire that we have considered in the model development, as well as further blueprint detail on the recommended SEND & Education operating model can be found in Appendix G.4.

6.2.5 Place

The three unitary authorities (3UA) proposal maximises the growth in homes and jobs across Oxfordshire in the years ahead, allow housing and jobs growth and agglomeration around Oxford, while ensuring that smaller towns and villages retain their local character and natural environment. The outcomes this would deliver are outlined in detail at 3.2 and 3.3 above.

With strategic planning, strategic transport planning and delivery, skills and inward investment all shifting from the County Council to the new MSA, it is clear that when it comes to Place services, devolution undermines the case for larger more strategic unitary authorities, while underlining the case for place-based authorities. As such the 3UA proposal will work to complement, not duplicate the work at the MSA across the Place services, by bringing together planning, development, economic growth, skills and transport briefs into single authorities routed and responsive to the needs of the places they represent.

Improving infrastructure across Oxfordshire is the only way to achieve the levels of growth required to sustain the level of growth for business and homes which is proposed over the next 30 years. Growth and associated infrastructure can be controversial, and the implementation of plans needs to be down with, not to, local communities. As such, it is essential that the authorities responsible for implementing strategies in this space are representative of those areas, whether that be Greater Oxford, the market towns, or more rural areas.

Placemaking requires deep understanding of and engagement with the area. Each unitary in the 3UA is of a suitable size and scale to be able to tailor Place services at a neighbourhood level and represent efficient use of resources. Delivering at this local level will keep these serves rooted in the

communities they serve, ensuring that local priorities are met and ensuring clear connection with each unitary authority's engagement functions which engages with local voices.

The increased scale for services which would move from the current arrangements of up to six separate councils into three would provide notable advantages. This would enable some efficiencies for streamlining of management structures and rationalising systems. Moving to a larger scale of service would also support greater resilience for services such as Planning.

However, consideration must be given to the existing arrangements and contractual commitments. These would present challenges for the new unitary authorities. For services such as Waste in Ridgeway, Highways for West Berkshire and car park enforcement, there are existing contracts in place which would need to be continued. In these cases, councils would need to take longer-term approaches to rationalising services. There may be opportunities in the shorter term to unlock benefits such as coordinating operations, rationalising depots across new unitary authorities and optimisation of routes.

Development / Delivery of Homes

We need a delivery model across the 3UA geography which reflects the ambition to do better in terms of delivering homes, and affordable homes in particular, to all our residents.

We have set out above that we believe a modest level of green belt release is vital to delivering 40,000 new homes within a Greater Oxford geography, 16,000 more than the standard method will deliver. Additionally, the other two unitary authorities will deliver homes in line with the standard method.

We recognise that to achieve this ambition, we need a robust delivery model for Greater Oxford. We already have the appropriate vehicles in place to achieve these goals and a strong track record of housing development albeit within a much tighter and more constrained boundary. This provides a foundation for delivering a more ambitious programme across a wider Greater Oxford geography. This will allow the other two unitary authorities to focus on meeting housing need for their areas in line with standard method targets rather than needing to make additional sites available for Oxford's needs.

Oxford City Council has a substantial Housing Revenue Account (HRA), is a registered provider (RP) and a Homes England Investment Partner. We have a wholly owned housing company established in 2016 (OCHL trading as OX Place) that undertakes much of the direct delivery of affordable housing (itself or as the development agent for the HRA).

Our affordable housing team undertakes a clienting and commissioning role with OX Place; operates acquisition and small sites programmes to meet housing needs; operates the 'strategic housing and enabling' function – working strategically with RPs and providing housing supply expertise re s106s; manages funding and grant applications & tracking (including Homes England; Retained Right to Buy Receipts (RRTBRs); One Public Estate/Brownfield Land Release Fund, & LAHF); leads capital tracking & programme management; promotes CLH; and works with adjacent districts on strategic housing sites to meet unmet housing need.

Oxford City Council also has a strong record of demonstrating its commitment to place as a steward as well as a landowner through joint ventures with Nuffield, Grosvenor and Peabody in some of the

largest and most successful developments in the city. The benefits of being a developer as well as a facilitator means that Oxford City Council understands the nuances and commercials of development allowing Oxford to seize and leverage opportunities for the maximum wider benefit.

Within Oxford we have a target of delivering 1,600 affordable homes over a rolling four years and are on track to do so, albeit via some extremely challenging sites. Around 50% of the four-year programme is direct delivery by OCHL/HRA, 7% through the acquisition of small sites and the remainder through a 40% target on private schemes which come forward.

Sites across the rest of Oxfordshire are brought forward through the current district authorities housing delivery teams, and we expect this to continue.

In Ridgeway this includes a Temporary Accommodation (TA) landlord function. Large strategic sites including those in the Kennington/ Radley to Abingdon area (currently planned to mostly meet unmet need from Oxford), plus growth in Didcot and market towns. Ridgeway does not have an HRA and has few Council land holdings with functions predominantly focused on enabling and partnerships.

North Oxfordshire (through West and Cherwell), also undertake key enabling functions with partners RPs and developers. In West this is focused on large strategic sites including Salt Cross, Witney and Carterton. In Cherwell large strategic sites include Kidlington, Yarnton, Bicester and Banbury. Cherwell benefits from a small number of wholly owned development companies delivering individual sites.

Applying the new Standard Method across all authorities in Oxfordshire will represent a significant leap in delivery, with an intention to go further still in Greater Oxford. To ensure the capability and capacity is in place we expect all three unitary authorities to consider working with the new Mayor and/or central Government to create one or more Mayoral Development Corporation(s) (MDC) (or similar vehicle) to assemble land and capture the wider benefits. An MDC would also provide a basis to ensure land value capture across green belt release sites, which would allow for infrastructure-first development strategies, and a level of co-production and wealth retention in the local area to support work with local communities to effectively plan and deliver development to works for both existing and new residents.

Transport

There is near universal acknowledgement that the transport system in central Oxfordshire is in crisis – there is a clear priority to get people and traffic moving and to better connect surrounding areas as well as continuing to address air pollution. The County Council approach has not been a success in addressing this challenge.

Improving infrastructure across Oxfordshire and particularly those networks serving Oxford itself, as well as addressing congestion in surrounding market towns, is vital to achieving the levels of growth required to sustain the region over the next 30 years and to achieving agglomeration within Oxford, by supporting maximum growth in locations closest to the city.

In proposing a Greater Oxford unitary, we state that we must play a leading role in delivering transport change for our city. Poor quality transport infrastructure is currently a fundamental barrier

to growth. We will immediately undertake a review across all areas of transport policy. Over the last decade, various schemes have come forward through the County Council on an ad hoc basis. These have been well meaning but have lacked detail and an understanding of the interdependencies which exist between all parts of our transport ecosystem. We are clear that we must have a well thought out approach to reducing congestion in the city, and that doing nothing is not an option, but this must lead to a strategy which is fair to residents and does not penalise those living in our most deprived wards.

For Greater Oxford there is an opportunity to connect the area through a focus on transport policy and delivery of sustainable transport. The area's geography, the existing commercially viable bus services, high level of walking and cycling and work to improve rail services and station capacity provide a strong foundation to build upon. The approach will bring together transport with the approach to growth, community and health.

Oxford City Council has a strong track record in delivering significant improvements to the local transport system. This includes bringing forward the upgrade of Oxford Station and reopening of the Cowley Branch Line, introducing the UK's first Park and Rides and being a national leader in Electric Vehicle Infrastructure delivery. The Council also provides Taxi Licencing, maintains minor roads in the city using its LATCO Oxford Direct Services and provides verge maintenance for the whole city, so it is experienced in delivering operational work for transport. It has also led on successful changes to streets in the city: including temporary pedestrian-friendly experiments on George Street and Broad Street as well as more substantial resurfacing and public realm transformations of Market Street and St Michaels' Street. Oxford City Council has a good reputation as a supporter of active travel through involvement in projects such as Oxford Greenways and ZCOP – with 26% of commuting journeys made by bike (the second highest in the UK) thanks to the improvements to cycle infrastructure.

Case Study: Prioritising rail investment in the city - the Cowley Branch Line and Oxford Station

Working between government and the private sector to deliver transport infrastructure which will unlock up to 10,000 new jobs and homes [59]

The Cowley Branch Line (CBL) was closed to passengers in the 1960s and it has long been an ambition locally to have it reopen to serve the communities of Blackbird Leys, Greater Leys, Cowley, and Littlemore, as well as the many businesses at ARC Oxford (formally Oxford Business Park) and The Oxford Science Park.

Oxford Station was built in the 1970s as a temporary station that has never been fit for purpose. Its replacement is a major priority to improve the arrival into the city. As part of the development of the DfT-led Oxfordshire Rail Corridor Study (ORCS) in 2020, a long list of projects for interventions across Oxfordshire was produced with both Oxford Station and the Cowley Branch Line flagged as priority projects. However, DfT and Network Rail were clear that local funding was needed to move any projects forward.

[59] 23 October 2025 HM Treasury Press Release

The County Council (as transport authority) were not in a position to take forward either the station masterplan or the Full Business Case (FBC) for the Cowley Branch Line as priority projects, either in terms of leading the projects, or providing substantive funding. This is part of the understandable compromises that a larger authority is required to make with its capacity. The City Council therefore took the decision to step up, take the lead, and secure necessary funding to take forward these key priorities for the city. The County Council subsequently prioritised funding outside of the city, on a much longer-term opportunity, funding and leading the development of a Strategic Outline Business Case for the Witney-Carterton-Oxford rail corridor. Oxford City Council's ability to focus and prioritise the city's needs was key. Moving forward, this place-based delivery and partnership role will be vital, while strategic initiatives such as implementation of OxRail Plan will be for the MSA to take forward. For both the station and CBL, an innovative partnership led approach was needed to move this forward. The City Council was well placed given its close networks with local landowners and businesses to use its convening power to secure funds, alongside ensuring a close working relationship with County Council officers. Working with local landowners it secured funds to part fund 2 City Council officers, over £100k contribution to a masterplan for Oxford Station, and the bulk of the £4.7m needed to fund the Full Business Case (FBC) for the reopening of the Cowley Branch Line. The City Council commissioned Network Rail to complete the FBC, led the lobbying across Government departments, and secured at least £15m of contributions from the private sector. On the back of the strong business case, the City Council has approved additional funds to help deliver the scheme, and the County Council has now also come forward with substantial funding from the county's Enterprise Zone to fund the delivery phase.

On the strength of the FBC, the government has now announced £120m to fund the reopening of the Cowley Branch Line. Without Oxford City Council's leadership, ability to prioritise the needs of the city, and to use its networks to work in partnership over 4 years, we would not have got to this position. Furthermore, Network Rail has now announced it will be bringing forward the redevelopment of Oxford Station, with design work building from the initial masterplan starting in November, to take them through to a planning submission.

The re-opening of the Cowley Branch Line and creation of station at the Oxford Science Park has been praised for its improved and sustainable connection of these areas to the city and the wider Oxford Cambridge Growth Corridor. This was coupled with the announcement of a £10 billion expansion of the Ellison Institute of Technology in Oxford Science Park, which noted that the line would "help us attract world-class talent to EIT by linking up key innovation hubs with Central London via direct train services.60

[60] 23 October 2025 HM Treasury Press Release

Linking with the MSA

The specific challenges which face Oxford require a dedicated approach to delivery. However, this will form one part of a wider approach which provides support to the leading transport functions of the proposed Thames Valley MSA. The Strategic Authority will take on responsibility for publishing a comprehensive local transport plan. One unitary authority (1UA) and two unitary authority (2UA) models would not add value to that process – they would offer neither a local nor strategic perspective.

The 3UA model will complement that strategic role. Under the three unitary authorities approach, focus will be given within each unitary to the transport priorities of the city and market towns in those areas. This localised approach will allow listening to stakeholders and ensuring that proposals for development are accompanied by clear proposals for how infrastructure will serve communities and create improvements. This will mean a stronger relationship with communities, with deep partnership work seeing meaningful engagement and co-design around changes to transport. Overall, the three unitary authorities model can oversee transport in each of its specific areas - as well as linking to the wider strategic transport work of the MSA.

The reduction to bus services in 2016, which led to the loss of many services linking Oxfordshire villages to the towns and city, has resulted in an increased reliance on the car. Bus operators have confirmed that densification and agglomeration of housing around the Oxford will enable improved public transport services connecting surrounding villages into the city. The three authorities will work with the MSA to lobby central government to subsidise public transport initiatives across the geography to tackle road congestion generally but with a clear ambition for the longer-term delivery of a mass transit system for Greater Oxford.

North Oxfordshire and Ridgeway Council geographies are very different from Greater Oxford, with market towns and large rural hinterland dominating. They face challenges related to congestion and environmental impact of traffic within the market towns and villages, whilst much of the recent growth in the surrounding rural areas remains primarily car based with much of the public transport that remains requiring subsidy. Unitary Councils are therefore required to address these considerable challenges.

The countywide Milestone highway maintenance contract will continue to run beyond the formation of the unitary authorities. This will be managed for each unitary area on a collaborative basis. As this contract comes to an end there is the opportunity for the contract approach to be renewed, either based on successful working that has taken place or reshaped to focus on the priorities and needs of the areas.

The population growth and densification around Oxford proposed by the three unitary authorities model requires reducing the number of car journeys per household. There is also an advantage to the model of growth around Oxford rather than spreading this across the smaller villages: higher density growth in these areas creates a clear demand for improved bus services.

Crucial to further reducing reliance on cars will be planning and strengthening how towns and villages across Oxfordshire link together, working at a local level to best understand local priorities for transport. The three-authority model gives the best option to be able to develop deep

understanding of local demands and develop solutions which are reliable and meet the requirements for movement in these areas.

Oxford and West Berkshire both have contractors providing maintenance on local roads. There will be opportunities to explore how these current arrangements can benefit the 3UA model through an expanded model to provide locally based responsive maintenance of the highway network to the whole of the Greater Oxford area.

Skills

Greater levels of jobs and sector growth expected in the 3UA, alongside significant new employment space, close to where people live, should then allow for a co-ordinated approach to the development of Community Employment and Procurement Plans, to support a joined up approach to the training and employment of local people at both construction and end user phases of developments, as well as support for the local supply chain. All with the aim of retaining more wealth and prosperity, locally.

County wide approaches to skills development over the last two decades have failed to deliver the interventions needed for all of Oxfordshire's residents to benefit from growth. New jobs have been created but remain out of reach for too many residents. Nowhere is this clearer than in Oxford itself, where a city of world-class innovation and prosperity also has 10 of its 83 neighbourhood areas ('Super Output Areas') among the 20% most deprived areas in England, causing deep polarisation. For a significant minority of residents, especially in our most deprived wards, the pathways into emerging opportunities remain closed. Without a new approach, the gap between those who benefit from Oxford's growth and those who are left behind will only widen.

This is why the emerging proposals for a Mayoral Strategic Authority (MSA) matter. An MSA will provide the regional oversight once held by LEPs, but with far greater accountability, devolved decision-making, and the budgets needed to act at scale.

Our delivery model will mean that top-down strategic approaches will combine with bottom-up delivery, ensuring both sides of the labour market equation are addressed: meeting employer demand and tackling the barriers faced by residents.

Oxford's prosperity masks the reality that for many residents, opportunity feels out of reach. Too many people grow up believing that the jobs and industries shaping the city's future are "not for them." Low aspirations combine with real and practical barriers: limited English, weak literacy and numeracy, and a high proportion of residents in some communities with no formal qualifications.
Even when people want to work, they are too often trapped in low-paid sectors such as care, leisure, or entry level roles, with few chances for progression.

In our most deprived wards, critical skills gaps persist. Non-native speakers face language barriers. Access to digital devices can be patchy, and digital literacy including use of AI is low. Pupils in some deprived wards struggle with overcrowded classrooms and weak GCSE attainment in English and maths. For too many, a lack of qualifications or confidence has left them disconnected from the knowledge economy on their doorstep.

Oxford's employers consistently report that they cannot recruit the skills they need from the local labour pool. The result is high vacancy rates, reliance on bringing workers in from outside Oxfordshire, and growth that risks bypassing local residents.

The skills gaps are clear: digital capability, green skills, specialist technical expertise in advanced manufacturing, life sciences and R&D, alongside customer service, hospitality, and the "soft skills" of communication, teamwork, and work readiness. Employers also face pressing skills shortages in construction, STEM, health and care, hospitality, and advanced manufacturing, roles that are critical both to Oxford's economy and to the daily functioning of the city.

The MSA will allow us to deliver change through joined-up model in each 3UA area.

With devolved powers each area can act as a commissioner for outcomes through a Procurement Framework, taking control of the Adult Education Budget locally and funding providers based on results such as moving people into jobs, progressing in work, and lifting their pay.

Key elements of each local delivery model would include:

- **One system, one pathway**: Create **one front door** (a single-entry point online and in community hubs) for residents and employers to access skills and jobs support; integrate community hubs, schools, and colleges into a single programme. Provide clear pathways from primary and secondary education through to FE, HE, and employment.
- **Data, evidence and market shaping**: Establish a Skills Observatory in each unitary to publish live labour market intelligence. Use employer feedback and real-time data to steer investment and commissioning. Grow training in priority sectors: digital, green, construction, health and care, advanced manufacturing, life sciences. Embed green and digital skills across all sectors.
- **Skills Compact:** Establish a Skills Compact with anchor institutions including schools to pool levy funds and guarantee apprenticeships, interviews, and Living Wage jobs and contracts for local businesses: Co-design training pathways with schools, colleges and businesses to match recruitment needs.
- **Planning and procurement:** Strengthen developer contributions to skills development (for example using the CEPP model as currently being delivered in Oxford) so every major development delivers training, apprenticeships, and local jobs: Pool developer contributions and align with community hubs and sector academies.
- **Sector academies and flagship projects**: Deliver dedicated training routes in growth sectors, supported by national programmes like Connect to Work. Expand Oxford Works, Green Skills Centre, and new apprenticeship hubs.
- **Place-based delivery:** Focus support in each unitary's most disadvantaged wards (in Oxford that would include Barton, Rose Hill, Blackbird Leys, Littlemore for example). Tailor training and outreach to meet the needs of residents who face the highest barriers to work.

We have developed a full delivery model for a Greater Oxford. Our proposal would be for each unitary to develop its own model to ensure the effectiveness of delivery through the MSA is maximises. The 1UA and 2UA models will fail to deliver this as they will simply replicate the regional oversight provided by the MSA.

Planning

Currently the Development Management function is split into geographic areas, with an additional Team focussed on Major Schemes, concentrating skills and knowledge of dealing with complex and significant schemes in the city. In a 3UA model the geography-based team model will continue, and Majors team would retain their focus on (principally) employment sites with an additional team developed to focus on the delivery of the housing growth that will be enabled by our proposed green belt release.

Unitarisation provides benefits to the planning system by bringing disparate parts of the system (e.g. highways, education) as well as a single legal team and these benefits will be present at all scales. However, with strategic issues being elevated to MSA level, the 3UA ensures that greater focus can be given to local issues at an appropriate scale.

Heritage and design are critical issues in a historic city, and this team is complemented by the Oxford Design Review Panel – an independent design panel co-ordinated by the city, available as a paid service during pre-application discussions. This panel is unique in Oxfordshire and in the 3UA option will continue to provide an invaluable tool to ensure the highest quality of design in the new developments proposed across Greater Oxford.

Oxford's Planning Policy team have a track record of delivering pro-Growth Local Plans to address the need for housing, facilitating the employment growth potential of the city, whilst ensuring environmental sustainability. The immediate focus of the team in a Greater Oxford would be to deliver a comprehensive and robust green belt review, building on our high-level analysis identifying areas that should be released for the development the city needs, and an accompanying Plan that ensures releases deliver the local, regional and national benefits that a Greater Oxford can deliver.

Sustainability and Climate Action

Action to tackle climate change and protect and enhance the natural environment must be both strategic and local to be successful. The city of Oxford in particular - and Oxfordshire more widely - are already recognised as beacon areas for their work on environmental sustainability.

Oxford City Council has had a top 5 Climate Scorecard ranking for the last 3 years and was winner of the national LGC and MJ awards for Climate Leadership in 2023 and has a reputation for delivering innovation and major decarbonisation projects.[61] Oxfordshire County Council leads the Climate Scorecard rankings for county councils.

The climate teams across the proposed three unitary geography already work closely together. The City and District Councils each cover their own regulatory, core and relevant project functions suited to their demography and location, with Oxfordshire County Council providing a strategic function, particularly as the main funding recipient. West Berkshire Council combines both elements in its existing delivery.

The Zero Carbon Oxfordshire Partnership (ZCOP), established by Oxford City Council in 2021, links public, private and third sector organisations and successfully delivers significant environmental sustainability programmes.

[61] Council Climate Scorecards

These strong foundations will ensure all three unitary authorities are well equipped to continue to demonstrate leadership in environmental sustainability work. It also ensures continuity in effective partnership working across the three unitary councils, and with the planned Thames Valley MSA geography.

The three unitaries have the resources, skills and expertise to manage key unitary workstreams including:

- **Regulatory functions**: air quality, land quality, flood mitigation, biodiversity & ecology (nature recovery, trees and canopy cover etc
- **Core functions**: local area energy planning, net zero delivery (own assets and area wide), electric vehicle infrastructure, energy efficiency and retrofit, climate adaptation
- **Project functions** (bespoke to area): such as Partnership working, nature recovery, innovation, heat networks, carbon off setting, community energy.

Given the scale of economic growth envisaged, Greater Oxford will require a specific focus on achieving sustainable outcomes. It also has additional unique challenges because of high levels of fuel poverty and high levels of ageing, poor energy efficient properties. Unitarisation will enable a focus on tackling buildings emission and working with the MSA to ensure that devolved funding (via Warm Homes etc) is targeted where it makes the most difference.

A three unitary approach will benefit local people. Enabling the right local focus of action and appropriate use of devolved funding, in relation to emissions and ability to influence. Climate leads across the Unitaries will continue to work together where there are shared areas of focus.

Regional and MSA work on environment

The climate teams in Oxfordshire have significant skills to support a wider local and regional strategic approach via the empowered Mayoral Strategic Authorities (MSAs), on an overarching ES Strategy, bringing the following expertise:

- Close climate partnership working through ZCOP which already involves the most influential organisations across Oxfordshire to act on carbon emissions and could readily be expanded to cover the Thames Valley.
- A track record of involvement in developing and delivering complex projects including Electric Vehicle Infrastructure delivery, Biodiversity Net Gain, flood mitigation and retrofit.
- Close links with regional, national and government organisations, such as Greater Southeast Net Zero Hub, DfT, DESNZ and with energy stakeholders (SSEN, NGET and RESP) working with them to unlock the grid constraints, restricting growth in Oxfordshire.
- Development of District Heat Network options for Oxford with key Partners (Universities, Hospital Trust & County Council) in preparation for heat zoning.
- Enabling the delivery of pipeline renewables schemes by supporting the MSA with strategic planning for solar farms and linking with energy infrastructure providers. A collective approach will also be taken to maximise community benefits via Great British Energy.

Waste Services

Waste & recycling services are both a District and County function covering collection and disposal respectively. However, work to finalise a business case for integrating these operations is already well advanced, and involves four of Oxfordshire's six councils (City, WODC, CDC and County). Integrating and transforming waste operations across this geography offers the opportunity both for significant cost savings and increasing the proportion of recycling, even though Oxfordshire already has the highest rate of domestic recycling in England.

Under the three unitary councils' proposal, £63.5m of net benefit will be delivered in the first five years (by 2032/33), with an ongoing benefit of £14m per annum. This would be shared between Greater Oxford and Northern Oxfordshire Councils which would jointly own and operate the LATCo that delivers waste and environmental services across both council areas. More detail is outlined in Appendix F: Oxfordshire Waste & Environmental Services Transformation Programme (WESP).

Building Control

Building Control is already a district responsibility, and there are no direct county-level functions that lend themselves to integration in the way other areas do (i.e. Environmental Health and Trading Standards). The service does, however, work with county teams such as Highways and Fire & Rescue as statutory consultees. These partnerships are essential to the delivery of safe and compliant development, but they are distinct points of coordination rather than overlapping responsibilities.

The establishment of three new unitary councils nevertheless creates an opportunity to strengthen Building Control by consolidating services within larger, more resilient authorities. Each unitary will be able to deliver a single, locally accountable service with clearer oversight of building safety, access to a broader pool of professional expertise, and more consistent application of national building regulations. The three unitary model also secures Building Control remains closely connected with planning, housing and environmental services whilst being locally focussed. Crucially, this structure keeps Building Control rooted in the communities it serves, ensuring that local development needs and priorities are met while maintaining the capacity to respond to increasing regulatory demands and safeguard public confidence.

Regulatory Services (including Environmental Health and Residential Licensing)

The establishment of three new unitary councils in Oxfordshire provides a clear opportunity to align Environmental Health with Trading Standards, creating services that are both more efficient and more responsive to local needs. At present these functions are divided between tiers despite significant areas of overlap. For example, Environmental Health regulates food hygiene while Trading Standards covers food composition and labelling. Both investigate unsafe products, scams and unfair trading practices; and both work directly with businesses on compliance. This separation can create duplication, multiple points of contact, and the potential for gaps in enforcement.

Unifying these functions within each new unitary would deliver clearer accountability, streamlined processes, and better outcomes. For residents, this would mean a straightforward route for reporting concerns and stronger protection from unsafe housing, rogue traders or counterfeit goods. For businesses, it would provide a single source of advice and regulation across food law, product safety,

licensing and fair trading. The result would be reducing bureaucracy, supporting compliance, and ensuring that services reflect local circumstances and priorities.

Importantly, the three unitary structure allows each council to shape its service around the needs of its communities. This closer link to local priorities strengthens accountability and ensures that resources are directed where they will make the greatest difference. The wider advantages are equally significant. A locally rooted, combined service would be well placed to work with community safety and public health teams, as well as the Police and Crime Commissioner, on issues such as age-restricted sales, fraud prevention, air quality, tobacco control and infectious disease management.

Regeneration and Capital Programmes

At present, districts have distinct and individual approaches to delivering capital projects and regeneration more generally and for bidding for funds to progress schemes.

It is proposed that these remain unitary functions. The 3UA is the right geography for this approach – with each unitary having high aspirations for change backed up by strong regeneration proposals whether through new towns, science campuses, public realm programmes, transport infrastructure and housing and commercial schemes. Each of the proposed authorities has the scale and ambition of projects to benefit from in house Project Management function (PMOs) with local knowledge of regeneration and capital opportunities. Whilst we do not foresee this approach including a shared service across the three unitary authorities, we do see an opportunity for dialogue between services to make best use of resources.

Property

The City Council manages its extensive property portfolio in house with the use of agency/ consultancy services where appropriate. The portfolio includes significant investment assets which are managed on a very commercial basis to maximise income. The three unitary authorities largely adopt this approach (but possibly with a reduced commercial emphasis) and can continue to do so.

The adoption of a unitary approach will doubtless bring opportunities to streamline the number of corporate assets such as community centres with inherent value created by way of capital receipt and development opportunities. The unitary model allows for shared services within buildings which means that properties are truly able to provide for the needs of different communities in a truly place based approach.

Green and Blue Spaces

OCC manages all its green and blue spaces internally with grounds maintenance and maintenance of facilities carried out by its wholly owned company. Although across the three unitary authorities some green spaces will be managed by parish councils, it is envisaged that each of the authorities would manage its other green and blue spaces in house. and there may be opportunities for savings through economies of scale across the authorities, particularly if ODS could expand its remit.

Facilities Management

The Council provides FM services to all its corporate buildings and expects that the unitary approach supports this model across all options and that there may be opportunities for narrative with the other two authorities to reduce space and procure joint systems (booking for example).

6.2.6 Housing Services

The new unitary authorities' model would bring together a wide range of services into a comprehensive, system-wide solution with "no wrong front door" which would enhance the prevention-focused model. This would significantly drive efficiency and improve service delivery to prevent homelessness, avoiding cost to the public purse and ensuring better outcomes.

Our vision for a three unitary authority (3UA) structure would see housing, homelessness and commissioned based services rooted in prevention, building on examples of good practice that are well established and embedded across Oxfordshire. It will focus on early, targeted intervention – using data sources to effectively triage and then then better support single adults and families to ensure a person centric service across a wide range of activities including housing, mental health, substance misuse and adult and children social care services. Operating statutory homelessness over three unitary councils, on enlarged footprints from the current five teams (South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse already operate with one team), would deliver efficiencies and increased resilience with larger more specialised teams.

Case Study: Oxfordshire Homelessness Alliance

Cross-sector collaboration to end rough sleeping

The Oxfordshire Homelessness Alliance was established in 2022, in partnership between Oxford City Council, Oxfordshire County Council, the district councils and six leading providers: Homeless Oxfordshire, Connection Support, Elmore Community Services, Aspire, St Mungo's and A2 Dominion. The Alliance is a collective commitment to delivering integrated, person-centred support that breaks down silos across housing, health and social care to drive system-wide change to end rough sleeping.

Through this partnership, essential transformation work is underway across supported accommodation, outreach, and homelessness prevention services. This includes a shift from the traditional 'pathway' model of supported accommodation toward a housing-led approach, prioritising stability, long-term independence, and wraparound support. Rough sleeping levels in Oxford have remained steady, bucking the national trend, reflecting the strength of cross-sector partnerships, shared knowledge, and joint commissioning across the system.

Since the Alliance's formation, over 50 individuals have been successfully accommodated through Housing First across Oxfordshire, enabling some of the most vulnerable and entrenched individuals to access secure housing with holistic, multi-agency support.

Whilst the three areas have differing housing pressures the ethos of the service design will be consistent across the three authorities, whilst allowing for a more tailored approach responding to the different levels of demand and complexity of need.

Oxford has a different housing market to the wider county. It faces the most significant housing pressures, with high levels of both private and social rented housing, higher rents, greater areas of

deprivation and significant amounts of supported accommodation. Northern Oxfordshire and Ridgeway are in comparison more rural and have housing markets dominated by owner occupiers. For example, 144 households were accepted as homelessness in Oxford between January and March 25, compared to 23 in South Oxfordshire. 733 families and other households live in temporary accommodation across Oxfordshire and West Berkshire (June 2025), having a significant impact on these families and their children, at huge cost to local government. Oxford City Council holds the largest cost and has been recognised nationally as a beacon authority in developing programmes to mitigate the rise in temporary accommodation demand and costs, delivering £8.5 million in cost avoidance. Nonetheless, the annual pressure of TA costs are expected to rise up to £5.7m in two years, without further mitigation.

This approach to prevent demand would be coupled with an increase in housing supply from the three unitary authority model – with Greater Oxford delivering 40,000 new homes (of which 40% would be affordable), alongside the Heyford Park new town in Northern Oxfordshire and other settlements continuing to grow with home building appropriate to their local context and character. This supply side increase will help to meet housing demand and ensure, as Oxford's economy grows and produces more jobs, that there are enough homes to meet need, helping ensure affordability for local people and preventing further increases in homelessness .

In terms of private sector housing, the service will align/interface with key private sector housing functions such as selective licensing and Houses of Multiple Occupation (HMO) standards to drive good quality private sector homes, critical to meeting the housing demand.

In line with the corporate focus on prevention, this service will work in close collaboration with the HRA (where relevant) and social housing landlord functions to manage any further increases in stock with a particular focus on reducing number in temporary accommodation and those waiting for permanent homes.

Greater Oxford Unitary will be a large social landlord with over 8,000 dwellings. The council will be a tenant focused landlord, continuing to invest in tenant's homes and services, ensuring compliance with the Social Housing Act and Consumer Standards. Services will be shaped by a strong, empowered tenant voice, helping ensure the council is a responsive and transparent social landlord.

Northern Oxfordshire would be a predominantly rural area, with larger owner occupier housing sector, and smaller private and social rented sectors. It would however contain the larger town of Banbury, and the rapidly growing urban area of Bicester. Homelessness pressures have been growing in both West Oxfordshire and Cherwell Councils in recent years, with increasing numbers in temporary accommodation, and higher rates of rough sleeping in Cherwell than the other Districts (excluding the City). Pockets of deprivation exist in Northern Oxfordshire, particularly in Banbury where three areas are in the top 20% most deprived nationally.

Ridgeway Council would also be a largely rural area, with larger towns being Abingdon, Didcot, Newbury and Thatcham, and includes the western Reading suburbs. The housing market will also be dominated by owner occupies, but with some concentrations of deprivation in areas such as Didcot, Newbury and Calcot. South and Vale Councils have historically had lower levels of homelessness and rough sleeping, but West Berkshire has more homelessness pressures and higher temporary accommodation use.

Northern Oxfordshire and Ridgeway also both have higher levels of renting from a housing association than Greater Oxford, but Greater Oxford has higher levels of renting from the council. Census data also shows that Greater Oxford has higher levels of overcrowded housing that both Northern Oxfordshire and Ridgeway.

Whilst demand in Northern Oxfordshire and Ridgeway for housing services is not of the scale of Greater Oxford the preventative and holistic service design would be a constant across the three areas.

Table 6.1: Housing indicators by unitary

Housing Indicators	No. of households	Indices of Multiple Deprivation – Average Score*	Private rented	Social rented	HHs in Temp. Accommodation	Housing Benefit claimants
Greater Oxford	**87,780**	**12.74**	**27%**	**17%**	**-**	**5%**
Northern Oxfordshire	**103,890**	**11.90**	**19%**	**14%**	**-**	**4%**
Ridgeway	**168,050**	**9.87**	**16%**	**14%**	**-**	**4%**
Cherwell	65,890	12.65	20%	13%	82	4%
Oxford	55,225	14.42	32%	21%	299	7%
South Oxfordshire	61,480	8.55	16%	12%	50	3%
Vale of White Horse	57,490	9.47	16%	14%	73	3%
West Oxfordshire	47,990	10.15	18%	13%	79	3%
West Berkshire	66,650	11.05	17%	14%	150	4%

*higher score indicates that an area is experiencing higher levels of deprivation. Indices of Multiple Deprivation 2025.

Case Study: Temporary Accommodation

Working holistically to prevent homelessness

Oxford is facing a housing crisis, with a shortage of homes driving up private sector rents by 11.7% annually (ONS), this is leading to growing homelessness acceptance rates, more than doubling in 2 years, and putting increasing pressure on temporary accommodation. Oxford City Council has responded with a comprehensive and holistic strategy to meet rising homelessness demand, focused on prevention, better quality temporary accommodation, and faster move on to a permanent home

This has led to an expansion of the Council's homelessness prevention service focused on keeping people in their home when possible, a multipronged approach to increasing temporary accommodation stock through purchases and working in partnership with private and social housing providers, and a focus on moving people on into affordable private rented homes. The team has

delivered impressive results: 241% increase in homelessness prevention, doubling of temporary accommodation stock, and over 100 successful private rental lets in a year. Their work provides a blueprint for other local authorities striving for effective, forward-thinking solutions to homelessness.

6.2.7 Citizens Services

Public Health

Public Health functions in England are defined by the Health and Social Care Act 2012, assigning local authorities the statutory responsibility to improve health and reduce inequalities. Core statutory responsibilities include promoting healthier lifestyles, preventing disease, and addressing wider determinants such as housing, employment, and education. The public health data-led preventative approach supports the wider operating model. The three unitary authority (3UA) model proposes bringing together wider public health services such as housing, leisure, revenues and benefit services to ensure it is easier for people to get the help they need earlier.

A key requirement is appointing a Director of Public Health (DPH), who leads strategy and produces an independent Annual Public Health Report. Health protection duties involve preparing for infectious disease outbreaks and environmental hazards in collaboration with UK Health Security Agency (UKHSA) and Local Resilience Forums. As currently, there will be two DPH's, one for Ridgeway and a joint post between Greater Oxford and Northern Oxfordshire.

Public health leadership integrates with council governance via the Health and Wellbeing Board, Joint Strategic Needs Assessment, and Joint Health and Wellbeing Strategy, while collaborating closely with Integrated Care Systems (ICS).

Services focus on health improvement (e.g., smoking cessation, mental health promotion), health protection, children's services, sexual health, substance misuse, and NHS commissioning support. Delivery is through a mix of in-house teams, NHS providers, commissioned external partners, and voluntary sector organisations, with strong cross-sector collaboration to address social determinants of health.

Physical activity, exercise or activity related community rehabilitation is recommended in 98 NICE clinical and condition specific guidelines and quality standards. 72% of people with Long-Term Health Conditions (LTHCs) say that the NHS is the most trusted source of physical activity advice however only 16.6% of GPs are broadly to very familiar with the CMO physical activity guidelines. Joining services and supporting a holistic view of Public Health is an opportunity to create a system which better supports wider determinants of health to both improve long term health conditions and reduce their onset.

Case Study: Move Together

Joint regional activity pathway improving health and reducing health service pressures

Move Together is a nationally recognised physical activity pathway for adults living with long term health conditions, and a joint venture between Oxfordshire County Council Public Health, Buckinghamshire, Oxfordshire and Berkshire West Integrated Care Board, County Sports Partnership and City and District Councils. During the 24/25 reporting year Move Together continued to show a critical role in not only improving people's health but reducing pressure on the health system with a reported 43% fewer GP appointments, a 22% reduction in 111/Out of Hours demand and a 15.11 Quality Adjusted Life Years (QALY) gain across all participants.

Leisure Services

Leisure Services form part of the 3UA early intervention and prevention understanding that leisure centres can have a wider role in wellbeing and should help prevent ill-health through inclusive offers, social prescribing and location of services.

Sport England are promoting a vision in which local authority leisure moves beyond simply offering gym/swim classes to taking a broader in supporting people's overall wellbeing. This means integrating physical activity with health, social care, mental health, prevention and community outcomes. The 3UA preventative and community-focused model would continue this approach across all three unitaries.

Greater Oxford is in year two of a new 10-year Leisure Services contract in 2024 with Serco and More Leisure Community Trust. Provision across the other authorities is mixed across inhouse and external provision, including Greenwich Leisure Limited, Everyone Active and Parkwood Project Management. Length of contract varies across each council but within a reasonable timescale each unitary would be able to enjoy a single leisure offer. Each new footprint will be able to offer a greater range of services.

There will be good potential for longer term savings after re-contracting at end of each contract term. There could also be savings through the use of alternative delivery models. Investment in concessionary access for those on the lowest incomes can have a significant impact on health and wellbeing.

Culture and Heritage

Building on the strong current cultural, arts and heritage offer the 3UA proposal will support direct service delivery but also support cross-sector joint working, especially with the voluntary and community sector.

Cultural and heritage services will be delivered in each area, with models adapted to the needs of urban and rural populations and making best use of available assets, including outdoor venues. Using established locality-based working that is rooted in communities and already part of the Voluntary and Community Sector network, they will continue to grow community capacity and a sustainable cultural offer that is flexible, modern and relevant to the communities being served.

Inclusive access, whether through peripatetic offerings to rural areas or reflecting demographic diversity in urban areas, will be at the heart of the service. Identity and belonging will be reflected in the service priorities, ensuring continuity for traditions like May Morning, St Giles Fair and Abingdon bun throwing that bring people together with a positive sense of place. The established Cultural Partnership and Cultural Education Partnership will continue across all three councils, led by Greater Oxford, with an aim to set up a Cultural Compact for the Combined Mayoral Authority. Ultimately, boosting economic success and well-being, improving community cohesion and integrating culture into regional and local planning.
A small core shared library service will be maintained across the three councils for book depository, library care and management ICT systems. The assets and teams that run the libraries would transfer to each council. The central library at Westgate will be accessible to all citizens and reciprocal

arrangements would be made to enable Ridgeway and Northern Oxfordshire citizens to use other Greater Oxford libraries and vice versa.

The Museum Service would be led by North Oxfordshire Council with their base at the Oxfordshire Museum in Woodstock and there would be service level agreements, as there are currently, with other local authorities to share collections, storage and expertise.

6.2.8 Community Safety

The three unitary model will enhance the work of the Community Safety Partnership, a statutory partnership brought together by the Crime and Disorder Act 1998 to identify local community safety priorities and developing plans to address them. Oxfordshire and Berkshire local authorities work closely with Thames Valley Police and the Thames Valley Police and Crime Commissioner on setting priorities and plans for Community Safety Partnership (CSP) area. This statutory arrangement would continue in each unitary area.

There is an important intersection between community safety and child and adult safeguarding, and homelessness. As the area within the three unitary geographies with both the highest level of homelessness and with a largest proportion of residents in council housing, Oxford has enjoyed strong partnership arrangements with organisations and teams involved in managing behaviour and providing the right support. This close collaboration will continue under a Greater Oxford Council, with parallel arrangements in each of the other unitary councils, though proportionate to their lower levels of need.

Overview of the service model

The establishment of three new unitary councils creates an opportunity to strengthen the Community Safety Service aligning a wider range of linked services:

- The Community Safety Partnership
- Anti-Social Behaviour Investigation Team
- Community Response Team and environmental enforcement
- Trading Standards
- Taxi and Alcohol Licensing Team
- Emergency Planning
- Modern slavery and adult exploitation coordination
- CCTV system management
- Corporate safeguarding policy and practice, supporting the Multi-Agency Safeguarding Arrangements (MASA)

The Community Safety Service will build on its work with local Parish Councils to implement interventions to reduce crime and disorder in neighbourhoods and local communities. The well-established collaboration between Oxfordshire local authorities and local Neighbourhood Policing Teams will be enhanced in all the three unitary council areas, recognising the differing community safety challenges in each area.

Trading Standards, Licencing and Environmental Health

Trading Standards would be brought into the Community Safety Service, enhancing the opportunities with our licensing and environmental health officers to focus on the local issues of most concern to our communities. This would include more activities targeting underage sales of cigarettes, alcohol, vapes and knives and greater join-up of our regulatory powers to disrupt those that trade in counterfeit goods or sell to children.

The taxi, alcohol, gambling, late-night entertainment and other licensing authority functions will be extended to incorporate applicants in the Greater Oxford area. The well-established NightSafe partnership approach to managing the night-time economy will roll-out into neighbouring towns, addressing alcohol-related crime and disorder.

Joint Oxfordshire-wide approach

A pan-Oxfordshire Prevent Delivery Board will deliver the Prevent Duty and support partners and businesses in meeting the requirements of the Terrorism (Protection of Premises) Act 2024, “Martyn’s Law”. The Channel Panel safeguarding arrangements would be administered by social care teams within the authority.

The emergency planning function will build upon and strengthen the existing Thames Valley Local Resilience Forum and single Oxfordshire Joint Oxfordshire Resilience Team. A shared resource among the three unitary councils will ensure the continued integrated and effective response to regular emergencies experienced across Oxfordshire and the wider Thames Valley, such as flooding events. Emergency planning lead officers would remain within the two other unitary councils.

Domestic abuse and drug and alcohol services are currently commissioned jointly in Oxfordshire. A lead unitary authority will continue this partnership approach, ensuring local needs are recognised and addresses whilst attaining efficiencies from commissioning at scale.

Multi-Agency Safeguarding Arrangements (MASA) will continue with the current Oxfordshire Adult Safeguarding Board and Oxfordshire Children Safeguarding Partnership providing multi-agency oversight and governance as set out in statute. A lead authority will provide business unit support to these partnership arrangements. Lead safeguarding policy officers within each authority will represent the authorities in the boards and their subgroups, and lead on the implementation of policy and practice within each area.

Impact on Staffing

Overall, existing resource levels will be maintained across the three unitary authorities for the community safety functions, due to the specialist and often professionally accredited nature of different roles. However, efficiencies will be achieved through linking complementary activities such as environmental enforcement, statutory nuisance, business regulation and licensing, as well as through the integration of systems used to identify risks and manage responses. This will lead to an overall increase in community safety capabilities deployed.

Fire and Rescue Services

Fire and Rescue Services in the Thames Valley are currently run by three separate Fire and Rescue Authorities: Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes Fire Authority (combined fire authority); Royal Berkshire Fire and Rescue Service (combined fire authority); and Oxfordshire (county council fire and rescue service). Swindon forms part of the Dorset and Wiltshire (combined fire authority).

While the different Thames Valley fire services operate independently, with the current exception of Swindon the geography shares a strong programme of collaboration which includes the handling of 999 calls, mobilising of fire engines, procurement, fire investigation and operational response, with a joint control room that has been operational across Berkshire, Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire since 2015

Oxfordshire Fire and Rescue Service deliver effective operations throughout Oxfordshire which link with the Oxfordshire Police area.

The English Devolution White Paper and accompanying Bill are clear that Mayors are accountable for the exercise of Fire and Rescue Authority functions where fire and rescue service and MSA boundaries align. At the time of drafting this proposal Oxfordshire, Berkshire and Swindon councils are developing an Expression of Interest proposal to Government for the creation of a Thames Valley MSA. Therefore, while there is not yet an agreed path to the establishment of an MSA, arrangements for Fire and Rescue Services are proposed in anticipation of its creation.

Under the three unitary authorities' proposal a Combined Fire and Rescue Authority would be established on a temporary basis to cover the Oxfordshire geography, providing oversight for an unchanged Oxfordshire Fire and Rescue Service. This would ensure a firm foundation in which to offer a straightforward transition to a future Thames Valley Fire and Rescue Service.

Local experience in neighbouring Berkshire and Hampshire demonstrates how Combined Fire and Rescue Authorities covering several council areas can operate effectively.

No changes to the operation of Oxfordshire Fire and Rescue Service are put forward within the unitary proposal, other than those already being developed to improve its operational effectiveness.

6.2.9 Enabling Services

The proposed model sees many of these services delivered separately by each unitary council to give flexibility and efficiency. A shared service approach could be considered where this enhances customer experience and financial efficiency. This approach balances efficiency with local responsiveness, ensuring services benefit from the right systems, expertise and governance, while providing clarity for residents and making it easier for them to access services.

Within each unitary council, a unified ICT and Digital infrastructure will underpin a single digital workplace, enabling collaboration, standardisation, and innovation. HR and Organisational Development will lead cultural integration and workforce transformation, embedding a shared identity and high-performance culture. Strategy, Policy, and Data functions will support evidence-based decision-making and strategic alignment across the new authorities.

Customer Services will combine a digital first approach with community-based touch points, improving access and experience for residents while reducing costs, supported by a digital-by-design Communications team to enable and improve access to services.

Legal, Audit, and Democratic Services will ensure robust governance and accountability, with consistent support for elected members and statutory functions.

There will be opportunities for shared services, service alignment and other efficiencies in areas including library depositary and lending functions, and museum and cultural services.

This model will deliver financial benefits through streamlined management, shared systems, and improved purchasing power. It will also enable the new authorities to manage contractual transitions effectively and take advantage of commercial opportunities.

The transformation of enabling services will support the delivery of high-quality, resident-focused services, close budget gaps, and ensure the new councils are equipped to meet the challenges and opportunities of the future.

Further detail on local context and constraints across Oxfordshire that we have considered in the model development, as well as further blueprint detail on the recommended Enabling Services operating model can be found in Appendix G.5.

6.3 Council Size and Structure

Portfolios and responsibilities

The blueprint for the governance of the new unitary authorities will be based on the government's preferred Leader and Cabinet model. This is already proven effective within all the councils across Oxfordshire and West Berkshire.

Under this model, executive authority will be concentrated in a Leader supported by up to nine Cabinet Members, each responsible for a coherent cluster of functions designed to reflect the full span of single-tier responsibilities.

Decision-making and delegation

Governance arrangements are already broadly similar among the existing councils across the Oxfordshire and West Berkshire geography, and so the approach to decision-making and delegation within each of the three unitary councils is expected to follow a common model:

A regular meeting of full Council to determine budgetary and policy decisions will be held every two months, with a meeting in May for the annual election of the Chairs and Vice-Chairs. Under its city charter, Oxford elects Civic Office roles including the Lord Mayor, Deputy Lord Mayor and Sheriff. These civic and ceremonial functions will be retained and clearly defined under any new Greater Oxford Council arrangement to safeguard the city's historic identity and continuity of tradition. Emphasis should be placed on preserving the symbolic continuity of civic leadership while ensuring it becomes more inclusive and representative of all communities across Greater Oxford.

Ceremonial and symbolic functions across the wider Oxfordshire area will be safeguarded through charter trusteeship or equivalent provisions, ensuring that historic rights, insignia, and civic property are maintained. These roles are non-political and focus on promoting civic pride, community engagement, and the preservation of local heritage.

The Lord-Lieutenant, as a county-level Crown-appointed role, would need to be hosted by one of the successor councils, most appropriately Greater Oxford, as a shared ceremonial function across the county. This arrangement would maintain continuity in representing the Crown and align with precedents established following other local government reorganisations.

This proposal recognises the important role that the Lord Lieutenancy plays in the ceremonial county of Berkshire, and will seek to continue with the existing arrangements there as well.

Meetings will be held in February to determine Council's annual budget. These meetings will also be an opportunity for Members to introduce motions and ask questions to the Cabinet outside of their regular meetings.

A detailed scheme of delegation will be developed for each Cabinet Member to support agile and proportionate decision-making. This will ensure that decisions can be taken within their remit between Cabinet meetings.

Cabinet itself will be reserved for matters of cross-cutting or strategic significance, enabling it to operate as a genuinely collective body. Regular meetings will be held on a monthly cycle, supplemented by joint shareholder and partnership groups where commercial ventures or shared services require oversight. The combination of clear delegation, visible leadership, and a forward plan of Cabinet business will give residents a transparent understanding of who is responsible for what and will allow scrutiny committees to target their oversight accordingly.

Scrutiny and accountability

Balanced against strong executive leadership, the councils will embed a comprehensive and multi-layered system of scrutiny and accountability.

A primary scrutiny committee will meet monthly, complemented by two standing committees focused on Education and Young People, and Health and Wellbeing. Each will meet on a bi-monthly cycle. These committees will be supported by working groups established to examine specific areas in greater detail, such as housing and homelessness, finance and performance, or climate and environment. The system will retain the power to call in executive decisions, commission reviews, and draw evidence from residents and partners. Importantly, scrutiny will not only be backward-looking but also proactive, engaging with policy proposals at an early stage, commissioning reviews, and linking directly with local area committees to ensure that community voices are embedded in the decision-making process rather than consulted after the fact.

Alongside scrutiny, the councils will retain the statutory regulatory committees needed for planning, licensing, audit, standards, and appointments. These will be reviewed to ensure that schemes of delegation and call-in thresholds strike the right balance between workload management and robust oversight, particularly in planning, where councillors are often heavily involved. Proposals will also be developed to ensure that NACs can feed into planning processes earlier, strengthening engagement at a very local level and building legitimacy. Where services are shared across unitary authorities,

joint committees will provide democratic oversight, avoiding duplication and reinforcing accountability across boundaries.

Democratic Support

Given the move to a single tier of local government, councillors must be able to respond to a wider range of elector interests and needs than under the current two-tier system. To ensure members can continue to provide effective representation, the councils will invest in enhanced democratic support.

The Committee and Member Services team would be serviced by up-to 8 full time officers, comprising of a Committee and Member Services Manager, to have oversight and responsibility of the service, a Scrutiny and Governance Manager, to lead the Scrutiny function of the Council, and to act as a formal deputy for the Committee and Member Services Manager. Three Scrutiny and Governance Advisors will support the enhanced Scrutiny function, including supporting the committees, working groups and commissioned reviews. Three Committee and Member Services Officers will clerk and support all other committees. The whole team would have responsibility for Member Support, including being a first point of contact for IT, Councillor development, expenses and any committee guidance.

Given the consolidation from seven to three separate Democratic Services structures across the new unitary councils, efficiency savings are likely compared with current resourcing levels, subject to detailed design considerations.

Councillor numbers and interim boundaries

Administrative boundaries and councillor numbers have been proposed in accordance with the Local Government Boundary Commission for England's statutory criteria of electoral equality, community identity and effective governance. In addition, proposed councillor numbers for Ridgeway and Northern Oxfordshire are based on discussions with council leaderships across the entire geography of Oxfordshire, and represent the expressed democratic preferences of neighbouring authorities.

While the precise number of councillors will be centrally determined, the authorities anticipate that one councillor will represent between 2,117 and 3,525 electors, broadly consistent with comparator authorities Slough, Swindon, Milton Keynes, Dorset, and Nottingham.[62] To ensure that a reduced cadre of councillors does not result in a democratic deficit, members will be made more visible and better supported. Enhanced casework support will be matched with fair remuneration that reflects the scale of the role, and clear pathways will be established for councillors to progress into leadership or specialist non-executive positions. Emphasis will be placed on encouraging applications from underrepresented groups, including younger people and women, with measures such as flexible meeting times, hybrid and digital participation, and development opportunities designed to make the role accessible and sustainable, whether undertaken on a full-time or part-time basis.

[62] North Yorkshire Council: Council Size Submission

Table 6.2: Baseline Cllr. Numbers

Current Authority	Current Councillor Numbers
Oxford City Council	48
South Oxfordshire District Council	36
Vale of White Horse District Council	38
Cherwell District Council	48
West Oxfordshire District Council	49
West Berkshire Council	43
Oxfordshire County Council	69
Total	**331**

Table 6.3: Proposed Cllr. Numbers [63]

Emerging Authority	Current Councillor No. Equivalent	Cllr: Electorate Ratio (Baseline)	Emerging Authority	Cllr: Electorate Ratio (Proposed)	Proposed Councillor No Equivalent
Greater Oxford	92	1:1657	Greater Oxford	1: 2,117	72
Northern Oxon	112	1:1653	Northern Oxon	1: 3,428	Up to 54
Ridgeway	127	1:2442	Ridgeway	1: 3,525	88
Total	**331**				**Up to 214**

In accordance with Government and LGBCE guidance, the three proposed unitary councils for Oxfordshire will initially operate under interim warding arrangements. These arrangements are designed to ensure democratic continuity from vesting day, while providing a clear and flexible framework for refinement through a comprehensive boundary review to follow.

The LGBCE advises that, where local government reorganisation occurs before a full review can be completed, interim arrangements should be based on existing county divisions, district wards, and parish boundaries. This approach ensures that early elections take place on familiar, administratively workable geographies, maintaining broad electoral balance and reflecting the structure of existing communities.

In line with this guidance, the following interim arrangements are proposed to preserve local identity and community coherence while ensuring effective and proportionate representation:

- **Greater Oxford** will build upon the existing Oxford City structure, maintaining two-member wards and extending the footprint to incorporate adjacent suburban and peri-urban communities such as Kidlington, Botley, and Wheatley. This approach seeks to preserve community cohesion while accommodating growth within a coherent metropolitan geography.

- **Ridgeway**, comprising South Oxfordshire, the Vale of White Horse, and parts of West Berkshire, will adopt a flexible hybrid model derived from existing county boundaries and

[63] The proposed councillor numbers have been developed jointly with the teams working on the 1UA and 2UA models, ensuring shared assumptions and a consistent approach.

unitary wards. Specifically, South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse councils have indicated a preference for using current county divisions, while West Berkshire would utilise a mix of single- and double-member wards to reflect local geography and representation needs. This pattern balances effective representation across large rural areas with the distinct identities of market towns such as Didcot and Wantage.

- **Northern Oxfordshire**, covering Cherwell and parts of West Oxfordshire, will use a hybrid model based on existing county divisions. Urban areas such as Banbury and Bicester will be represented by multi-member wards, while smaller rural settlements will retain single-member divisions, ensuring both accessibility and local accountability.

Following vesting day, the LGBCE will be invited to undertake a comprehensive electoral review, rationalising boundaries across parish and community lines, incorporating updated population data, and confirming long-term arrangements consistent with its statutory criteria of electoral equality, community identity, and effective governance.

In the interim, the proposals outlined above provide a stable, equitable, and locally grounded framework, aligned with the expressed democratic preferences of neighbouring authorities, for the first elections to the new unitary councils, while laying firm foundations for a refined electoral map through the full LGBCE review.

Electoral Cycles

For Greater Oxford, the current system of biannual elections will be retained to preserve continuity and stability, to reflect a councillor demographic drawn from diverse backgrounds and full-time employment, and to enhance accountability by allowing residents to respond to the authority's performance in near real time.

There is strong local political will and clear justification for maintaining this cycle. Retaining elections by halves aligns with the proposal's core principles of inclusivity and growth ambition, ensuring that public service as a councillor remains accessible to those balancing professional and community commitments. Importantly, there is no legal barrier to continuing this arrangement, as the relevant legislation does not prescribe electoral cycles and allows flexibility for locally justified approaches.

For Northern Oxfordshire and Ridgeway, an all-out election model will be adopted, in line with the practice of many comparable unitary councils, including Cumberland, Somerset, and North Yorkshire.

Together, these arrangements represent a balanced and pragmatic approach combining regular democratic renewal and responsive local accountability in Greater Oxford with the stability and strategic focus needed for the larger and more rural areas of Oxfordshire to deliver effectively on long-term priorities.

Outside appointments

Finally, the role of councillors as representatives beyond the chamber will remain central to the governance model. Members will continue to serve on outside bodies, including community associations, local trusts and charities, and strategic partnerships. Appointments will be guided by

clear principles: they must support the council's corporate policy objectives, preserve important community or historical ties, meet statutory requirements, or allow the authority to influence policy at regional and national levels. Strategic partnerships will typically be represented by Cabinet Members, while ward councillors will take on community-level appointments, ensuring that both strategic influence and local presence are maintained.

Taken together, this model of governance, scrutiny, and representation provides a long-term structure that is both efficient and resilient. It balances strong executive leadership with robust accountability, ensures councillors are well supported to represent larger electorates, and embeds local community voices within the decision-making process. It reflects the government's preferred approach, is consistent with LGBCE guidance, and builds on proven practice from Oxford and comparable unitary authorities.

Community engagement and neighbourhood empowerment

A more empowered decision-making role for portfolio holders, in addition to increased support and capacity building for members, will enable them to fulfil their community leadership and representative function more effectively. But we recognise that re-thinking the scale and function of local government requires a considered and embedded approach to local engagement and community empowerment, which doesn't begin and end with elected councillors in a unitary authority.

West Berkshire already has well-established and close partnership working with its 62 parish councils facilitated by a twice-yearly District Parish Conference. Certain powers are available to be devolved to Town and Parish Councils if requested. This successful partnership working model can be extended across the rest of the new Ridgeway unitary area.

Scaling up Greater Oxford to a size that will allow it to effectively make strategic decisions for the benefit of the city and neighbouring towns and villages, necessarily means considering stakeholders over a wider geography. Similarly, the creation of new unitary authorities across Northern Oxfordshire and Ridgeway will need a direct link to the already-existing local councils and community organisations already active in service delivery and community engagement. Ensuring that the very local voice can be heard effectively in decision-making and service delivery needs to be part of the institutional design of the new authorities.

This is to support meaningful localism, but also because we know that communities and local partners have a key role to play in embedding preventative ways of working in the new authority from the first day. We know that collectively working towards community-centred solutions is the best way to unlock the best outcomes for our people, and the new authority needs to bake this into its design.

We also know that creating a new unitary authority doesn't mean starting from nothing. We recognise the importance of already existing local organisations, ways of working, and social connections that underpin civic and community life across Oxfordshire. We know that local communities care deeply about their places and want to be more involved. Our approach will be to strengthen relationships where they already exist and build them where they don't.

The way we propose to do this, across all three of the proposed new unitary authorities, is through the government's preferred vehicle of Neighbourhood Area Committees.

Neighbourhood Area Committees

We envision NACs as having a dual role: as an enabler of local community activity for preventative ends, and as a body with some formal democratic role and power in and of itself, that gives voice to the interests of distinct communities within each unitary area.

Joining these core functions in the same vehicle brings some challenges, which will need to be carefully considered. The NACs will need to interact with local communities in ways that complement and support existing activity and capacity, rather than crowding it out. They must also provide a consistent framework that works across different places and communities, recognising that each will bring its own strengths and challenges. At the same time, they will have to integrate participatory and relational practices with the representative democratic structures of the council and with the legal and bureaucratic processes that underpin decision-making.

We recognise that creating a new body that will be an important focus for local community and partnership working will require meaningful input from stakeholders and residents to ensure it is fit for purpose. At this stage, we are proposing a set of design principles which will guide the design of this new vehicle, subject to detailed stakeholder input at the appropriate time.

Democratic representation and engagement Design Principles

Table 6.4: Assessment against Demographic Representation and Engagement Design Principles

Principle	Rationale
NACs should act as a link between local community activity and the new authority	Building and deepening relationships between actors at a very local level and the new authority could be facilitated through a dedicated link body. Having a clear and consistent approach across the new authorities would help community partners (including town and parish councils) navigate the system and build relationships. A link with scrutiny and into other decision-making bodies will enable community voice to be bought into council processes.
NACs should build on and support what already happens in places	Community activity is 'messy' in that it coalesces around particular individuals and organisations – trying to generate it based around a structure imposed from top down won't work. It needs to respond to already existing energy. In this way some of the functions of the NAC will be driven by community priorities. Already existing local partnerships will be key links to established networks.
NACs should act as an enabler and incubator of community activity	Unlocking latent community capacity can act as the gateway to community-based solutions to local challenges. Bringing community partners and actors together through the NAC can maximise what is already happening through, e.g. mapping activity and information sharing, capacity building and strengthening local partnership working. This will require dedicated resourcing to become meaningful.

NAC's enabling function should be paired with a formal governance role	To provide a direct link between community engagement and strategic governance, and to generate credibility and an incentive to engage, NACs should have *some* formal decision-making power over matters affecting the local area. This should include an element of expenditure. Ensuring that communities are not tangled up in governance requirements will be a key consideration for detailed design and implementation.
NACs formal governance role should support participation in local decision-making and service delivery	While not assuming direct responsibility for local service delivery, NACs should enable participation in local service delivery and decision making. Acting as the key link organisation between communities and the authority will facilitate this. This could include, but not be limited to, facilitating co-production and co-design of council services, facilitating engagement in spatial planning or placemaking, playing a scrutiny and advisory role by holding service providers to account and making sure delivery is well-coordinated.

Embedding and empowering NACs

To embed NACs and make them a meaningful vehicle for community engagement and empowerment will require answering several key questions, to be developed in a collaborative process with communities and partners, including town and parish councils, during the shadow authority phase aligning to the principles proposed:

Scale and geography

An appropriate geography and scale for NACs will need to be defined. They will need to be close enough to the ground to have deep insight into granular community issues, while recognising that the three unitary system inherently increases local voice by virtue of its scale.

At the same time, there needs to be a number that is manageable and not an administrative burden on the new authority. There will need to be a coherent relationship with existing ways of working and networks, preserving what matters most to residents, as well as their relationships.

Oxford City Council's current neighbourhood-based way of working, the Locality Approach, aligns its geographies with local Primary Care Networks (PCN). This creates a consistent geography among healthcare providers and council services involved in community outreach, building partnership networks with deep local knowledge and relationships. The government's aspirations to move towards community-based services, delivered at a neighbourhood scale defined around PCN geographies, mean this is a natural starting point for defining our NAC geographies, as it reinforces already-existing local networks and preventative ways of working. Government's intentions to establish Neighbourhood Health Centres as a one-stop-shop in every community which co-locates NHS, local authority and voluntary sector further bolsters the case for proposing a geography at this scale.

As such, our starting point for proposing NAC geographies will be in line with this, serving a population of c. 50,000 people each. On the current PCN footprints in Oxfordshire, this gives a working assumption of c.21 NACs across the county area. We propose this as a scale which strikes the right balance between consistency of approach across partners and networks, very-local connection, and light-touch administration. As the new governance arrangements are developed throughout the

implementation process, the scale of the NACs will be kept under review to ensure that this balance is indeed the right one.

Formal governance

Governance arrangements for the NACs will need to be carefully considered. Ensuring that NACs are constituted with some decision-making power, with the authority to influence local priorities and spend is important to make them more than tokenistic. As a genuine decision-making body, they will need some formal checks and balances to ensure democratic safeguards are in place. The right balance between elected and co-opted members in any formal decision-making function will need to be carefully considered.

Checks and balances should not be so onerous as to create a barrier to participation by community groups. Opportunities for participation which are informal and don't require stringent qualifying criteria should also be part of the design. An 'informal' function should enable, not restrict, broad and diverse community involvement.

Resourcing

To make NACs effective and sustainable, they will be provided with sufficient resources for both capacity building and direct investment in local priorities. Early identification of funding sources and establishing fair, transparent budgeting will be key parts of their design, enabling communities to act with confidence and ambition.

7 Implementation Map

7.1 Future state

Implementing LGR in Oxfordshire is a complex and ambitious undertaking. It presents a rare but vital opportunity to reshape local government around the real geographies of how people live, work and move, creating three distinct unitary authorities (3UA) that are better placed to deliver growth, prevention and innovation. Through doing this the new authorities will be able to create new relationships with their communities and partners to work together on local priorities collaboratively.

Change of this scale demands strong leadership and vision, firmly grounded in a realistic and practical approach. The councils leading implementation must balance ambition with discipline, protecting critical services while creating the conditions to realise the full benefits of reform. This implementation map sets out how the three unitary authorities will prepare, resource and deliver the transition, guided by a clear vision and design principles.
The roadmap to delivery includes designing services focused on residents and local needs, with flexibility to reflect the varying priorities of Greater Oxford, Northern Oxfordshire and Ridgeway. It will reimagine how services are delivered through a total place approach, digital by design, and smarter use of public assets, including opportunities for colocation with health, police and other public services enabling the release and disposal of properties no longer needed. Operating models will be cost-effective and prevention-led, driving better value and long-term outcomes.

The programme will be built on a clear and compelling vision for change, supported by targeted investment in workforce capability and robust, empowered governance. Together, these foundations will ensure each new authority has the leadership, capacity, and structures needed to deliver transformation effectively from the outset.

7.2 Implementation roadmap

There is a lot of work to do by April 2028 to establish three safe, secure and solid unitary councils, and to set the foundations to deliver on the benefits and ambitions for the people of the three unitary authorities. It will be crucial to establish governance structures, including the Programme Management Office (PMO) and other enablers, to drive the change and identify the essential elements and priority areas of focus across the implementation timetable.

This transformation is underpinned by core principles that connect our vision for the three unitary authorities with a clear approach to ensuring a safe, legal, and seamless transition for both residents and staff:

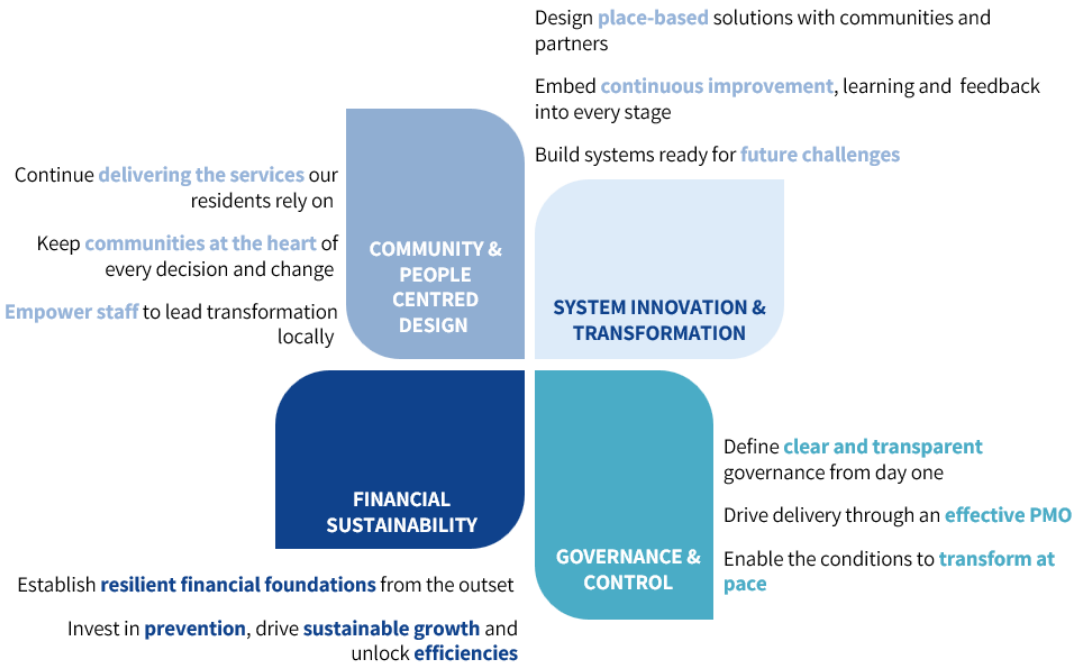

Fig 7.1: Principles for Three Unitary Implementation

Implementing LGR will bring about more change than can realistically be delivered by the anticipated vesting day in April 2028. To manage this, we have developed a high-level implementation approach that ensures the creation of three new unitary councils that are safe, legal, and operational from Day 1, while also laying the groundwork for a bold and ambitious programme of reform that delivers lasting benefits with residents, communities and partners across Oxfordshire.

This transformation will comprise three layers of change. First, the essential elements required to establish fully functioning councils on Day 1, such as constitutions, safe transfer of services, and staffing structures.

Second, the foundational components that enable the new authorities to begin transformation immediately, such as programme governance, the Programme Management Office (PMO), partnership working and other key enablers.

Third, the longer-term reforms that - while not critical for vesting day - will be instrumental in unlocking the full potential of the three unitary model. Crucial reforms to unlock growth in Greater Oxford will include establishing devolution and structural links with a Thames Valley MSA, which it is hoped will vest at the same time, and setting in motion the Green Belt review process.

These layers of change are embedded within the four phases of our roadmap (laid out below), which align with the Government timetable and provide a structured framework for transition and transformation.

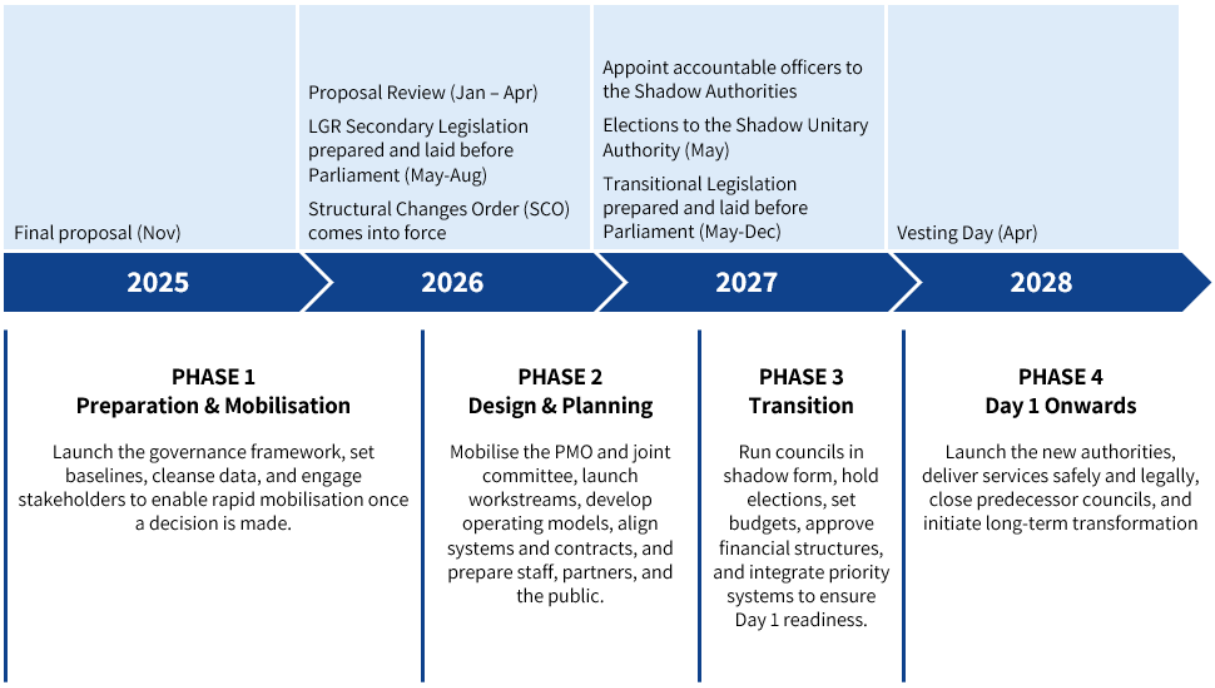

Fig 7.2: The Implementation Roadmap & Government Timetable

Phase 1 - Preparation & mobilisation

From submission of the proposal to the formal announcement of the preferred LGR option, with a focus on laying the foundations to be ready for Day 1 should the 3UA option be approved. We will continue to engage widely with our communities and partners, establishing robust programme management and governance arrangements. A detailed inventory of service data, structure, contracts, assets and systems across all will be established involving all seven local authorities in Oxfordshire and West Berkshire. This is needed to enable the design of new unitary authorities, strengthen service delivery, remove duplication, assess opportunities for shared services, maximise transformation opportunities and minimise risks as we move into the design phase.

By the end of this phase in July 2026, working with the other local authorities we will have:

- Established arrangements to continue to engage and collaborate with colleagues, communities and partners.
- Created a roadmap for transition for each service area.
- Built up readiness across the system to implement the unitary proposal for Oxfordshire chosen by Government.

Phase 2 - Design & planning

Following announcement of the chosen option, authorities will establish the programme infrastructure and embark on detailed design, alongside planning for the transition period.

We recognise that all aspects of Oxfordshire's local government and its services are vital. Our implementation approach proposes balanced governance, ensuring equal input from both current local government tiers, which encourages collaboration and reduces risks during transition. No single authority will dominate; every voice will be heard, with final governance arrangements determined by ministerial decision.

Whilst upholding the independence of each new council, we are committed to ensuring that Oxfordshire's new unitary authorities collaborate closely to fully harness the benefits of LGR. As has been mentioned, this is far more than an administrative reshuffle; it is a unique, generational chance to create councils capable of efficiently and effectively responding to the priorities and requirements of local communities.

To deliver a clear and compelling vision for transformation, we must articulate clearly and consistently what a transformed Oxfordshire looks like, with strong and stable leadership guiding the organisations through the change. The structural foundations must enable the new unitary authorities to operate at a sufficient scale to deliver services effectively, including the capacity to invest in modern systems and to attract and retain a skilled workforce. At the same time, these new authorities must remain deeply rooted in their communities, maintaining strong connections to both place and people.

Table 7.1: Guiding Design Principles for Implementation and Our Approach

Principle	Challenges and issues	Our approach
Community & people centred design		
Continue delivering the services our residents rely on	Transitioning to new structures may disrupt essential services, especially where legacy systems are outdated or fragmented.	We will map critical services and embed continuity plans. Ahead of vesting day, we will ensure accurate, complete data is safely transferred to the correct unitary to enable the safe and legal continuation of services and mitigate any disruptions to residents and service users.
Keep communities at the heart of every decision and change	Establishing new governance structures may risk disconnecting communities from decision-making.	Our vision is to develop future operating models that reflect the distinct needs of Greater Oxford, Northern Oxfordshire, and Ridgeway, enabling services to raise living standards, reduce demand, and connect residents to opportunity. We will embed community voice into our governance and design by using local forums, place-based engagement, and stronger partnerships with the voluntary and community sector.
Empower staff to lead transformation locally	Staff may face uncertainty and cultural disruption during transition to new authorities.	We will support the existing officer workforce through transition and staff transfers, with clear plans for consultation, union engagement, and redeployment. We will manage change for all staff transparently and

		fairly, while building a new organisational culture rooted in place-based leadership, innovation, and resident-focused practice. The design and delivery of the transition to new authorities will include broad engagement with all employees and consultation with trade union representatives to secure successful outcomes for individuals and the new organisations. Each new authority will develop and establish an organisation identity and purpose and a values-based culture that builds unity, supports effective change and innovation and puts local resident needs at the heart of all service delivery.
System innovation & transformation		
Design place-based solutions with communities and partners	Public services often operate in silos and do not reflect how people experience their communities and challenges. Current service boundaries may not align with community needs or local geographies.	Early on in our transition roadmap, we will establish collaborative leadership arrangements that reflect unitary ambitions, fostering coordinated delivery and shared responsibility for outcomes across the region. We will maintain and deepen partnerships with local organisations, anchor institutions, and regional bodies. We will confirm detailed baselines for each unitary and use local data to inform place-based service design.
Embed continuous improvement, learning, and feedback into every stage	Without structured oversight, transformation efforts may lack coordination and adaptability.	We will ensure data and feedback is used to drive evidence-based decision-making, seamless service delivery, and innovation tailored to local priorities. We will establish implementation boards and programme teams to guide transition and embed learning.
Build systems ready for future challenges	Legacy systems and contracts may hinder integration and future scalability.	We will review and allocate contracts across the new authorities, negotiating variations and preparing for decommissioning or re-procurement over a 3–5-year plan. Our aim is to coproduce commercial arrangements with communities within the new geography to unlock financial and social value, and the ability to respond to local needs. Our vision is to design in flexibility to our operating models, to build structures and services that are fit for the future.
Financial sustainability		

Establish resilient financial foundations from the outset	Fragmented financial systems and legacy challenges may impact transparency and readiness on vesting day.	We will apportion budgets fairly and transparently across the new unitary authorities, while harmonising council tax and aligning financial policy with local priorities. We will work together to navigate legacy financial challenges, such as unclear savings rationales or fragmented data systems, while building resilient financial foundations that support growth and prevention for the future we will agree on shared service arrangements and establish a savings tracker for each unitary to monitor efficiencies.
Invest in prevention, drive sustainable growth and unlock efficiencies	Short-term pressures may limit capacity to invest in long-term prevention and growth.	Our target operating model embeds prevention in design and delivery of services. To support this we will modernise systems to support digital by design using ai to improve user interfaces.
Governance & control		
Define clear and transparent governance from day one	New authorities require robust governance to ensure accountability and clarity.	Our plan will establish the democratic foundations of the three new authorities, including constitutions, leadership structures, elections, and governance systems. We will embed strong local voice, balanced regional influence, and governance rooted in place, supported by effective partnerships across communities and sectors. We will establish joint leaders committees, oversight boards, and shadow elections.
Drive delivery through an effective PMO	LGR is too large and complex of a programme to deliver in silos or within existing portfolios. Without dedicated and disciplined programme management, transition activities may become fragmented, delayed, or ineffective.	We will form a joint programme team and allocate tasks to SMEs across authorities to ensure coordinated delivery.
Enable the conditions to transform at pace	LGR implementation is a serious undertaking with clear timelines set out from central government. We will need to move at pace in order to meet key delivery milestones.	We will put in place a comprehensive transition plan supported by a joint risk register and escalation process. These mechanisms will help manage risks effectively and ensure the programme delivers against the timelines set for implementation.

By the end of this phase, we will have:

- Established robust governance arrangements, including the Oxfordshire Joint Leaders Committee and Leaders Oversight Board, as well as a Chief Executives/Programme Board, to provide clear leadership and oversight throughout the transition process.
- Advanced the devolution twin track, ensuring alignment with broader regional ambitions and preparing for simultaneous progress alongside the new unitary authorities.
- Set up the Implementation Board or design committee, with representation from each existing local authority, and form a Joint Programme Team to coordinate all transition activities effectively.
- Agreed on and allocated key tasks and responsibilities across the system, drawing on subject matter experts (SMEs) from each authority to ensure comprehensive engagement and specialist input.
- Developed a detailed operational plan to ensure readiness for Day 1, covering all essential services, systems, and processes, prioritising functional design to address statutory requirements, particularly safeguarding processes
- Reached agreement on shared service arrangements, identifying opportunities for efficiency and collaboration across the new authorities.
- Established and agreed the design principles that will underpin the future operating models and guide the transformation journey.
- Agreed the design of future operating models based on agreed principles and the organisation of shadow elections in preparation for the new governance structures.

Phase 3 – Transition

Following the Structural Changes Order (SCO) being passed, Shadow Authorities or Implementation Executives will be established to guide the preparation of authorities in readiness for vesting day.

By the end of this phase, we will have:

- Established Implementation Executives for each new unitary authority to oversee the transition process, and appointed officers to the top three tiers of leadership across the new authorities.
- Developed, in collaboration with employees and unions, distinct cultural values for each new authority and completed the workforce strategy, including creation of each authority's brand and visual identity.
- Secured agreement at the shadow council level on Day 1 operational plans, target operating models, transformation plans, and the workforce strategy.
- Ensured the devolution twin track is prepared, so that the new MSA is ready to vest at the same time as the new councils are established.
- Completed comprehensive system and user testing, agreed the year one budget and Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS), and achieved Day 1 operational readiness for buildings, systems, data, and staffing.
- Conducted the initial co-design of service areas through shadow authorities in partnership with local residents.
- Developed a comprehensive recruitment and retention strategy for social care staff, including the appointment of senior positions such as Director of Adult Social Services (DASS), Director of Children's Services (DCS), and Principal Social Worker (PSW) within Northern Oxfordshire and Greater Oxford.

- Confirmed detailed baselines for all three unitary authorities, covering disaggregated functions such as systems usage, asset management, grant funding, partnerships, contracts, and care package specific details).
- Agreed pooled budget (section 75) arrangements with Health Partners
- Identified and commissioned specialist external capacity in social care.
- Novated existing care provider contracts to the new authorities, engaging with the market prior to vesting day to minimise potential disruptions.
- Ensured alignment of CQC registration for provider services according to the footprints of the new authorities.

Phase 4 - Day 1 onwards

The new unitary authorities will go live with foundations in place to ensure safe, secure and solid services can be provided, and with each authority positioned to deliver transformation in line with the benefits and ambitions set out.

From Day 1, we will have:

- Established a robust savings tracker for each new unitary authority, ensuring clarity and transparency as we monitor financial efficiencies throughout the transition.
- Designed a comprehensive plan for integrating systems and contracts over the next three to five years, removing duplication, streamlining processes, and maximising savings opportunities.
- Launched proactive and inclusive information and engagement programmes for employees, stakeholders and the public, fostering strong communication and participation at every stage.
- Commenced a review of the Greater Oxford Green Belt, balancing environmental stewardship with future development needs and community aspirations.
- Introduced clear steps to support the operationalisation of the new Mayoral Combined Authority (MSA), aligning new unitary functions to deliver on devolution priorities and maximise local opportunities.
- Statutory roles in place, such as DASS, DCS, PSW, and DPH, and each supported by dedicated teams, with staff transferred from the county as appropriate (subject to any relevant TUPE considerations).
- Convened or refocused committees, including the Health & Wellbeing Board and Safeguarding Partnerships.

This roadmap is based on the data and time available at this stage. Further detailed design and planning will be required, in close discussion with staff, unions, and other representatives, to refine and validate the approach. For further details on the risks, assumptions and dependencies of the implementation plan, please see Appendix H.

7.3 Creating the conditions for success

Successful delivery of LGR depends on creating the right conditions for change. Ahead of launch, we will establish robust governance and reporting arrangements that meet national requirements and reflect local accountability. A dedicated Programme Management Office (PMO) will drive delivery,

coordinate workstreams, and embed the tools, controls, and agile methodologies needed to manage change effectively.

A detailed programme plan will be developed, grounded in shared design principles and a clear roadmap. This plan will reflect our commitment to place-based transformation, ensuring that delivery is tailored to the distinct needs of Greater Oxford, Northern Oxfordshire, and Ridgeway. It will be insight-led, using data to inform decisions, track progress, and target interventions where they will have the greatest impact. Innovation will be embedded throughout, enabling us to design prevention-led, responsive services that anticipate future needs and improve outcomes for residents.

Governance will be established to ensure political oversight, strategic leadership, and operational delivery are aligned and effective. Building on the joint working established during the business case, our framework will become progressively more formalised through mobilisation, design, and the Shadow Authority period. A Leaders Oversight Board will provide collective political direction and assurance, while a Programme Board comprising current Chief Executives will oversee strategic alignment, risk and interdependencies. This will transition into Implementation Boards or Joint Committees once the Structural Changes Order takes effect.

Fig 7.3: Programme Governance Structure

We are committed to engaging with other LGR programmes as proposals are approved, adopting good practice and applying lessons to our local context.

These foundations will ensure the programme is well-managed and rooted in our shared ambition: to deliver better outcomes, smarter services, and a stronger voice for every community.

8 Criteria Assessment

8.1 Government LGR Criteria Assessment

The below table provides an overview of the key strengths of our proposal in line with the criteria, highlighting why the three unitary authorities model is the best option for the future of Oxfordshire.

Table 8.1: Assessment against Government criteria

LGR government criteria	How the three unitary authorities proposal meets each of the criteria	Relevant section of the proposal
Unitary local government and our approach		
A proposal should seek to achieve for the whole of the area concerned the establishment of a single tier of local government.	Within this proposal, a single tier of local government is achieved as three new unitary authorities are created from the current two-tier, seven authority system, a Greater Oxford, Northern Oxfordshire and Ridgeway.	3.1.3 Three Unitary Councils
Proposals should be for sensible economic areas, with an appropriate tax base which does not create an undue advantage or disadvantage for one part of the area.	Each of the three unitary areas have ensured a sensible economic area with balanced tax bases and designed to recognise the different needs, demands, challenges and economic strengths across Greater Oxford, Northern Oxfordshire and Ridgeway. They all share a common ambition to build a more prosperous future for all of those in Oxfordshire. They link to existing economic geographies – particularly in expanding the boundaries of the city of Oxford to cover the places where people look to the city for work, leisure and services and feel the impact of decisions made by the city.	5.3 Financial Disaggregation and Aggregation Process of Baseline Appendix A Development of Boundary Proposals

Proposals should be for a sensible geography which will help to increase housing supply and meet local needs.	The three unitary model will deliver on the Government's mission to increase housing supply in responding to local need and with local coordination. It will allow for the building of up to 40,000 homes over the next 15 years through release of green belt land around Oxford – significantly ahead of Government housing targets, which alternative proposals cannot match.	3.1.3 Three Unitary Councils 4.3 Homes
Proposals should be supported by robust evidence and analysis and include an explanation of the outcomes it is expected to achieve, including evidence of estimated costs/benefits and local engagement.	The proposed service delivery models have been informed and developed through thorough engagement with council members, key stakeholders and wider engagement groups including businesses and residents. The financial implications of reorganisation - including costs, savings and income – have also been assessed for the three unitary model.	4 Case for Three Unitaries 5 The Financial Case 6 New Target Operating Model
Proposals should clearly describe the single tier local government structures it is putting forward for the whole of the area and explain how – if implemented – these areas expect to achieve the outcomes described.	Each area proposal sets out how the new unitary councils will have the required leadership and capacity at the optimum scale and proximity to residents to respond to the needs and challenges of each place.	3.1.3 Three Unitary Councils 6 New Target Operating Model 7 Implementation Plan
Unitary local government criteria		
Unitary local government must be the right size to achieve efficiencies, improve capacity and withstand financial shocks.	The modelling suggests that payback of transitional costs is within 4 years and there are then ongoing savings of around £48.6 million per annum for the aggregated position of all 3 unitaries going forward. The suggestion therefore is that this three unitary proposal is the right size.	5 The Financial Case

As a guiding principle, new councils should aim for a population of 500,000 or more.	The total population of the three unitary areas currently is 935,000. Greater Oxford has 240,000 residents, Northern Oxfordshire has 265,000 residents, and Ridgeway has 430,000 residents. Rapid housing delivery in line with Government targets will see significant population growth by 2040 to 370,000 in Northern Oxfordshire and 545,000 in Ridgeway. Housing delivery in Greater Oxford will exceed Government targets leading to a population of 345,000 by 2040. Rationale for population sizes set out below.	3 Options Appraisal 4.1 Prosperity 4.2 Homes 4.3 Quality of Life 4.4 Identity 4.5 Voice 4.7 Engagement Unitaries 6 New Target Operating Model Appendix D Engagement Detail
There may be certain scenarios in which this 500,000 figure does not make sense for an area, including on devolution, and this rationale should be set out in a proposal.	This proposal sets out why the areas proposed are smaller than 500,000 based on the specific and distinct geographies and demographics of each unitary, the need to represent each area distinctly as part of devolution, as well as being required for suitable levels of green belt release to maximise and support growth. This is necessary to deliver the economic growth and levels of housing outlined across this proposal.	3 Options Appraisal 4.1 Prosperity 4.2 Homes 4.3 Quality of Life 4.4 Identity 4.5 Voice 4.7 Engagement Unitaries 6 New Target Operating Model Appendix D Engagement Detail
Efficiencies should be identified to help improve councils' finances and make sure that council taxpayers are getting the best value for their money.	The 3UA proposal will deliver efficiency savings in aggregate and in the individual new unitaries arising from ICT, support services, managerial, democratic processes, the disposal and rationalisation of property transferred and external audit costs. Additionally, savings will be driven from transformation of early intervention, adult social case and children's services, as well was waste collection and disposal. In the Greater Oxford proposal, in addition to increased council income for all new unitaries arising from the ability to levy the Adult Social Care Premium, significant increased income will arise from	5 The Financial Case

	growth in dwelling numbers and new businesses. Payback of additional one-off costs for all unitaries will be approximately 4 years.	
Proposals should set out how we will seek to manage transition costs, including planning for future service transformation opportunities from existing budgets, including from the flexible use of capital receipts that can support authorities in taking forward transformation and invest-to-save projects.	Payback of initial costs for each new unitary authority is an estimated 4 years from investing. The balance sheet financial strength analysis suggests that each unitary should be able manage these transitional costs with some of the authorities such as Oxford already making early provision of costs in the current round of medium-term financial planning. Where possible, use will be made of the flexible use of capital receipts to support transformation projects.	5.6 Transition Costs and Longer-Term Transformation Savings
For areas covering councils that are in Best Value intervention and/or in receipt of Exceptional Financial Support, proposals must additionally demonstrate how reorganisation may contribute to putting local government in the area as a whole on a firmer footing and what area-specific arrangements may be necessary to make new structures viable.	West Berkshire was granted one off Exceptional Financial Support of £16m in 2025. This was noted as a one-off measure and the authority has a clear path to securing a balanced financial position in the immediate future. The strong balance sheet position shows that none of the unitary authorities in this proposal will be looking for exceptional financial support.	5.2 Existing council budgets and pressures 5.3 Financial Disaggregation and Aggregation Process of Baseline position
Public service delivery		
Unitary structures must prioritise the delivery of high quality and sustainable public services to citizens.	The proposals will ensure services are tailored to local circumstances and will be developed collaboratively with local communities and partners. The focus will be on the development of a transformative, preventative model that links growth to improved outcomes and reduced inequality. Independent assessment has shown all three unitary authorities would be able to provide sustainable services. Each unitary will be able to take a single coordinated approach to addressing priorities for their	4.6 Future Fit 6 New Target Operating Model

	area. Decisions can focus on the needs of specific areas and the integrated model allows for more agile service delivery.	
Proposals should show how new structures will improve local government and service delivery and should avoid unnecessary fragmentation of services.	The proposal shows how three unitary authorities will be more agile, connected to their local communities and able to work collaboratively with partners. Services will be commissioned and delivered at the most appropriate level, some across multiple authorities. For example, each authority will have its own sovereign children's services, but Safeguarding Boards will operate across all three unitary authorities. Services will achieve better outcomes for the lives of residents by being explicitly designed to respond to local circumstances, with a mix of direct delivery and shared services. It will achieve this through the creation of efficiencies from consolidation while also investing in new capacity, digital capability, and innovative service models to underpin long-term viability.	4.3 Quality of Life 4.6 Future Fit 6 New Target Operating Model
Opportunities to deliver public service reform should be identified, including where they will lead to better value for money.	The proposals align with the wider public sector reform agenda including the NHS ten-year plan, and devolution. They focus on data-led place-based and integrated early intervention and prevention, tailoring collaborative service delivery to respond to community needs effectively in each unitary area, ensuring better value for money organisationally and at a systems level.	4.3 Quality of Life 4.6 Future Fit 5.7 Transformation Savings 6 New Target Operating Model
Consideration should be given to the impacts for crucial services such as social care, children's services, SEND and homelessness, and for wider public services including for public safety.	The proposal for three unitary authorities has considered the impact of a range of crucial public services and how the new unitary authorities can deliver better public services that improve outcomes for residents, through identifying and addressing needs in a timely manner. This includes:	4.3 Quality of Life 4.6 Future Fit 6 New Target Operating Model

	Localised approach to Children's Social Care, Adult Social Care and SEND – the three unitary authorities will deliver their own sovereign services with collaboration on critical areas with other unitary authorities to effectively fulfil statutory duties, maintain economies of scale and avoid unnecessary disaggregation Community-based early intervention and prevention model boosting community networks and resilience In-house statutory homelessness services rooted in prevention	
Local engagement		
Proposals should show how councils in the area have sought to work together in coming to a view that meets local needs and is informed by local views.	Collaborative work with the five other Oxfordshire councils, and West Berkshire, took place to develop proposals for reorganising local government. Collective agreement was made to a shared data protocol to ensure consistent baseline comparisons, and a series of teach-in sessions were delivered across the councils. As a proposer of a three unitary model for Oxfordshire and West Berkshire, Oxford City Council's Leader, Chief Executive, and Leadership Team actively worked with the other councils, and West Berkshire, to shape the proposal.	4.7 Public Engagement Appendix D Engagement Detail
It is for councils to decide how best to engage locally in a meaningful and constructive way, and this engagement activity should be evidenced in your proposal.	A comprehensive and inclusive engagement programme was delivered across Oxfordshire and West Berkshire to support the proposal for Local Government Reorganisation. A diverse range of methods and strategies were carefully designed to ensure meaningful, constructive, inclusive, and representative participation throughout the process.	4.5 Voice 4.7 Public Engagement Appendix D Engagement Detail
Proposals should consider issues of local identity and cultural and historic importance.	The proposal protects Oxfordshire's historic and cultural identity while aligning governance with natural community boundaries. It gives residents more say in local planning	4.4 Identity 4.5 Voice 4.7 Public Engagement Appendix D Engagement Detail

	and ensures services are tailored to urban, rural, and market town needs. Development is directed to less sensitive areas, balancing growth with housing, heritage, and environmental protection. It strengthens local representation and delivers smarter, place-based decision-making.	
Proposals should include evidence of local engagement, an explanation of the views that have been put forward and how concerns will be addressed.	Feedback indicated strong support for smaller, locally responsive councils, alongside concerns regarding transport, housing, respecting local identity, and representation. Feedback has been used to tailor approaches and respond to green space protection, urban – rural balance, financial sustainability and improving services and access.	4.7 Public Engagement Appendix D Engagement Detail
Boundary change		
Existing district areas should be considered the building blocks for your proposals, but where there is a strong justification, more complex boundary changes will be considered.	The proposal is based around creating a scale and geography for each unitary authority that allows them to respond to the distinct strengths and challenges of each distinct place. These are based on coherent economic areas and housing markets. In the case of Greater Oxford, we are proposing to create a new unitary authority that encompasses the full existing urban conurbation together with already planned urban extensions, rather than an under-bounded city authority. Encompassing the contiguous urban area and surroundings will allow the city to coherently plan for meeting the significant under supply of housing in Oxford, as well as providing sufficient space to meet ambitions for growth which are nationally significant in their impacts. This has used parishes as the building blocks of the proposed boundaries. Redrawing the city boundaries will at the same time allow rural areas and towns in Oxfordshire to govern themselves based on their distinct	3 Options Appraisal 4.1 Prosperity 4.2 Homes Appendix A Development of Boundary Proposals

	local needs and priorities, as opposed to having to respond to the gravitational pull of the city into existing districts.	
Devolution support		
New unitary structures must support devolution arrangements.	This proposal for unitary structures was developed concurrently with preparation of an Expression of Interest for devolution to create a Thames Valley Mayoral Strategic Authority.	4.5 Identity
Where no Mayoral Combined County Authority is already established or agreed then the proposal should set out how it will help unlock devolution.	This proposal sets out how it will provide constituent authorities which provide a balance of three voices for Oxfordshire to the Mayoral Strategic Authority, representing its distinct places and suitably balancing representation of the urban and rural populations.	4.1 Prosperity 4.5 Identity 3 Options Appraisal
Proposals should ensure there are sensible population size ratios between local authorities and any strategic authority, with timelines that work for both priorities.	The creation of three unitary authorities across Oxfordshire and West Berkshire will help ensure there is closer parity in scale among the constituent unitary authorities within a Thames Valley MSA than a single Oxfordshire unitary council which would be over two and a half times the size of the others, and at least 37% the population size of the MSA itself.	3 Options Appraisal 4.5 Identity 6.3 Council Size and Structure
Community engagement		
New unitary structures should enable stronger community engagement and deliver genuine opportunity for neighbourhood empowerment.	Three unitary authorities will allow for governance that is more tailored and representative. This proposal will support local leaders better understand and tackle the unique challenges and opportunities within their areas. Explicit within this proposal are arrangements that will support increased community engagement in democratic processes, but also the design of local authority services and community empowerment more generally.	4.5 Voice 6.3 Council Size and Structure

Proposals will need to explain plans to make sure that communities are engaged.	A community place-based approach will see enhanced neighbourhood engagement and delivery models. The three unitary authorities will co-design with residents and partners neighbourhood governance arrangements to support local requirements. This will deliver decision making at the lowest effective level to speed up delivery and growth, tailored to each community's circumstance.	4.5 Voice 6.3 Council Size and Structure 7 Implementation
Where there are already arrangements in place, it should be explained how these will enable strong community engagement.	Parish and Town Councils will retain their independence and functions. Where present, they will be invited to participate in NACs. Our approach supports local decision-making building on existing networks understanding the Oxford speaks clearly for the city, while towns and villages across Northern Oxfordshire and Ridgeway are empowered to speak for themselves.	4.5 Voice 6.3 Council Size and Structure

8.2 Devolution Criteria Assessment

Devolution is a key criterion in considering Local Government Reorganisation; the two must be complementary. There are currently no devolution arrangements in place that cover the Thames Valley area, but an expression of interest (EoI) is being developed jointly by all 13 councils across Oxfordshire, Berkshire and Swindon for the proposed creation of Mayoral Strategic Authority (MSA).

Reports by Inner Circle Consulting and Metro Dynamics, working on behalf all 13 councils across Oxfordshire, Berkshire and Swindon have produced an evidence base to enable a better understanding of the sectoral and economic complementarity of the Thames Valley geography. These show there is significant opportunity for the region and scope for it to contribute even further to UK plc. They find the region's economic success has masked persistent challenges, including a rural-urban divide, housing pressures, fragmented infrastructure and skills misalignment with businesses' needs. They also find that the area does not sufficiently act as an integrated economic whole, but there are many overlaps in terms of sectoral composition and economic potential. The proposed MSA is needed to overcome this fragmented approach, strengthen connections across the main economic centres and unleash the region's growth potential in a way that both increases inclusivity and supports UK global competitiveness.

Establishing a Thames Valley MSA with Level 3 powers will unlock high-value, innovation-driven growth by integrating fragmented labour markets, accelerating economic recovery, and enabling the region to contribute even more to national prosperity through coordinated investment, infrastructure, and skills development. Subject to the councils' approval, the EOI will be submitted in

December 2025, with the ambition that a Thames Valley MSA could be established to vest in April 2028 at the same time as the new unitary council's vest.

The new unitary structures proposed for Oxfordshire and West Berkshire sit within the same geography as the planned MSA and directly support the devolution arrangements. A strong Oxford is good for Oxfordshire and UK plc. Three unitary councils will ensure there is a distinct voice for the city region of Oxford at the MSA table alongside those of Thames Valley's other economic engines – Reading, Slough, Bracknell and Swindon. Working together with an elected Mayor, we will help relight the fire of our economy and ignite growth – the Government's number one mission – and share prosperity.

Three unitary councils will also provide distinct voices for interests of northern Oxfordshire and Ridgeway areas that form part of the knowledge spine and part of the Ox-Cam Corridor. Oxford forms just 22% of Oxfordshire and so either a single unitary council or two unitary councils would see Oxford's needs and voice competing from a minority position among wider council interests. Under these circumstances the interests of the rural majority, not the urban growth engine will likely be represented at the MSA table.

LGR proposals must also ensure that there are appropriate population size ratios between local authorities and strategic authorities. We consider that this condition is better met by three unitary councils than by two or one unitary authorities. The mean average population of the existing Berkshire unitary authorities and Swindon is 174,000, while an Oxfordshire unitary would be 763,000 - creating a clear size imbalance. Three unitary councils would have a mean average size of 312,000, providing a more equitable balance.

The table below provides further evidence of how the proposal meets these criteria and provides detail on how model will support the future success of our MSA:

Table 8.2: Assessment criteria for Local Government Reorganisation Criteria

Strategic benefits of Multi-Unitary authorities	Opportunity
Representation of Place	The proposed authority will cover a large geographic area which, while not yet formally defined, is likely to have a population in the region of 2 million residents. The area is predominantly rural but contains several highly productive urban centres including Oxford, Reading, Slough, Bracknell and Swindon. It is vital to ensure that the complexities of this combined area can be appropriately represented within the MSA. Three constituent authorities closely linked to the distinct places across Oxfordshire and West Berkshire will provide strong voices which can represent place and champion their priorities and strengths at a more local level than one single voice representing a single county – or by a two unitary model where the voice of urban Oxford is diluted by the rural priorities of the current West Oxfordshire and Cherwell. Smaller businesses and community groups will have a better vehicle to advocate for them to be heard by the MSA by having a more locally available unitary which

	is working closely with them to build relationships and actively represent their views. Across the region, our past achievements and successes through collaboration have always been built on having several voices and constructive challenge which ensures enhanced scrutiny as well as local stakeholder representation. A multi unitary model will ensure that this approach is continued.
Capacity and Capability	Three unitary authorities present the opportunity to ensure there is the capacity, skills and capability across the wider system to deliver on the strategic priorities of the MSA. They will bring diverse skillsets and local knowledge to effectively respond to the proposed model and enable wider joint investment and coordination on key issues such as transport, housing and skills. This will ensure that the strengths of working together at a MSA level will combine with the local knowledge and capabilities of three distinct authorities.
Governance, enhanced local representation and democratic legitimacy	Thames Valley is a large region with a population of around 1.9 million, but with constituent parts that include current West Oxfordshire – the second most sparsely populated area in south east England with less than 5% ethnic minority population, and Oxford – the fifth most densely populated area in south east England and 29% ethnic minority population. Three unitary authorities covering such diverse places and populations will provide more effective local representation and democratic legitimacy than a single unitary or two unitary authorities could. Multi-unitary authorities will ensure these voices are heard in balance at the MSA and presents a distributed leadership and delivery model. This will ensure a fair, inclusive and democratic approach to decision making is achieved. It will also see more ideas introduced, more challenge to status quo decision-making, and ultimately more positive change. In particular, given the importance of the Oxfordshire knowledge spine and the wider Ox-Cam Corridor, the businesses and universities that drive innovation and growth across the wider geography will be better heard and their and their interests and needs championed at the MSA. Spreading decision making across multiple unitary councils encourages ownership of outcomes across those areas. It also ensures that the authorities are suitably representative of and hold strong relationships with their local communities. This means that they can suitably cascade messages and key priorities from the MSA down to their local area and secure buy in through deep knowledge of and trusted relationships with their local communities.
Scrutiny	A mayoral combined authority which contains multiple unitary authorities enhances the ability of the governance structure to scrutinise policy and performance effectively. Multiple unitary authorities contribute layered and diverse oversight, as well as bringing the unique perspectives from local experience. This strengthens transparency and ensures decision making at the MSA level is subject to robust, evidence-based review which drives continuous change. It enables clear escalation routes, peer accountability and strengthens public confidence in how they are being governed. Scrutiny functions within the three authorities will be better resourced and diversified, which will ensure that each authority is able to suitably scrutinise decision making at the MSA level.

Risk (including financial)	The strengths of governance and scrutiny offered by the three unitary authorities also reduces the risks which are associated with poor governance. The strong oversight and reduction of political bias or status quo thinking will improve decision making and the management of risks. The strong and shared scrutiny across multiple authorities makes it harder for risky or one-sided decisions to pass without appropriate checks and brings the advantages of adding different perspectives for identifying, assessing and mitigating against risks. Additionally, multi-authorities will be able to spread financial risks which the constituent authorities may have to absorb if there is a lack of financial management within the MSA itself. This would reduce the risk of a severe financial impact on a single authority.
Trust in Institutions	Public and businesses confidence will be fostered by a balanced multiple unitary structure which engages with them at the local level and has a deep understanding of local priorities and requirements. Their trust will be built by seeing their communities and business interests reflected in the make-up of regional governance and their experience of services which understand and respond to their local context. The visible local leadership present in their local area and fairer representation across diverse places assures both communities and commerce that their area is well represented, listens to them and their priorities are being advocated for in a way which suitably balances with other voices across the MSA. Public and business confidence in institutions is not simply a result of good governance, it is required to give long-term democratic legitimacy, civic engagement and compliance with policy. A model of three unitary authorities will feel accessible, equitable and responsive – which will help to create the conditions for shared ownership of regional priorities and a stronger public backing for change.

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Two Councils. One better future.

The two unitary Local Government Reorganisation proposal for **Oxfordshire and West Berkshire**

Cherwell District Council North Oxfordshire

South Oxfordshire District Council Listening Learning Leading

Vale of White Horse District Council

West Berkshire Council

West Oxfordshire District Council

Oxford & Shires | Ridgeway
Local Government Reorganisation Proposal

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1. Foreword

1.1 Joint letter from the Leaders of Cherwell District, South Oxfordshire District, Vale of White Horse District, West Berkshire Unitary and West Oxfordshire District Councils

This is an ambitious proposal for Oxfordshire and West Berkshire that will benefit local communities for decades to come. We are excited by the transformational opportunity to deliver two new councils for one better future.

We have embraced the chance to propose the only viable solution that is positive, innovative, and provides a sustainable model for local government reorganisation in both Oxfordshire and West Berkshire.

It is clear that reorganising local government presents a once-in-a-generation opportunity for our communities, the region and the country. We will be able to deliver better council services more efficiently and manage sustainable growth to deliver more jobs, homes and infrastructure.

Our residents have told us that they have clear priorities in terms of the change they want to see, especially in areas such as highways, planning, adult social care, and SEND. They have also been clear that they want us to be efficient and to be more representative of the communities we serve. Local government can and will do better. We will be innovative and proactive to manage the increasing demand and deliver the services our communities need.

We have approached this process not with a view to protecting what we already do, or with political boundaries in mind, but rather with a focus on how local government can deliver the best possible outcomes for all of the communities across Oxfordshire and West Berkshire.

We believe our proposal is the only suitable option that meets all of the Government's criteria. It will empower stronger communities giving all areas a voice. It will deliver tangible efficiencies and improved financial sustainability. This will provide a platform for redesigning high quality and transformed services. It will create two councils that will be the right size and geography to be effective and viable and small enough to be representative and responsive to the communities they serve. They will be ideally placed to drive effective devolution with others across the region, to fully support the Government's growth agenda.

Creating two new councils for one better future is an opportunity we will embrace with vigour, dedication and care for all our communities.

2. Executive Summary

2.1 A once in a generation opportunity to deliver two new unitary councils for Oxfordshire and West Berkshire

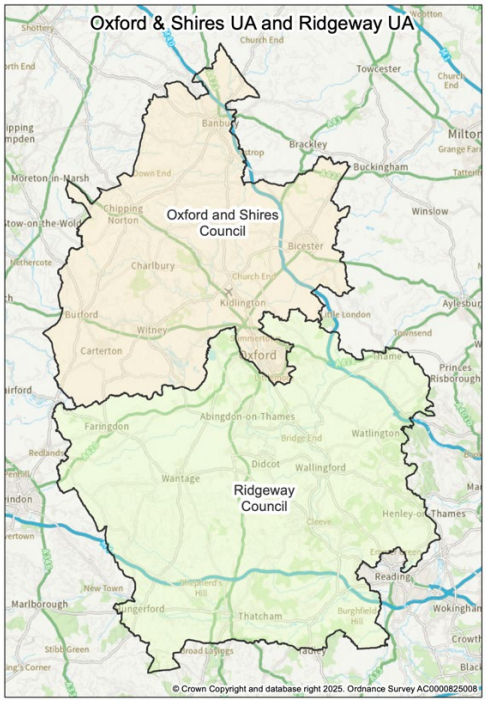
"A new council needs to be bold and visionary in how the area is to retain and improve its standing as an excellent place to call home, to work and to play."

Our area is one of high-quality landscape and thriving economies, with the unique globally renowned and historic Oxford city working in harmony with high-tech science and engineering industries in a mix of rural and market town settings.

Following extensive engagement, people told us they want:

- **Better services - not just more of the same.**
- **Better value for money and efficiency.**
- **Councils that are locally focused and responsive.**
- **Local accountability, identity and voice.**
- **Growth enabled in a way that protects the nature of our communities.**

Our proposal **meets the government criteria** and sets out a clear, evidence-based plan for creating two new unitary councils across the Oxford & Shires and Ridgeway areas — to deliver better, more efficient, and more locally accountable public services.



Oxford & Shires 471,716 population
Ridgeway 482,703 population

Government Criteria	
1. A **single tier and sensible geography** to improve housing supply and outcomes avoiding creating (dis/)advantaged areas	✓
2. Unitary local government must be the **right size** to achieve efficiencies, improve capacity and withstand financial shocks	✓
3. Prioritise the delivery of **high quality and sustainable public services** to citizens	✓
4. Councils work together in coming to a view that **meets local needs and is informed by local views**	✓
5. New unitary structures must support **devolution** arrangements	✓
6. Enable **stronger community engagement** and deliver genuine opportunity for neighbourhood empowerment	✓

2.2 Our case for change

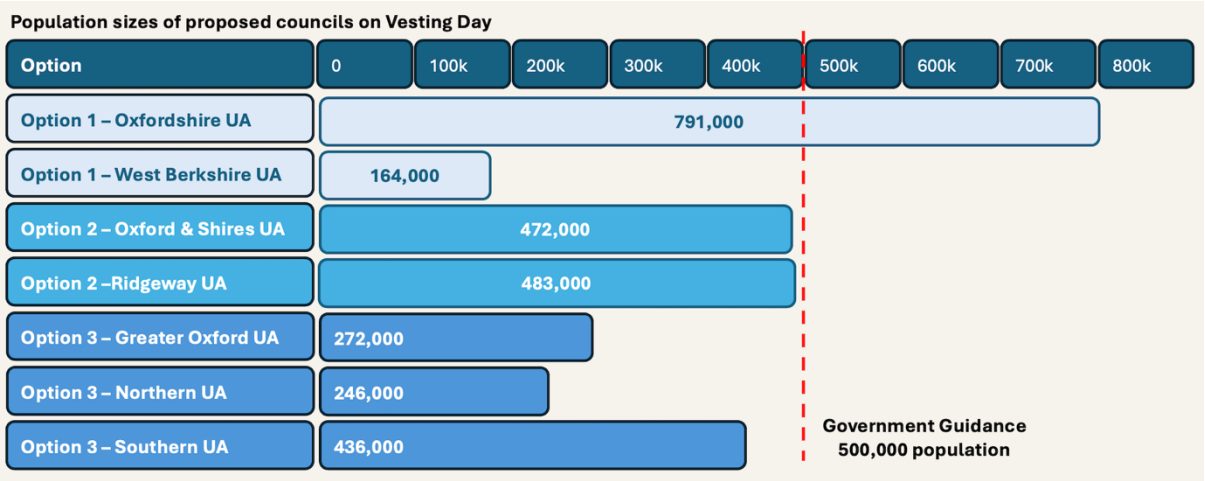
The Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) invited the principal Oxfordshire authorities in February 2025 to submit proposals for the establishment of unitary local government across Oxfordshire, with the option of also including neighbouring authorities. Oxfordshire and West Berkshire (which is already a unitary area) make up a coherent geography for Local Government Reorganisation (LGR) with strong and historic connections from a social, economic and physical perspective. This led us to the conclusion that **a broader geography than Oxfordshire alone would be beneficial for the Thames Valley region**.

Local government across Oxfordshire and West Berkshire is under pressure. Population growth, ageing communities, and rising service demand are driving up costs and stretching services far beyond manageable levels. The current system is too complex and stretched over geographies and populations that are too large, and the current setup of multiple councils faces significant financial challenges.

Residents, businesses and communities want simpler, more local decision-making and better value for money, and **we support this need for change**. We want to deliver clearer accountability and consistent and co-ordinated service delivery with greater flexibility in service design to meet local need. Our proposal will enable greater strategic capacity whilst eliminating duplication, and it will deliver stronger alignment and collaboration at a strategic partnership level. Overall, we have a strong ambition to build a more sustainable model of government for the benefit of the communities that we serve.

2.3 Two unitaries - delivering the best outcomes for our communities

Creating two new councils offers the right balance between efficiency and local identity. Each would serve around 450–500,000 people — **large enough to be efficient and stable, but small enough to stay connected to communities**. Two other proposals are being considered for Oxfordshire, one proposal that leaves West Berkshire unchanged, but would create one council for Oxfordshire that is too large to balance the criteria that the government has set out. The other proposal is a three unitary model covering Oxfordshire and West Berkshire, but would create councils that will lack the scale and financial resilience to address the challenges we currently face.



Our options appraisal shows that only the two unitary model – Oxford & Shires and Ridgeway – meets the requirement for **strong local accountability alongside financial sustainability**. The two new councils would strike a good balance between achieving the advantages of scale in two similarly sized authorities, while establishing a strong locality working model that makes community empowerment intrinsic to the way the councils would work.

MHCLG Headline Criteria	Option 1 – Oxfordshire UA & West Berkshire UA	Option 2 – Oxford & Shires and Ridgeway UAs	Option 3 – Greater Oxford UA & two other UAs
1. A **single tier and sensible geography** to improve housing supply and outcomes avoiding creating (dis/)advantaged areas	Does not meet the criteria	Fully meets the criteria	Does not meet the criteria
2. Unitary local government must be the **right size** to achieve efficiencies, improve capacity and withstand financial shocks	Does not meet the criteria	Fully meets the criteria	Does not meet the criteria
3. Prioritise the delivery of **high quality and sustainable public services** to citizens	Partially meets the criteria	Partially meets the criteria	Does not meet the criteria
4. Councils work together in coming to a view that **meets local needs and is informed by local views**	Does not meet the criteria	Partially meets the criteria	Does not meet the criteria
5. New unitary structures must support **devolution** arrangements	Partially meets the criteria	Fully meets the criteria	Partially meets the criteria
6. Enable **stronger community engagement** and deliver genuine opportunity for neighbourhood empowerment	Partially meets the criteria	Fully meets the criteria	Fully meets the criteria

Independent financial testing shows that the two-unitary model is the only viable choice. The two unitary model pays back its transition costs in just over four years, and once long-term transformational savings are taken into consideration, our model would **save around £59.8 million a year**.

Potential Annual Recurring Benefits from Local Government Reorganisation and Ambitious Transformation from PwC modelling

Option	£0m	£10m	£20m	£30m	£40m	£50m	£60m	£70m	
Option 1 – Oxfordshire UA & West Berkshire UA	Reorganisation Benefits			Transformation Benefits					TOTAL Recurring Annual Benefits £58.4m p.a.
Option 2 – Oxford & Shires and Ridgeway UAs	Reorganisation Benefits			Transformation Benefits					TOTAL Recurring Annual Benefits £59.8m p.a.
Option 3 – Greater Oxford UA & two other UAs	Re-organisation Benefits			Transformation Benefits					TOTAL Recurring Annual Benefits £47.7m p.a.

Furthermore, an assessment of the risks around future financial resilience based on the current financial baseline against the CIPFA Financial Resilience Index, concludes that **the two unitary model represents the lowest risk option to secure financial resilience.**

Total Risk Scores for Local Government Reorganisation options from the CIPFA Financial Resilience Index analysis

Option	CIPFA Financial Resilience Index Risk Score
Option 1 – Oxfordshire UA & West Berkshire UA	43.8
Option 2 – Oxford & Shires and Ridgeway UAs	24.1
Option 3 – Greater Oxford UA & two other UAs	35.3

These ongoing improvements and savings mean the two unitary proposal has the potential to generate **highest overall financial benefits of any of the options, with the least risk and supports financial sustainability across the whole of Oxfordshire and West Berkshire.**

2.4 Supporting devolution and driving growth

The two new councils will **provide a robust growth offer and a strong locally connected base for the Mayoral Strategic Authority (MSA)** for the Thames Valley. We want to ensure close, improved and valued business relationships, engaging with key sectors and clusters to strengthen the economy of Oxfordshire and West Berkshire.

Working together we can focus on growth linked to Oxford's world-class innovation and industry and the wider area's world class engineering sector and booming rural economy around the A40 and A44 corridors. We will make the most of the area's advanced research, science and technology sector, strong rural enterprise, and connectivity across the M4 and A34 corridors. Our proposal will support housing delivery, better transport links, and local job creation while protecting the very character of towns and villages that makes this area thrive.

2.5 Transforming public services for a better future

We know that people want **better public services that are responsive and locally focused**. Our proposal responds to the Government's priorities, but also the priorities of those we have engaged with as we have developed this proposal. Every service will be safe and legal from day one but will also be designed to transform over time to make the most of the cost-savings and service improvements from a more sustainable geography, and to maximise benefits of existing high-performing services.

Social care transformation will **focus on prevention**, benefiting from the local teams enabled by a more manageable geography than existing services, and from the smarter use of technology. Children's Services and SEND will also benefit from more **early intervention, better commissioning, and shared best practice**. Housing and Homelessness services will be integrated, opening the door to more affordable homes and stronger local partnerships. **Joined up system working** to prevent harm and reduce inequalities will boost Public Health and Safety. **Increased collaboration with partners, providers and communities** will help align and shape development and infrastructure delivery to enable growth. Delivering integrated best-in class transport solutions that integrate Oxfordshire's strategic highways asset approach with West Berkshire's innovative, responsive and effective highways operations, improves public transport accessibility and responds to Net Zero ambitions.

We're committed to improving public services, by delivering them closer to and in more integrated ways, with and for the communities they serve.

2.6 Empowering our communities

At their hearts, each council will be **locally accountable** and will have a firm basis in locality working. They will be **accessible while being strategically capable and effective** at representing their communities. Our model strengthens local leadership and accountability – ensuring decisions are made by representatives who understand their communities. We want to encourage deeper community engagement, convening expertise and local insight to develop a detailed understanding of the hopes and concerns of residents, businesses and visitors and then advocate for change.

We want to champion strong local voices, celebrate rural, market-town and urban distinctiveness and empower local communities. We will collaborate with individuals, our communities and partners to develop **a locality working model that works for everyone** across Oxfordshire and West Berkshire.

2.7 Two new councils. One better future.

The proposal for two new councils — Oxford & Shires and Ridgeway — will provide the best long-term financial value, alongside improved services while protecting local accountability. At the heart of the proposal is the creation of a robust and innovative foundation for devolution and growth. It will provide the strongest voice for our communities in a model that also provides a rational, sensible scale of local government.

It is a plan for stronger councils, improved customer focussed services, a fairer future, and a better future for everyone living, working and learning in Oxfordshire and West Berkshire.

Chapter 3 Context and Background in a nutshell

Quick Chapter Summary

- When looking at Local Government Reorganisation (LGR) it makes sense to consider the natural geography of Oxfordshire and West Berkshire combined. West Berkshire offers complementary economic strengths, experience of running unitary services and there is a clear opportunity to improve financial resilience across the whole area
- The current approach to local government is not best suited to deal with rising demand, stretched finances and ambitions around devolution and growth.
- Partnership working and driving public sector reform is key. Our new local government model must reflect community identity, geography and local economies, ensuring services are better tailored to residents.
- Without change, duplication will persist, costs will continue to rise, and outcomes for residents will not improve.

What people told us

“...the joining of the existing smaller councils will assist in reducing inefficiencies and duplications. The cost savings can then be put towards chronic underfunding of services especially adult social care and children’s services/ education.”

“If the geographic area covered by a council is too large, it will have more potential for conflict over priority needs from different parts of the council population and one area may feel ignored to the benefit of another.

The two unitary model will:

- **Balance scale and locality:** It needs to be efficient and resilient, and connected to communities, reflecting identity and being rooted in local economies and geographies.
- **Avoid extremes in size:** It should not be a remote “mega-council” nor fragmented, small councils lacking capacity, in line with the government guidance of 500,000 residents per council
- **Improve outcomes for residents:** Services are tailored to the place and need.
- **Improve financial sustainability:** Strong enough to withstand financial shocks and deliver service efficiency where duplication is reduced, and decisions are made faster.
- **Provide strong local leadership:** Councillors are closer to the communities they serve.
- **Be resilient:** Giving an evidence-based, proportionate model aligned with geography and economy.

3. Context and Background

3.1 Oxfordshire and West Berkshire

The combined profile of Oxfordshire and West Berkshire is one of a high-quality landscape (located within three National Landscapes and designated greenbelt) and thriving market towns connected to a rural tapestry of villages and hamlets. At the centre of this combined geography is Oxford City with its globally renowned and historic University, which is one of the UK's most visited locations.

Economically strong, with a variety of high-functioning sectors and business clusters, the area is supported by a network of transport corridors that ensure connections into, through and out to key cities and logistics hubs. Generally affluent, Oxfordshire and West Berkshire offer residents a high quality of life. However, challenges around pockets of deprivation, housing affordability and the economic ramifications of this persist. The area has high potential to address these inequalities and deliver inclusive growth that benefits all communities.

Profiling the area

Oxfordshire and West Berkshire make up a coherent geography for LGR, with strong and historic connections from a social, economic and physical perspective. Key indicators show that the two areas complement each other while bringing different relative strengths that will be beneficial to combine in considering the future of local government across the area.

Together, the area of Oxfordshire and West Berkshire is an internationally significant region, known for its world-class research institutions, vibrant communities, and high-value economy.
Together, Oxfordshire and West Berkshire are home to over 900,000 residents across a mix of urban, rural and market town communities. Oxfordshire currently operates under a two-tier system, with Oxfordshire County Council delivering county-wide services and five district councils. West Berkshire is a unitary authority, providing all services to around 163,000 residents.

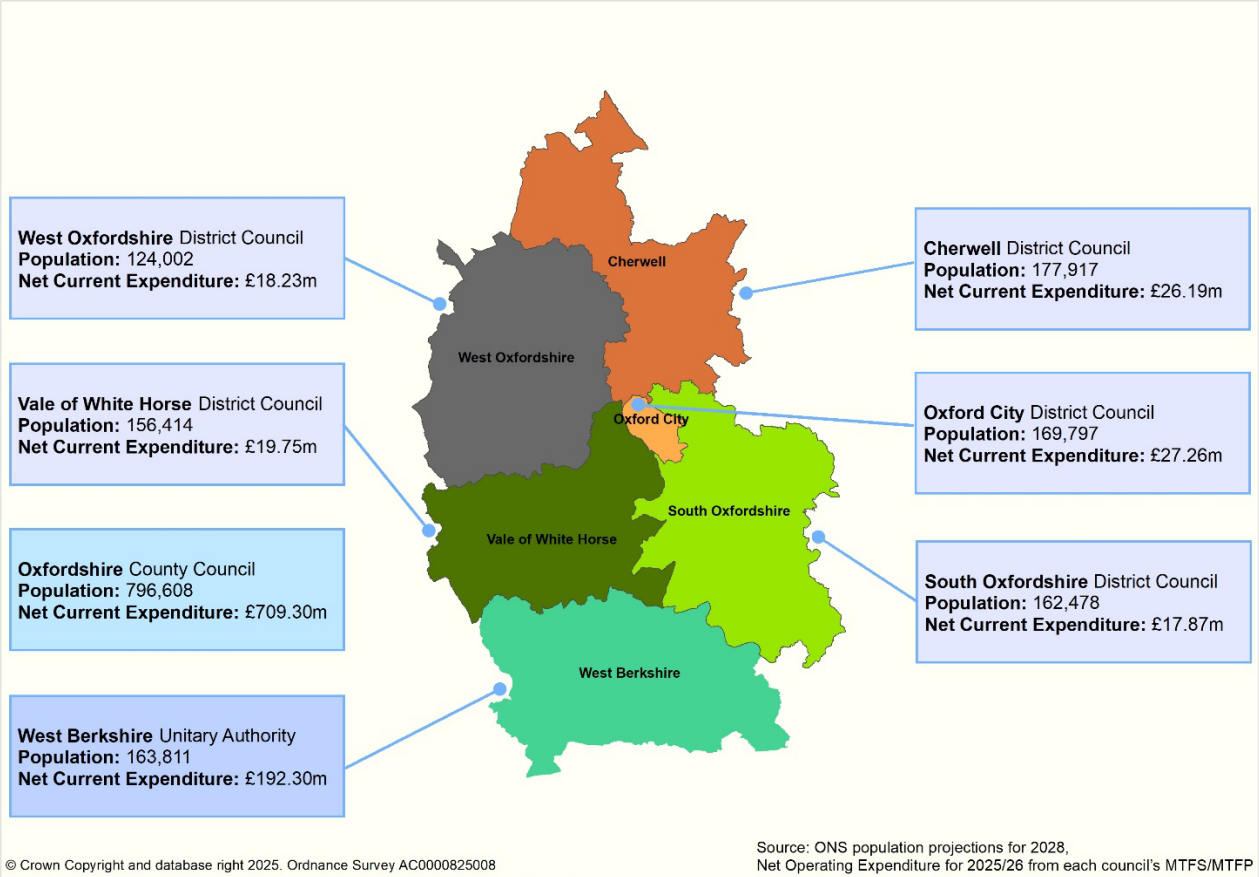
The region is a vital contributor to the South East's economy, with strong transport links including the M4 and A34 corridors, proximity to London and Heathrow, and access to key rail routes. Oxfordshire is internationally recognised for its academic excellence, innovation clusters, and science parks, while West Berkshire hosts significant logistics and defence operations.

Despite its strengths, the area faces challenges such as housing affordability, transport connectivity, and disparities in access to services. Local government reorganisation presents a chance to address these issues more holistically, equitably and collectively. This reorganisation aims to reduce duplication, improve financial resilience and ensure decisions remain close to the communities they affect. It offers an opportunity to align services more effectively, enhance local accountability, and create a more sustainable governance model.

The area at a glance

Area	Gross Value Added (GVA)	Business Growth	Employment	Digital Propensity Index	Children in Low-Income Families	Deprivation	Overall Health Index	Household Benefit Claim Rate
Oxfordshire	**£41.30**	**0.14%**	**61.3%**	**94.97%**	**9,643**	**11.58**	**112.8**	**11.75%**
West Berkshire	**£54.10**	**-0.80%**	**63.0%**	**95.00%**	**9,257**	**9.89**	**114.2**	**13.87%**
England	**£42.40**	**0.24%**	**57.4%**	**94.00%**	**18,981**	**21.67**	**100.8**	**21.3%**
Units	£ per hour worked, 2023	% change, 2023/2024	% employed, 2021/2022	% DPI, 2021/2022	Per 100k, 2023/2024	IMD, 2019/2020	2021	%, 2023/2024
Source	GVA per hour, ONS	Business Demography, ONS	Economic Activity Status, ONS	Digital Propensity Index, ONS	Stat-Xplore (requires log in)	English indices of deprivation, MHCLG	Health Index scores, England, ONS	DWP benefits, GOV.UK (requires log in)

Oxfordshire and West Berkshire are home to over 900,000 people across their seven councils. These are comprised of one unitary authority, West Berkshire Council, and Oxford County Council and its five districts: Cherwell, West Oxfordshire, South Oxfordshire, Oxford City and Vale of White Horse - operating a two-tier system.

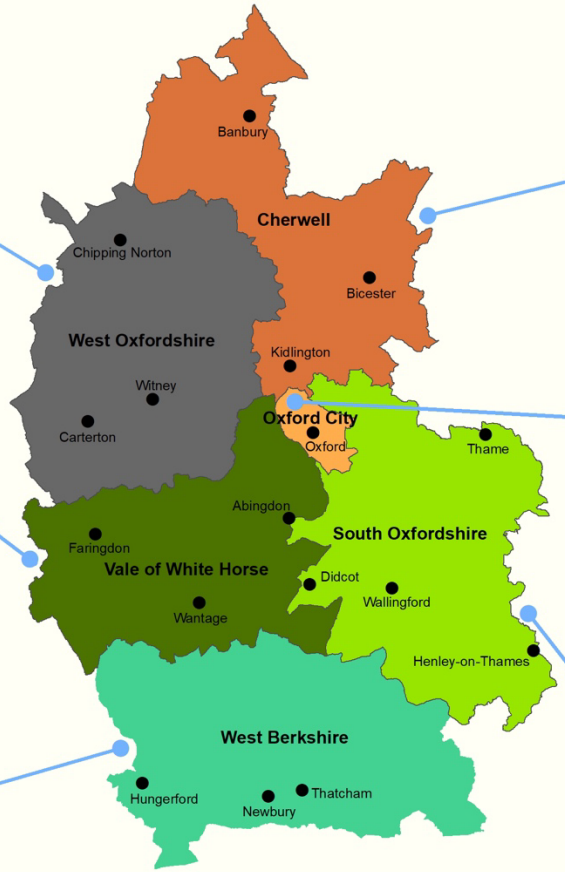


Each of the different areas of Oxfordshire and West Berkshire has a distinct identity.

West Oxfordshire is the second most sparsely populated district in the South East of England with residents living in over 120 villages and hamlets scattered across the district or in one of three towns, Witney, Carterton and Chipping Norton. One third of the district lies in the Cotswold National Landscape. Whilst deprivation is lower than average, the dispersed nature of the district means that despite general affluence, some areas are considered the most deprived in the UK in terms of access to services and facilities.

Vale of White Horse spans a mix of rural and urban areas between the River Thames and the Ridgeway, including three historic market towns of Abingdon, Faringdon and Wantage, Botley at Oxford's edge and the large village of Grove. The north of the area is on the fringes of Oxford and the North Wessex Downs National Landscape covers the southern part of the district. The district is generally affluent, with low deprivation and high life expectancy. It has the lowest housing affordability ratio in Oxfordshire.

West Berkshire comprises three main towns, Newbury, Thatcham and Hungerford and several suburban and rural communities. 74% of the area is covered by the North Wessex Downs National Landscape. Most of the population live along the Kennet Valley and in suburban areas to the west of, or adjacent to, Reading. The area is relatively affluent, with low levels of deprivation and good health outcomes. Housing affordability is lower than in Oxfordshire.



Cherwell has a growing population, encompassing a mix of market towns, villages and rural settings. The majority of residents live in the three urban areas of Banbury, Bicester and Kidlington, with the remainder living in over 70 rural villages. Whilst generally affluent, with high levels of employment compared to the South East average, there are pockets of deprivation, most notably within Banbury. Housing affordability remains a challenge in the district, as does a lower than average economic inactivity rate.

Oxford includes several key neighbourhoods in close proximity to the historic city centre, all bound by the Oxford Green Belt. Oxford's cultural identity is closely linked to the University of Oxford. The population includes a large student population (over 36,000). Oxford is a city of contrasts. Boasting high levels of education and affluence, it also contains some of the most deprived areas in Oxfordshire. Homelessness is a particular challenge along with acute housing affordability leading to high levels of commuting from adjacent districts and beyond.

South Oxfordshire has four main towns – Didcot, Henley, Thame and Wallingford, and a significant number of villages. Much of the district is rural and 70% has a Green Belt designation or resides in either the Chilterns or North Wessex Downs National Landscapes. It is generally affluent, with low deprivation and high life expectancy, however it has a high housing affordability ratio. There is also a lower than national average economic inactivity rate.

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3.2 The need for change

MHCLG invited the principal Oxfordshire authorities in February 2025 to submit proposals for the establishment of unitary local government across Oxfordshire with the aim of replacing the current two-tier system. This proposal has been developed in direct response to this invitation.

Local government is currently facing a series of systemic challenges, and the move to a unitary model is a once-in-a-generation operational opportunity to deliver meaningful and lasting change to help alleviate these issues. The key challenge to be addressed is improving the financial sustainability of local government in the area that will be well placed to meet residents' needs over the longer term. These considerations have led us to the conclusion that a broader geography than Oxfordshire alone would be beneficial for the Thames Valley region. This proposal therefore considers a geography that includes the current council area of West Berkshire (which is already a unitary council). West Berkshire offers a range of strengths including strong economic performance and complementary high tech business clusters.

Together, Oxfordshire and West Berkshire provide the opportunity to address financial resilience issues in local government, by creating two new unitary councils of the right size to withstand financial shocks. This responds to the government's intentions to address as a priority the challenge of small unitary authorities which are in financial distress. A second determining factor is the opportunity to redesign services to ensure delivery of these is maximised to address the needs of our communities now and into the future.

Councils across Oxfordshire and West Berkshire have a strong track record of collaboration to deliver services that meet shared community priorities. This legacy remains a virtue and continues to underpin effective and innovative service delivery. Despite this, as in many parts of the country, public services are coming under increasing strain. While the current two-tier system in Oxfordshire has supported innovation and proactive, interventionist approaches, there is a growing recognition that it faces long-term sustainability challenges in the face of mounting financial and operational pressures.

The changing policy direction of government towards single-tier local government presents a strategic opportunity to explore how alternative governance arrangements could offer greater resilience and efficiency, while building on the strengths of the existing system, and continuing to embed a 'prevention' approach to address service demand.

Demand for services varies across Oxfordshire and West Berkshire, reflecting the diverse demographic profiles and accessibility of rural and urban communities. Adult social care, Children's services and SEND continue to consume an ever-increasing share of limited upper-tier resources, driven by demographic change, rising demand, inflation and increasingly complex needs. Challenges at district level include surging demand for (and escalating costs) in housing and homelessness. Inflation and rising running costs further exacerbate financial vulnerabilities.

Trends in future demand for public services

Cherwell, Oxford City, and West Oxfordshire show distinct demographic patterns that will shape future service needs. Oxford City's younger demographic and high density will drive demand for education, transport, and healthcare services. Cherwell has seen rapid growth due to housing development, attracting working-age adults and families, which will increase pressure on schools, GP practices, and community infrastructure. West Oxfordshire's rurality and growing older population will require expanded adult social care, rural transport solutions, and mobile health services. This area will be required to rise to its distinct challenges of tackling high-cost, complex demand and urban deprivation.

South Oxfordshire, Vale of White Horse, and West Berkshire are experiencing steady population growth and demographic shift to a rising proportion of older residents, which will increase demand for health and social care services, age-friendly housing, and accessible transport. The rural and semi-urban nature of these areas presents challenges for service delivery, especially in remote communities, and ensuring that continued housing-led development and infrastructure expansion in education, healthcare, and community services continue. This area will need to focus on meeting the needs of the ageing population, rural access and unit cost inflation.

3.3 Making the case for creating unitary councils through LGR

Choosing the right option for reorganising local government in Oxfordshire and West Berkshire has the potential to significantly improve efficiency and achieve cost savings. A single-tier system in Oxfordshire and West Berkshire will eliminate the duplication of services and administration that can occur when two tiers of councils are responsible for the same area, but the levels of improvement will be dependent on the nature of the new councils that are created. Efficiency savings will be essential in meeting current and future demand and cost pressures. Some LGR options can also enhance the financial stability of existing unitary authorities, where they merge with others to make larger councils that can be better placed to raise revenue and manage costs.

By bringing all services under one roof, a unitary council of the optimal size and scale can coordinate public services more effectively. This is particularly important for complex issues, such as social care, where seamless collaboration between different departments (e.g., adult social care and housing) is crucial for providing high-quality support to residents. It will also reunite services like waste management, where at present responsibilities for strategic planning, operational delivery and tactical efforts are split across different layers of local government.

With a unitary council, residents know exactly who is responsible for a providing local services. This simplifies the democratic process, making it easier for people to hold their elected officials accountable for local decisions. There will be no more confusion over whether to contact the county council or the district council about a specific issue.

As we move to a single tier, there is the opportunity to secure a range of benefits. These would not be automatic, and their realisation would depend on strong governance, effective implementation and consistent and persistent focus on needs and priorities. Through maintaining this focus, we would expect:

- **More consistent and coordinated service delivery** through policy and practice alignment, standards and processes across the whole area
- **Clear accountability** giving transparent lines of responsibility and streamlined decision-making processes
- **Greater flexibility in service design** enabling more responsive, proactive, bespoke approaches that best address need and respond at a neighbourhood level
- **Securing economies of scale** in back-office functions, thus freeing up resources for frontline priorities
- **Effective collaboration with strategic partners** from other public services (health, police, fire and rescue, education), the Voluntary and Community Sector and the commercial/business sector
- **Stronger alignment with regional governance** thus enabling impactful representation of local priorities, including on growth, in regional forums, such as the MSA.
- **A shared and skilled workforce** equipped to meet evolving demands and with capacity for innovation
- **Alignment of strategic planning** to deliver inclusive growth and creation of prosperous places in partnership with the MSA.

3.4 The importance of working in partnership in LGR

The delivery of public services across Oxfordshire and West Berkshire is enabled and enhanced by a wide network of partnership working between local councils, statutory bodies, education providers, businesses and voluntary organisations.

Rising demand for services, together with increasing complexity of need and escalating costs is placing considerable strain on system capacity and the long-term sustainability of these services. It is therefore critical that the two future unitary councils for Oxfordshire and West Berkshire build on this legacy of partnership working, to address the operational and financial pressures all partners face and improve outcomes for our communities.

Health

Buckinghamshire, Oxfordshire and Berkshire West Integrated Care Board (BOB ICB) currently covers the majority of the Oxfordshire and West Berkshire area. A small part of the Vale of White Horse area is covered by the Bath and North East Somerset Integrated Care Board (BANES ICB).

Health is undergoing its own reform agenda, involving major changes to ICB structures, commissioning arrangements, funding models and service delivery structures. The 10-Year Health Plan and the reorganisation of Integrated Care Boards will reshape the design and delivery of health services, increasing emphasis on community-based care, digital transformation and prevention. This will involve the introduction of new integrated neighbourhood clusters, which will continue to operate mainly on a District footprint. These provide an opportunity for continued partnership working with the sector on local interventions.

Policing

Thames Valley Police serves the counties of Buckinghamshire, Berkshire, and Oxfordshire and therefore includes the whole geography considered in this proposal. Operationally, the force is structured into five Local Command Units (LCUs) responsible for delivering core policing functions, including patrol, criminal investigations, and neighbourhood policing. Oxfordshire and Berkshire West are two of these. Importantly, the Police and Crime Commissioner would continue to oversee the entire area under this revised governance model.

Well-established Community Safety Partnerships (currently West Berkshire and all district and city councils in Oxfordshire have one) will continue to work jointly with the statutory and voluntary sectors to prevent crime and disorder, support victims, and protect vulnerable people.

Fire and Rescue

Statutory Fire and Rescue Service arrangements, providing fire prevention, protection and emergency response services, are currently provided by two fire and rescue services. West Berkshire is served by the Royal Berkshire Fire and Rescue Service. Oxfordshire is served by the Oxfordshire Fire and Rescue Service.

There are well-functioning partnership arrangements between the Fire and Rescue Services and local authorities in place for community resilience and emergency planning. The Joint Oxfordshire Resilience Team provides this structure for Oxfordshire. In West Berkshire, community resilience is facilitated through the Thames Valley Local Resilience Forum and emergency planning, which is overseen by the Joint Emergency Planning Unit, supports 3 councils across Berkshire.

The current direction of travel for the Oxfordshire Fire and Rescue Service and Royal Berkshire Fire and Rescue Service is already working towards a harmonised approach across the Thames Valley (and in line with a new Mayoral Strategic Authority), to include systems, equipment and procedures, building on the joint control room that has been operational across Berkshire, Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire since 2015.

Town and Parish Councils

Town and parish councils have a vital role in delivering services to meet local needs, giving the community a voice and representation and improving quality of life and community wellbeing. Across Oxfordshire and West Berkshire, the number of town and parish councils/meetings in each geographic area is:

- Cherwell – 79
- Oxford – 4
- South Oxfordshire – 85
- Vale of White Horse – 69
- West Berkshire – 62
- West Oxfordshire – 81

In Oxfordshire, a Councils Charter was agreed in May 2024, providing a voluntary framework to help shape how Oxfordshire councils can work together in partnership to support better service delivery and outcomes and ensure thriving local democracy. In West Berkshire a District Parish Conference takes place twice a year to promote and facilitate effective dialogue and partnership working. There has been joint working over many years, with certain powers available to be devolved to Towns and Parishes when requested, which are now detailed in the Town and Parish 'Directory'. An ongoing commitment remains to working better together to empower vibrant democracy across Oxfordshire and West Berkshire.

Voluntary and Community Sector

Oxfordshire and West Berkshire benefit from a strong and active Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS), which is a long-standing partner of both tiers of local government, delivering bespoke support to a wide range of local groups and initiatives. This targeted localised support is greatly valued, and the need for a robust, well-functioning VCS at the neighbourhood scale is essential. Funding volatility and rising demand are specific challenges. The sector plays a crucial role in supporting vulnerable groups and delivering preventative services but is having to adapt to new commissioning expectations while operating in increasingly complex environments, so it is not without strain and challenges.

Oxfordshire Community Voluntary Action provides a forum for the sector and a range of public sector partners, including all Oxfordshire local authorities. West Berkshire benefits from two active VCS infrastructure organisations: Volunteer Centre West Berkshire and the Greenham Trust. These organisations, alongside supporting local charities, distribute significant funding to the sector.

National Landscapes

The Oxfordshire and West Berkshire area includes three National Landscapes: Cotswolds, Chilterns and North Wessex Downs. These designations bestow a statutory duty upon any future unitary authority under the Countryside and Rights of Way Act (2000) to ensure all decisions have regard for the purpose of conserving and enhancing the natural beauty of the National Landscape/s. In doing so, the National Landscape/s will continue to deliver essential benefits for nature, people and the economy. Long-term management of their beautiful scenery and unique geological, ecological and cultural features supports tourism and farming, enhances people's physical and mental health and provides a stable foundation for nature recovery.

Businesses

Oxfordshire and West Berkshire businesses are key stakeholders, and continued engagement and support will be crucial going forward to support strong economic growth. These range from small start-ups, small to medium enterprises, large-scale employers of global significance, including the University of Oxford and the research ecosystem that surrounds it. Structures that replaced the Local Enterprise Partnerships (Enterprise Oxfordshire and the Berkshire Shared Prosperity Board) provide this secured forum and a strong voice for the business community. The Oxfordshire Local Visitor Economy Partnerships (LVEP) (Experience Oxfordshire and Cotswolds Plus) and Berkshire LVEP, provide this function for Tourism, which is a key sector in Oxfordshire and West Berkshire. These business bodies will be crucial in helping us to establish two successful new unitary councils.

It will be vital as the unitary model, and the Mayoral Strategic Authority above it, are established that this level of collaboration and partnership continues. The unitary authorities understand the imperative to work closely to enable joined-up service delivery, foster intelligence sharing, and pursue opportunities for integrated planning. The Mayoral Strategic Authority provides a platform for broader regional coordination on shared priorities, including infrastructure, skills, public services and strategic initiatives such as net zero, procurement and commissioning.

Chapter 4 Options Appraisal in a nutshell

Quick chapter summary

- We tested the three options that are being put forward by the principal councils in Oxfordshire and West Berkshire, against the tests set out by MHCLG, on a like for like basis.
- **Only the two-unitary model — Oxford & Shires and Ridgeway — meets the requirements** for strong local accountability alongside financial sustainability. It balances scale and identity: large enough for efficiency and resilience, but small enough to remain accountable and truly connected to local communities.
- Financial modelling shows recurring annual savings of up to £60m for transition and transformation, helping to address financial challenges across the area, with a payback of between three and four years. This represents the highest potential savings of any of the three options.
- The option being put forward by Oxfordshire County Council is for **one large Oxfordshire unitary and leaving a small unchanged unitary in West Berkshire.**
- This provides savings but creates an overly large, remote Oxfordshire authority and leaves West Berkshire in a significantly disadvantaged position. It involves the lowest initial disruption but the risk is that this results in very little transformation and does not strategically address ongoing and escalating challenges around SEND and social care.
- The option being put forward by Oxford City Council is for **three unitaries – growing the existing city boundary to create Greater Oxford and leaving two other authorities** in the north and the south of the area.
- This fragments the area, introduces two new small unitary councils that are significantly under the government guidance level, carries significant disaggregation costs and risks, weakens resilience and delivers the poorest financial return.

What people told us

“If the geographic area covered by a council is too large, it will have more potential for conflict over priority needs from different parts of the council population and one area may feel ignored to the benefit of another

The two-unitary model will:

- **Support devolution:** two credible building blocks for a future Mayoral Strategic Authority.
- **Improve outcomes for residents:** services shaped around local needs, supported by prevention and locality models.
- **Increase financial sustainability:** recurring savings reinvested into frontline services and prevention, building long-term resilience.
- **Improve service delivery efficiency:** duplication removed, decisions quicker, services digitised.
- **Provide strong local leadership:** councillors accountable and closer to communities.
- **Enhance resilience and deliverability:** balanced councils aligned with geography, economy and identity, supported by a phased plan and with capacity to modernise services.

When looking at Oxfordshire and West Berkshire as a whole, only **Option 2** delivers sustainable savings, protects frontline services, and provides a balanced platform for devolution. The other options fail either on being a sensible geography, local accountability or financial resilience.

4. Options Appraisal

4.1 Introduction

This chapter presents an analysis of the three options for Local Government Reorganisation being considered by the principal councils in Oxfordshire, following the invitation from the minister received in February 2025.

The strengths and weaknesses of the different options have been evaluated against the published criteria and subsequent guidance. An overall evaluation and preferred option are set out at the end of this chapter.

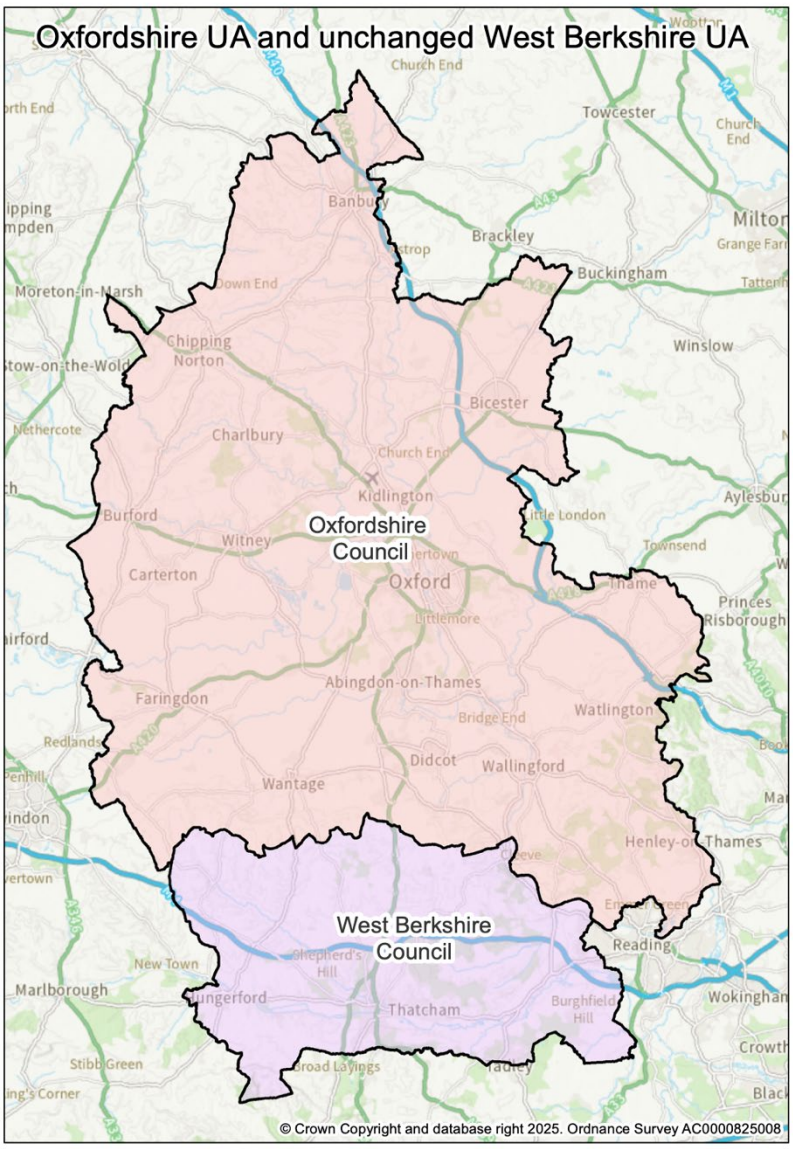
All three options have implications for the neighbouring unitary authority of West Berkshire. Options 2 and 3 include West Berkshire in the proposed new unitary authorities for Oxfordshire. Option 1 does not include West Berkshire in the proposal and so, by default, leaves it unchanged. West Berkshire has been actively supporting the two-unitary bid from the outset of this process and has been fully involved in the development of this proposal.

To ensure consistency across this options appraisal, all three options have been analysed using the same geography of Oxfordshire and West Berkshire. This broader definition of 'the whole geographical area' has been consistently used in assessing the proposals against the criteria. This whole area is also wholly within the emergent MSA model area, as well as the current Health and Police geographies.

Each option is set out on the following pages with a map showing the boundaries being proposed.

4.2 Options under consideration

Option 1 – Oxfordshire Unitary council and no change to West Berkshire Unitary council



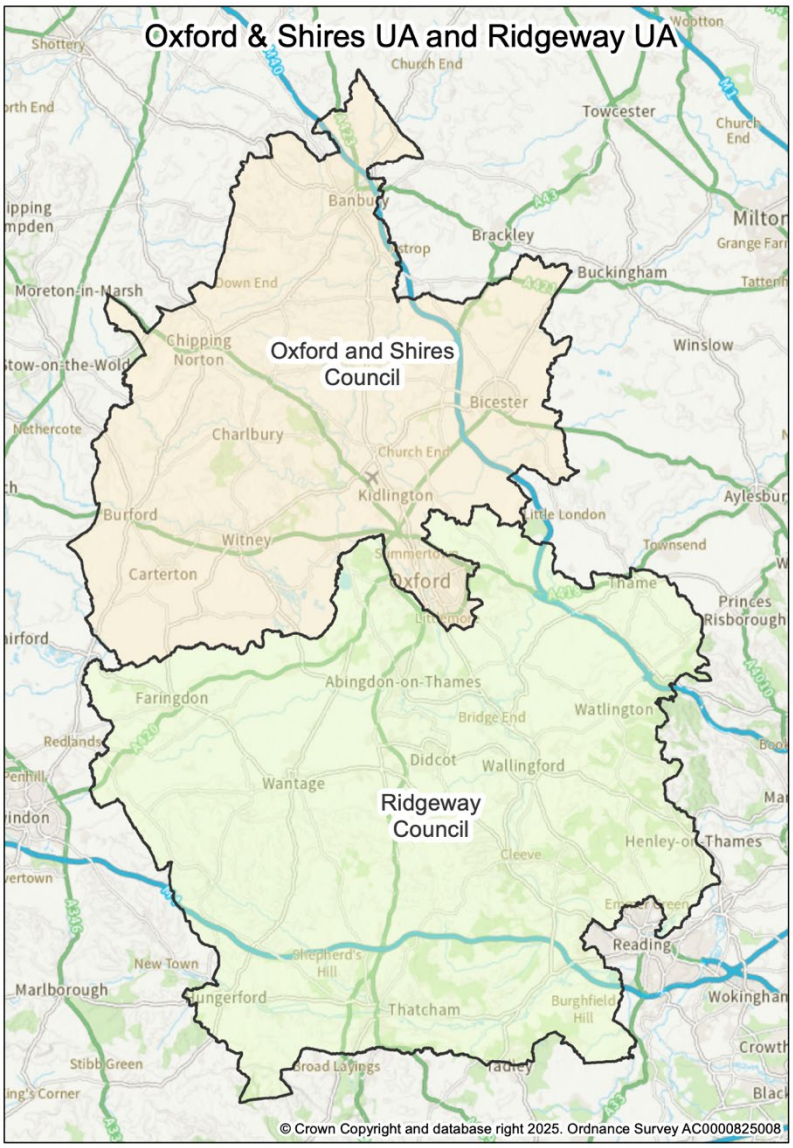
This would create **a large unitary council** (c. 790,000 population) and leave **a small unitary council** (under 165,000 population)

This option proposes the establishment of:

- **Oxfordshire Council** – replacing the six current councils with one large unitary council covering the whole of the current Oxfordshire County area c. 790,608 [1] population on vesting day based on ONS 2028 projections
- **West Berkshire Council** unitary would remain unchanged c. 163,811 population

[1] based on ONS 2028 projections. 2028 population figures have been used when describing the size of the councils that would be created on vesting day. 2025 population figures have been used in analysis by PwC, Newton, PeopleToo etc.

Option 2 – Oxford & Shires and Ridgeway councils



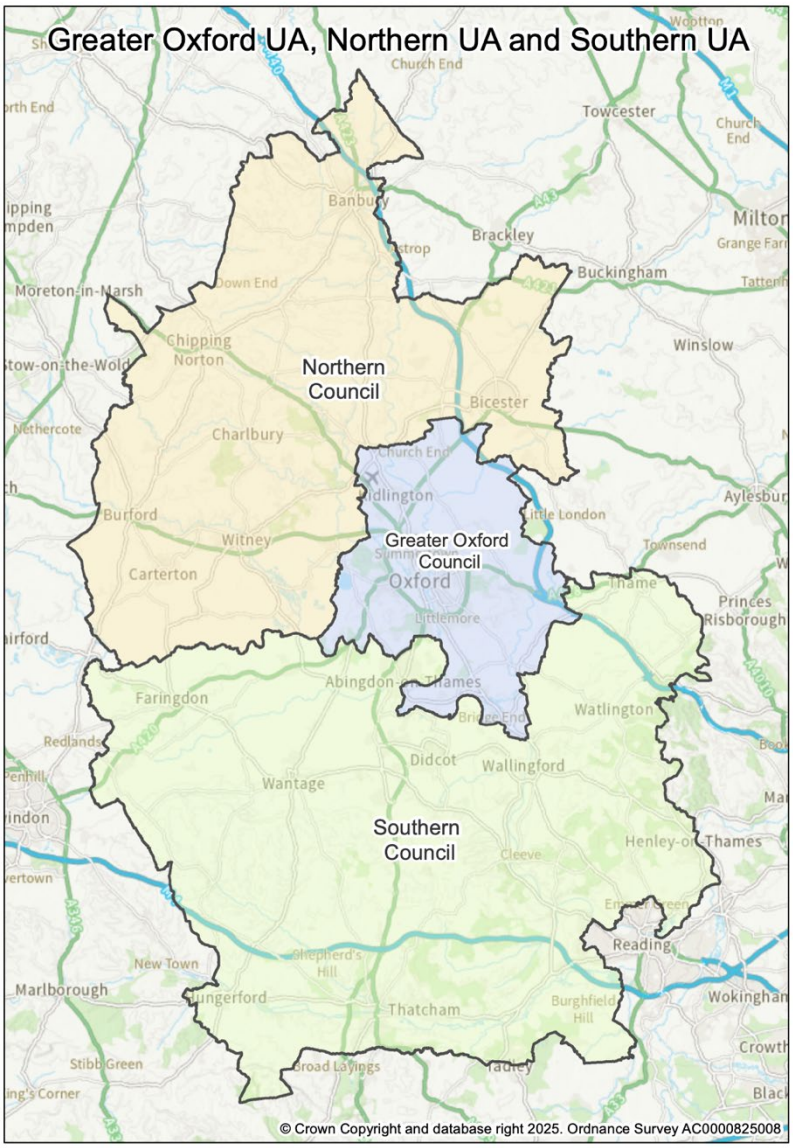
This would create **two similar sized new unitary councils** (c. 465,000 population)

This option proposes the establishment of two new unitary councils:

- **Oxford & Shires** area follows the existing boundaries of the Cherwell District, West Oxfordshire District and Oxford City councils. 471,716 population

- **Ridgeway** area follows the existing boundaries of the South Oxfordshire District, Vale of White Horse District and West Berkshire unitary councils. 482,703 population

Option 3 – Greater Oxford and two additional councils



This would create **two small** (c. 260,000 population) **and one larger new unitary councils** (c. 430,000 population)

This option proposes the establishment of three new unitary councils:

- The '**Greater Oxford'** council area would cover the existing Oxford City council area, expanded to encompass most of the area currently designated as greenbelt that is currently in neighbouring districts c. 272,000;
- The second **'Northern'** council area would cover the remaining parts of the existing Cherwell and West Oxfordshire districts councils that would not be covered by the Greater Oxford council c. 246,000; and
- The third **'Southern'** council would cover the remaining parts of the existing South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse district councils that would not be covered by the Greater Oxford council and West Berkshire unitary council area c. 436,000.

4.3 Socio-Economic and Demographics

The following tables provide an overview of some the key supporting socio-economic and demographic data for the Oxfordshire and West Berkshire areas. These have been used to inform the Options Appraisal and other elements of the proposal. Further details can be found in Appendix A.

Population projections based on ONS 2023-24 figures

	2024	2025	2026	2027	2028	2029	2030	2031	2032
Oxfordshire	**766,129**	**773,131**	**778,869**	**784,525**	**790,608**	**797,209**	**803,838**	**810,363**	**816,697**
West Berkshire	**163,540**	**163,712**	**163,754**	**163,725**	**163,811**	**163,953**	**164,123**	**164,303**	**164,507**
South Oxfordshire	156,126	157,893	159,508	160,995	162,478	163,954	165,404	166,825	168,232
Vale of White Horse	148,246	150,552	152,620	154,532	156,414	158,299	160,110	161,864	163,566
Ridgeway	**467,912**	**472,157**	**475,882**	**479,252**	**482,703**	**486,206**	**489,637**	**492,992**	**496,305**
Cherwell	170,119	172,283	174,214	176,065	177,917	179,804	181,661	183,507	185,337
Oxford City	171,899	171,498	170,562	169,946	169,797	170,096	170,562	171,052	171,425
West Oxfordshire	119,739	120,905	121,965	122,987	124,002	125,056	126,101	127,115	128,137
Oxford & Shires	**461,757**	**464,686**	**466,741**	**468,998**	**471,716**	**474,956**	**478,324**	**481,674**	**484,899**

Population figures across Oxfordshire and West Berkshire show an average growth of 5.5% between 2024 and 2032. Cherwell, South Oxfordshire, Vale of White Horse and West Oxfordshire all see growth between 7% and 11% over that period whilst West Berkshire and Oxford City are effectively static in terms of growth. Population growth is well balanced between Oxford & Shires (5%) and Ridgeway (6.1%). Although precise figures for the Option 3 authorities is not shown, the figures suggest that there would more of an imbalance in population growth given the static numbers in the city area.

Key socio-demographic measures

	GVA	Business Growth	Employment	Homelessness	Deprivation	Overall Health Index	Household Benefits Claim Rate
Oxfordshire	**£41.30**	**0.14%**	**61.27%**	**0.10%**	**11.58**	**112.8**	**11.75%**
West Berkshire	**£54.10**	**-0.80%**	**63.00%**	**0.11%**	**9.89**	**114.2**	**13.87%**
South Oxfordshire	£45.70	0.00%	62.90%	0.05%	8.33	120.2	11.67%
Vale of White Horse	£45.70	-0.56%	63.00%	0.07%	8.38	116.4	11.33%
Ridgeway	**£49.30**	**-0.46%**	**62.98%**	**0.09%**	**8.92**	**116.9**	**11.60%**
Cherwell	£37.80	0.40%	65.10%	0.10%	14.47	106.2	11.69%
Oxford City	**£40.30**	**0.46%**	**53.60%**	**0.18%**	**16.99**	**101.4**	**12.60%**
West Oxfordshire	£38.00	0.42%	62.80%	0.10%	8.77	119.8	11.45%
Oxford & Shires	**£39.00**	**0.43%**	**60.15%**	**0.12%**	**13.78**	**109.1**	**11.91%**
England	**£42.40**	**0.24%**	**57.39%**	**0.19%**	**21.67**	**100.8**	**21.33%**
Units	£ per hour worked, 2023	% change, 2023/2024	% employed, 2021/2022	%, 2024	IMD, 2019/2020	2021	%, 2023/2024
Source	GVA per hour, ONS	Business Demography, ONS	Economic Activity Status, ONS	Statutory homelessness in England, ONS	English indices of deprivation, MHCLG	Health Index scores, England, ONS	DWP benefits, GOV.UK (requires log in)

Variations in these indicators is not significant in scale, especially when considered to the England averages however, they do serve to demonstrate the potential value of being able to address specific issues in particular geographical areas. This needs to be balanced with the scale of the council and resources that are available to be financially sustainable in responding to the opportunities and challenges that are presented. GVA is materially higher in West Berkshire compared to Oxfordshire supporting the decision to include that area in the overall LGR considerations. Whilst the Ridgeway area has higher GVA, Oxford & Shires sees higher business growth across the whole of the area – not just the city. Rates of homelessness and deprivation are higher in the city and overall health and levels of employment are lower. These issues may prove problematic for a smaller council to deal with but still need specific policies without the risk of these being overshadowed by other issues in a very large authority.

4.4 Analysis against the MHCLG criteria

Overall summary of the options appraisal

This headline appraisal summarises the more detailed appraisal of all of the sub-criteria that is set out on the following pages. This appraisal has been conducted on a like-for-like basis considering the whole area covered by Oxfordshire and West Berkshire.

MHCLG Headline Criteria	Option 1 – Oxfordshire UA & West Berkshire UA		Option 2 – Oxford & Shires and Ridgeway UAs		Option 3 – Greater Oxford UA & two other UAs	
1. A **single tier and sensible geography** to improve housing supply and outcomes avoiding creating (dis/)advantaged areas	R	Positive for housing supply and outcomes in Oxfordshire. West Berkshire remains disadvantaged in terms of financial sustainability	G	Enables housing supply and outcomes over across whole area and does not create material (dis)advantaged areas	R	Challenges around nature and deliverability of housing supply. Creates (dis)advantaged areas based on financial analysis
2. Unitary local government must be the **right size** to achieve efficiencies, improve capacity and withstand financial shocks	R	Creates one of the larger unitary councils in England and leaves one which is significantly below the guidance level	G	Creates two unitary councils at the optimal scale to achieve efficiencies, create capacity and avoid the risks of being too large	R	Creates two unitary councils that are materially smaller than the guidance level limiting scope to achieve efficiencies
3. Prioritise the delivery of **high quality and sustainable public services** to citizens	A	Avoids disruption to key services but also risks little improvement through keeping too much of the status quo	A	Some short term alignment will need to be managed but scale and existing services offer the chance to really tailor and improve outcomes	R	Wholesale disaggregation of county & district services (with boundary change) will be required delaying improvements & increasing costs
4. Councils work together in coming to a view that **meets local needs and is informed by local views**	R	Concerns over engagement of West Berkshire and in rural areas in Oxfordshire	A	Clear support for considering West Berkshire along with Oxfordshire in shaping the future of local government in the area	R	Concerns over the extent of engagement beyond city and issues over protecting the greenbelt
5. New unitary structures must support **devolution** arrangements	A	Risk of distinct economic strengths being lost in a large Oxfordshire and leaves an imbalance of UAs in the Combined Authority context	G	Coherent economic geographies to support effective growth and devolution aims – with optimal sized unitary authorities	A	Could be seen to provide a strong growth hub around city but would leave small authorities in relation to Combined Authority
6. Enable **stronger community engagement** and deliver genuine opportunity for neighbourhood empowerment	A	Risk that scale and lack of effective community engagement at that level could result in poor community engagement	G	Strong localities model building on proven track record of effective community engagement and growth	G	Likely to resolve issues in terms of community engagement within the city

R Does not meet the criterion A Partially meets the criterion G Meets the criterion

Overall summary commentary on each of the options

Option 2 – Oxford & Shires and Ridgeway UAs	Green
Option 1 – Oxfordshire UA and West Berkshire UA (unchanged)	Amber
Option 3 – Greater Oxford, Northern and Southern UAs	Red

Option 2 scores well in terms of the potential to improve housing supply and outcomes by taking a more strategic view on where development should happen across Oxfordshire and would also extend this reach across the West Berkshire area. It would also offer the opportunity to create more financially sustainable local government across the whole area. Devolution ambitions in the region could be materially enhanced by this proposal, based on the establishment of two optimally sized councils with distinct economic characteristics and strengths to contribute to a Strategic Authority. The risk of short-term disruption to crucial services is higher in Option 2, than in Option 1, but so is the opportunity to use more significant change as a catalyst for new thinking, culture refresh, and material improvement over 'business as usual". The two new councils would strike a good balance between achieving the advantages of scale in two similarly sized authorities, while establishing a strong locality working model that makes community empowerment intrinsic to the way the councils would work. This is likely to benefit a broad range of services and can explicitly support better outcomes and unit costs in the key care service areas.

Option 1 would provide an opportunity to improve housing supply and outcomes across Oxfordshire, but would do nothing to secure similar improvements across West Berkshire. The financial challenges in West Berkshire (and specifically the current need for Exceptional Financial Support - EFS) are not addressed by this option. Devolution ambitions in the region could be enhanced by this proposal, but the significant imbalance in the size of the councils between Oxfordshire and Berkshire may prove problematic, with West Berkshire being less influential at a regional level due to its smaller size. While the risk of short-term disruption to crucial care services would be minimised under this option, there is a material risk that the opportunity to transform these services would be missed without the catalyst of more significant change. An Oxfordshire unitary would achieve significant scale, which could be an advantage in some respects but would need to guard against the risk of being too remote and lacking meaningful engagement at the locality level. Evidence suggests that, in relation to care services, the large scale of the Oxfordshire unitary risks higher unit costs and poorer outcomes when compared to smaller unitaries. West Berkshire would remain with significant challenges around scale, being considerably below the government guidance population level.

Option 3 scores less well in terms of the potential to improve housing supply, with the constraints of the greenbelt area and new unitary boundaries at risk of exacerbating the challenge of accommodating housing growth in and around Oxford. Creating a Greater Oxford council may provide a strong growth hub to stimulate regional growth, but it is less clear how the economic strengths of the remaining areas across Oxfordshire and West Berkshire would be harnessed effectively. The risk of short-term disruption to crucial services is higher than in both Option 1 and 2, with the need to create three new approaches to the provision of these services and/or shared arrangements between the new authorities. This would entail a highly significant change, which could provide a catalyst for new thinking, but the risks may outweigh the potential benefits. The three new councils would have a smaller scale that may help in establishing locality working and may simplify arrangements with respect to managing the city of Oxford. By being materially smaller than the government guidance, these councils risk not achieving economies of scale, meaningful benefits and ongoing financial sustainability.

Summary commentary on each of the criteria

Criterion 1 – A single tier and sensible geography to improve housing supply and outcomes, while avoiding creating (dis/)advantaged areas – overview

MHCLG Headline Criterion #1	A single tier and sensible geography to improve housing supply and outcomes avoiding creating (dis/)advantaged areas					
Sub-criteria / Overall rating #1	**Option 1 – Oxfordshire UA & West Berkshire UA**		**Option 2 – Oxford & Shires and Ridgeway UAs**		**Option 3 – Greater Oxford UA & two other UAs**	
Sensible economic geography with tax base that doesn't create dis/advantaged areas	R	A single unitary council for Oxfordshire would be significantly advantaged in comparison to West Berkshire in terms of economic geography and financial sustainability	G	Does not create a financial (dis)advantage to councils when the balance of factors are taken into account	A	Creates a degree of (dis)advantage between the council areas but helps to address the issue of West Berkshire sustainability
Sensible geography to increase housing supply	A	Positive for housing supply across Oxfordshire in terms of dissolving current district boundaries, but no change in supply for West Berkshire	A	Positive impact of housing geographies across Oxfordshire and West Berkshire with a need to only manage issues across one new boundary	R	Challenges around nature and deliverability of housing supply due to Greater Oxford boundaries encompassing most of the designated Green Belt area
Supported by robust analysis and articulation of expected outcomes including costs/benefits	G	Robust analysis and articulation of expected outcomes including cost/benefits expected	G	Robust analysis and articulation of expected outcomes including cost/benefits included	G	Robust analysis and articulation of expected outcomes including cost/benefits expected
How proposal works for the whole area and how outcomes will be achieved	R	Clear articulation of proposal and outcomes for Oxfordshire expected but risk that West Berkshire is not addressed (adequately)	G	Clear articulation of proposal and outcomes for the whole area of Oxfordshire and West Berkshire included	R	Clear articulation of proposal and outcomes for Greater Oxford expected but risk that the rest of Oxfordshire and West Berkshire is not addressed (adequately)

R Does not meet the criterion A Partially meets the criterion G Meets the criterion

Criterion 1 – A single tier and sensible geography to improve housing supply and outcomes, while avoiding creating (dis/)advantaged areas - commentary

Option 2 – Oxford & Shires and Ridgeway UAs	Green
Option 1 – Oxfordshire UA and West Berkshire UA (unchanged)	Red
Option 3 – Greater Oxford, Northern and Southern UAs	Red

Option 2 does not create councils that would be materially (dis)advantaged in terms of income, expenditure, assets, liabilities and current/future demand for services and this is supported by the financial modelling undertaken by PwC to support this case. In terms of housing supply, Option 2 offers many of the potential advantages of Option 1, across the whole of Oxfordshire, but also includes West Berkshire, which increases the opportunity across the whole of the area. Moving towards two Local Plans across this larger area would help simplify the process of agreeing on how housing targets can be best met without having to reach an agreement across multiple authorities. The two new authorities will need to collaborate closely to manage planning, infrastructure and supply issues arising between the two council areas. The smaller scale of the council reduces the risk of stifling innovative approaches to enabling housing supply that have been proven to work through schemes such as Graven Hill in Bicester, the UK's largest self and custom-build housing development.

This reduced risk of inhibiting creative and agile approaches also applies to securing outcomes, without sacrificing the benefits of economies of scale offered through aggregation of services. These will enable improvements in outcomes across the entire Oxfordshire and West Berkshire geography[2]. While there will be scope to collaborate across the two new authorities, successful delivery of positive outcomes will not be entirely dependent and can be designed to be more locally appropriate. Both new councils will have their own existing upper-tier services to use as a foundation for further transformation.

Option 1 provides the opportunity to make improvements in housing supply across the Oxfordshire geography. The creation of an Oxfordshire Local Plan could help to simplify the process of agreeing on how housing targets can best be met without having to reach an agreement across multiple authorities. Translating local plan intentions into the delivery of actual housing supply will still require innovative and agile approaches that have been proven to work at a more local scale. There is a risk that these local delivery approaches do not translate well to a larger scale authority, but that would need to be carefully managed. It is important to note that Option 1 will do nothing to secure similar improvements across West Berkshire.

[2] More information on how we ensure agile approaches in Chapter 5 (Vision and Ambition) and Chapter 8 (How the new councils will work)

In a similar manner, Option 1 also provides the opportunity to make improvements across the Oxfordshire geography. The aggregation of current district services, alongside existing upper-tier responsibilities, over a large geography should enable economies of scale but there is a risk that will need to be managed with such a large geographic area. Flexible and creative ways of working that deliver successful outcomes at a more local scale may not translate and flourish in a larger geography. Again, it is also important to note that Option 1 will do nothing to secure similar improvements across West Berkshire and will leave that area at a disadvantaged position in relation to financial challenges in comparison with a large Oxfordshire unitary council. This disadvantage is clearly illustrated by the CIPFA Financial Resilience analysis below which shows West Berkshire having a 39.9 risk score compared to an Oxfordshire unitary authority score of just 3.9.

Option 3 creates some material risks in the potential to significantly improve housing supply across the whole of the area being considered. Unmet housing need in the city has remained high for years, and housing supply is likely to be heavily restricted across the Greater Oxford council area because of the existing space pressures and the constraints of the Oxford greenbelt (which can take years to release new sites within). This will mean that the challenge of accommodating housing growth in and around Oxford will be dependent on arrangements between the three new councils, replicating many of the existing issues. The opportunity to have more balanced growth across the whole area will be diminished. The smaller-scale councils may be more adept at delivering on local plans, but the challenges of agreeing on the plans in the first place may outweigh any advantages.

The potential to improve outcomes is also likely to be reduced with the three new councils that would be created under Option 3. The benefits of aggregation and economies of scale will be smaller (just £9.5m, in comparison to £21.9m for Option 2), while the need to create another set of upper-tier services, as well as change the two existing ones across the geography, adds a degree of complexity that is likely to make improvements harder to achieve. Option 3 does actively include West Berkshire in the proposal, meaning that the benefits to housing supply and outcomes that can be achieved will extend beyond the current Oxfordshire boundary.

Option 3 also creates important imbalances Day 1 and Financial Resilience positions in the modelling from PwC and CIPFA respectively. Taken with the small size of two of the proposed new authorities, means that there is a material risk of creating (dis)advantaged areas through this approach.

Criterion 2 – Unitary local government must be the right size to achieve efficiencies, improve capacity and withstand financial shocks – overview part 1

MHCLG Headline Criterion #2 – Part 2	Unitary local government must be the right size to achieve efficiencies, improve capacity and withstand financial shocks					
Sub-criteria / Overall rating #2	**Option 1 – Oxfordshire UA & West Berkshire UA**		**Option 2 – Oxford & Shires and Ridgeway UAs**		**Option 3 – Greater Oxford UA & two other UAs**	
Proposals should set out how an area will seek to manage transition & transformation costs	A	The proposal is anticipated to set out a sensible approach to managing transition and transformation costs across the area but it is unclear if this will include West Berkshire	A	The proposal sets out a sensible approach to managing transition and transformation costs across the whole area. One-off transition costs are forecast to be slightly higher than the one unitary option	R	The proposal is anticipated to set out a sensible approach to managing transition and transformation costs across the whole area but the scale of those costs will be much higher than for the other two options
Best Value intervention and/or in receipt of Exceptional Financial Support to be addressed	R	The proposal does not include West Berkshire and will therefore not address their Exceptional Financial Support	G	The proposal sets out an approach to dealing with the Exceptional Financial Support being received by West Berkshire Council	A	It is not yet clear whether the proposal will set out an approach to dealing with the Exceptional Financial Support being received by West Berkshire Council but due to lower overall benefits the scope to do so will be lower
No proposal for council debt to be addressed centrally or written off as part of reorganisation	G	Proposal is not anticipated to suggest writing off debt or addressing it centrally	G	Proposal does not suggest writing off debt or addressing it centrally	G	Proposal is not anticipated to suggest writing off debt or addressing it centrally

R Does not meet the criterion A Partially meets the criterion G Meets the criterion

Criterion 2 – Unitary local government must be the right size to achieve efficiencies, improve capacity and withstand financial shocks – overview part 2

MHCLG Headline Criterion #2 – Part 2	Unitary local government must be the right size to achieve efficiencies, improve capacity and withstand financial shocks					
Sub-criteria / Overall rating #2	**Option 1 – Oxfordshire UA & West Berkshire UA**		**Option 2 – Oxford & Shires and Ridgeway UAs**		**Option 3 – Greater Oxford UA & two other UAs**	
Proposals should set out how an area will seek to manage transition & transformation costs	A	The proposal is anticipated to set out a sensible approach to managing transition and transformation costs across the area but it is unclear if this will include West Berkshire	A	The proposal sets out a sensible approach to managing transition and transformation costs across the whole area. One-off transition costs are forecast to be slightly higher than the one unitary option	R	The proposal is anticipated to set out a sensible approach to managing transition and transformation costs across the whole area but the scale of those costs will be much higher than for the other two options
Best Value intervention and/or in receipt of Exceptional Financial Support to be addressed	R	The proposal does not include West Berkshire and will therefore not address their Exceptional Financial Support	G	The proposal sets out an approach to dealing with the Exceptional Financial Support being received by West Berkshire Council	A	It is not yet clear whether the proposal will set out an approach to dealing with the Exceptional Financial Support being received by West Berkshire Council but due to lower overall benefits the scope to do so will be lower
No proposal for council debt to be addressed centrally or written off as part of reorganisation	G	Proposal is not anticipated to suggest writing off debt or addressing it centrally	G	Proposal does not suggest writing off debt or addressing it centrally	G	Proposal is not anticipated to suggest writing off debt or addressing it centrally

R Does not meet the criterion A Partially meets the criterion G Meets the criterion

Criterion 2 – Unitary local government must be the right size to achieve efficiencies, improve capacity and withstand financial shocks – commentary

Option 2 – Oxford & Shires and Ridgeway UAs	Green
Option 3 – Greater Oxford, Northern and Southern UAs	Red
Option 1 – Oxfordshire UA and West Berkshire UA (unchanged)	Red

Option 2 proposal would create the balance of two unitary councils at the optimal scale (over 470,000 at vesting day, based on projected 2028 figures and forecasted to grow rapidly). The logic of the 'guiding principle' is evident in the context of the two-unitary proposal. The reorganisation would create two balanced councils that are the right size to deliver effective growth and devolution aims, by acting independently and as part of a Strategic Authority. The scale of the two unitary councils will create scope for efficiencies, without some of the risks associated with being too large. All parties involved will have a strong catalyst for change through the reorganisation.[3] This proposal will also help create new opportunities in West Berkshire to achieve efficiencies, create capacity, and avoid financial shocks, thereby removing the current need for Exceptional Financial Support from government.[4] **Option 2 creates the potential for a Transition and Stretch Benefits total of £59.8m which are the highest total recurring benefits of any of the options**. This is made up of transition benefits of £21.9m and higher transformation benefits than Option1 at £25.6m (base) and £37.9m (stretch).

Option 3 would create three unitary councils, with two of them being at a population level that is materially lower than the 'guiding principle' figure (c.260,000). The rationale for creating such small unitary councils is not immediately clear beyond a desire to expand and build a strong growth hub around the city of Oxford. The scale of the three unitary councils is likely to limit their ability to create efficiencies, improve capacity and withstand financial shocks.[5] This proposal should, however, assist in creating new efficiencies and resilience in the West Berkshire area, and there should also be a significant catalyst for change for all parties. The ongoing cost of running additional upper-tier services with Option 3 means that it will create much lower transition benefits than the other options of £9.5m. This is offset, to a certain extent, by slightly higher transformation benefits than Option 2 at £25.8m (base) and £38.2m (stretch) but is forecast to create materially lower benefits for the area overall. One-off implementation costs are also the highest of any option at £59.2m (stretch).

[3] Our approach to maximising the benefits of a fresh start is outlined in Chapter 8 (How the new councils will work)
[4] For more detail see Appendix B (PwC Analysis)
[5] For more detail see Appendix B (PwC Analysis)

Option 1 proposes that Oxfordshire would become the largest non-metropolitan unitary council in England (c. 790,000) prior to the implementation of any reorganisation in the current round. It also leaves the existing West Berkshire unitary at a population level (c. 165,000), which is significantly below the 'guiding principle' figure of 500,000. There is also a risk that distinct economic strengths of different parts of the geography are overlooked in a large Oxfordshire unitary context, where 'second-order opportunities' are missed in favour of the city of Oxford's major industries. The scale of the Oxfordshire unitary should afford scope for improving capacity, withstanding financial shocks and achieving efficiencies, however there are a number of material risks to achieving this. The first is, the risk of 'business as usual' thinking prevailing, especially in the big spend services related to adults and children. LGR should be a catalyst for change and this will be less of an imperative with this option compared to other options where redesign will be essential. The second risk relates to the scale of aggregation required to bring district and city services into a coherent unitary of this size. Multiple systems, delivery models, contracts and teams will need to be reconciled, and the number of disparate approaches will be highest with Option 1. Even if these risks are well managed, Option 1 will mean that West Berkshire, will still be left at a scale that makes addressing these issues exceptionally challenging. It is anticipated that a sensible approach to managing transition and transformation costs across the Oxfordshire will be put forward, but this will not include West Berkshire. Option 1 will create the highest transition benefits of £27.3m but transformation benefits are lower than other options, which include the whole geography, at £20.9m (base) and £31.1m (stretch).

Criterion 3 – Prioritise the delivery of high quality and sustainable public services to citizens – overview

MHCLG Headline Criterion #3	Prioritise the delivery of high quality and sustainable public services to citizens							
Sub-criteria / Overall rating #3	**Option 1 – Oxfordshire UA & West Berkshire UA**		**Option 2 – Oxford & Shires and Ridgeway UAs**		**Option 3 – Greater Oxford UA & two other UAs**			
Improve service delivery and should avoid unnecessary fragmentation of services	A	The proposal is anticipated to identify service delivery improvements and will avoid the risk of fragmentation of services. There is however a risk that improvements are more limited through keeping too much of the status quo approaches	A	Proposes a range of service delivery improvements. Whilst a degree of fragmentation of current Oxfordshire services may be perceived this is deemed as necessary to build more effective services across the two new councils	R	The proposal is anticipated to identify service delivery improvements however the establishment of three smaller unitary councils is highly likely to lead to the fragmentation of services. This will need careful management
Opportunities to deliver public service reform and better VFM should be identified	G	The proposal is anticipated to identify opportunities to deliver public service reform and better VFM but many of the crucial services will largely remain on the same course as present	G	The proposal identifies a range of opportunities to deliver public service reform and better VFM by leveraging more local accountability along with some of the advantages of sensible scale	A	The proposal is anticipated to identify opportunities to deliver public service reform and better VFM. The extent to which these opportunities will be achievable through the creation of three smaller unitary councils is unclear
Impact on crucial services e.g. social care, children's services, SEND, homelessness, public safety	A	Any potentially negative impact on crucial services is likely to be avoided in the short term. A risk remains that continuation of the current approaches misses the opportunity to use LGR as a catalyst for medium to longer term transformation	A	The proposal sets out a clear transition plan to avoid any short term disruption. Many disaggregation challenges are negated by having two sets of crucial services already. Size affords economies of scale and effective place based delivery	R	It is unclear how the three unitary proposal can avoid wholesale disaggregation of county & district services (with boundary change) or the establishment of complex partnership arrangements. Either delay improvements & increase costs

R Does not meet the criterion

A Partially meets the criterion

G Meets the criterion

Criterion 3 – Prioritise the delivery of high quality and sustainable public services to citizens - commentary

Option 1 – Oxfordshire UA and West Berkshire UA (unchanged)	Amber
Option 2 – Oxford & Shires and Ridgeway UAs	Amber
Option 3 – Greater Oxford, Northern and Southern UAs	Red

Option 1 creates opportunities to secure some service delivery improvements and better value for money; however, research suggests that this is more difficult to achieve for care services for councils of this scale.[6] It is strong in avoiding the risk of unnecessary fragmentation of upper tier services. There may also be scope to improve broader public service reform; however, there is a risk that improvements are more limited if 'business as usual' thinking is adopted around existing upper-tier services. Any potentially negative impact on care and education services is likely to be avoided in the short term due to not needing to disaggregate many key services. A risk remains that continuing the current approaches will miss the opportunity to use LGR as a catalyst for medium to longer-term transformation. Again, this proposal will not support West Berkshire in improving its approach to delivering high-quality public services or achieving broader public service reform.

Option 2 provides a strong platform for securing a range of service delivery and Value for Money improvements. While a degree of disaggregation of current Oxfordshire services will be necessary, these are likely to be offset by the improved resilience and consolidation of similar services from a West Berkshire perspective. The two new authorities will create a fresh dynamic for public service reform across both Oxfordshire and Berkshire, with a clear catalyst for improvement.[7] Option 2 entails a level of risk around disaggregation of several crucial services, including Adult Social Care, Children's Services, Education and SEND. The challenges associated with disaggregation are reduced significantly by the fact that there are already two sets of all the crucial services functioning across the Oxfordshire and West Berkshire areas. Risks of disruption will need to be managed through a clear transition plan to avoid any short-term disruption to service users, the voluntary sector, other partners, and staff. However, this will be far more straightforward than in many disaggregation scenarios. Our research shows that authorities of this scale are better placed to focus on specific demand issues and local resolution of them, than larger councils, leading to lower unit costs and improved outcomes.

[6] For more detail see Appendix E (PeopleToo Analysis))
[7] Our approach to maximising the benefits of a fresh start is outlined in Chapter 8 (How the new councils will work)

Option 3 is anticipated to identify service delivery improvements; however, the establishment of three smaller unitary councils is highly likely to lead to the fragmentation of services. This will need careful management. The proposal is anticipated to identify opportunities to deliver public service reform and better value for money. The extent to which these opportunities will be achievable through the creation of three smaller unitary councils is unclear. It is also unclear how the three-unitary proposal can avoid the wholesale disaggregation of county and district services (with boundary change) or the establishment of complex partnership arrangements. It will either delay improvements or increase costs.

Criterion 4 – Councils work together in coming to a view that meets local needs and is informed by local views – overview

MHCLG Headline Criterion #4	Councils work together in coming to a view that meets local needs and is informed by local views					
Sub-criteria / Overall rating #4	**Option 1 – Oxfordshire UA & West Berkshire UA**		**Option 2 – Oxford & Shires and Ridgeway UAs**		**Option 3 – Greater Oxford UA & two other UAs**	
Evidence of locally meaningful and constructive engagement	A	The proposal has been prepared with a reasonable level of locally meaningful engagement across the councils in Oxfordshire and West Berkshire and with other interested parties	A	The proposal has been prepared with a reasonable level of locally meaningful engagement across the councils in Oxfordshire and West Berkshire and with other interested parties	A	The proposal has been prepared with a reasonable level of locally meaningful engagement across the councils in Oxfordshire and West Berkshire and with other interested parties
Consider issues of local identity and cultural and historic importance	A	The proposal is anticipated to consider the local identity and cultural importance of the current Oxfordshire boundary. The historic importance of the traditional Berkshire geography is still valued by some of the population	G	The proposal considers the local identity and cultural importance of the current Oxfordshire boundary and also embraces the historic importance of the some of the traditional Berkshire geography	A	The identity and historic importance of the city of Oxford is expected to figure heavily in this proposal. It is unclear if all residents of the proposed Greater Oxford feel part of the city and whether the broader area has been fully considered
Evidence local engagement and how concerns will be addressed	R	It is not clear the extent to which meaningful engagement has happened in some rural parts of Oxfordshire and whether the concerns of the broader population including West Berkshire have been addressed	A	A good level of meaningful engagement has happened across Oxfordshire and West Berkshire with the proposal seeking to address the concerns by the broader population	R	It is not clear the extent to which meaningful engagement has happened beyond the city of Oxford and whether the concerns of the broader population have been addressed. Specific issues over protecting the greenbelt are key

R Does not meet the criterion

A Partially meets the criterion

G Meets the criterion

Criterion 4 – Councils work together in coming to a view that meets local needs and is informed by local views - commentary

All three proposals have been prepared with a reasonable level of meaningful local engagement across the councils in Oxfordshire and West Berkshire, as well as with other interested parties. Regular dialogue has been held, with data and information shared to assist in the preparation of the three proposals.

Option 2 – Oxford & Shires and Ridgeway UAs	Amber
Option 1 – Oxfordshire UA and West Berkshire UA (unchanged)	Red
Option 3 – Greater Oxford, Northern and Southern UAs	Red

Option 2 considers the local identity and cultural importance of two distinct parts of Oxfordshire. It also embraces the historic importance of some of the traditional Berkshire geography, which is partially restored through this proposal. A high level of meaningful engagement has happened across Oxfordshire and West Berkshire, with the proposal seeking to address the concerns of the broader population (see Chapter 11).

Option 1 is anticipated to strongly consider the local identity and cultural importance of the current Oxfordshire boundary. It is unlikely to address the historic importance of the traditional Berkshire geography that is still valued by some of the population and would be partially addressed by the other proposals. It is not clear the extent to which meaningful engagement has happened beyond Oxfordshire and whether the concerns of the broader population, including West Berkshire, have been addressed.

Option 3 features the identity and historic importance of the city of Oxford heavily in this proposal, but with less focus on the other parts of Oxfordshire and West Berkshire that would make up the remaining two authorities. It is unclear if all residents of the proposed Greater Oxford authority feel part of the city, or whether they identify more strongly with the rest of the Oxfordshire area. Engagement has occurred across the city of Oxford, other parts of Oxfordshire and a little in West Berkshire but it is not clear that the concerns of the broader population have been adequately addressed. Specific concerns over protecting the greenbelt are key.

Criterion 5 – New unitary structures must support devolution arrangements- overview

MHCLG Headline Criterion #5	New unitary structures must support devolution arrangements					
Sub-criteria / Overall rating #5	**Option 1 – Oxfordshire UA & West Berkshire UA**		**Option 2 – Ridgeway UA and Oxford & Shires UA**		**Option 3 – Greater Oxford UA & two other UAs**	
Show support from any existing CA/CCA/Mayor and how arrangements will need to change		N/A		N/A		N/A
Where no CA/CCA is already established then set out how it will help unlock devolution	A	The proposal for a large Oxfordshire unitary council has some strengths but risks the distinct economic strengths of different parts of the area being lost and could miss the opportunity to include Berkshire	G	The proposal is to create two unitary councils based around distinct and coherent economic geographies. These have been designed to best support effective growth and devolution aims – with sensible sized UAs	A	The proposal could be seen as attractive in that it has the potential to provide a strong growth hub around city. The risks are however that the focus may be placed too heavily on the city and the strengths of others may not have been fully considered
Sensible population size ratios between local authorities and any strategic authority	A	The difference in size between the large Oxfordshire UA and the other smaller authorities would be significant and could hinder the operation of the new CA/CCA.	G	The Oxford & Shires and Ridgeway UAs would be of a very similar size and a sensible population building block for the new CA/CCA	A	The Greater Oxford proposal would create three smaller unitary councils that whilst similar in size are probably smaller than the ideal population building block for the new CA/CCA

R Does not meet the criterion

A Partially meets the criterion

G Meets the criterion

Criterion 5 – New unitary structures must support devolution arrangements – commentary

Option 2 – Oxford & Shires and Ridgeway UAs	Green
Option 1 – Oxfordshire UA and West Berkshire UA (unchanged)	Amber
Option 3 – Greater Oxford, Northern and Southern UAs	Amber

Option 2 proposes two unitary councils with complementary geographies to help drive local, regional, and national ambitions around devolution. The Oxford & Shires council connects Cherwell and West Berkshire to Oxford along the A40, A44, A4260 and A41 corridor, while the Ridgeway area connects well to the wider Thames Valley along the M4, A34, M40 and A420 and re-establishes important historic ties with parts of Berkshire. Both councils will be able to build a strong delivery record on their long history of effective collaboration and joint working. The Oxford & Shires and Ridgeway UAs would be of a very similar size and a sensible population building block (c. 470,000) for a new Strategic Authority (1.5m population target).

Option 1 and the proposal for a large Oxfordshire unitary council has some strengths in terms of creating a strong voice for the current county area but risks the distinct economic strengths of different parts of the area being lost. It could also miss the opportunity to harness the strengths of West Berkshire and the role it could play in engaging Oxfordshire more fully with Berkshire. While many of the constituent districts have strong track records of delivering local growth, this is much less evident in delivery at the county level. An Oxfordshire Unitary Authority would need to manage the risk of perpetuating sub-optimal delivery and attempt to scale the more locally based approaches over a much larger geography. The difference in size between the large Oxfordshire UA (790,000) and the other smaller authorities, including West Berkshire (164,000) would be significant and could hinder the operation of the new Strategic Authority (1.5m population target).

Option 3 is expected to focus heavily on the creation of a Greater Oxford authority. It is anticipated to demonstrate strong ambitions around housing and economic growth and to be a driver of broader devolution goals. While this focus on the city may have some strengths in terms of creating a strong growth hub around the city, it also risks some significant shortcomings. The risks related to housing supply, planning issues, and the protection of the greenbelt have been outlined above. In terms of economic growth, an undue focus on the city of Oxford risks misunderstanding the interconnected links that it has with other parts of the Oxfordshire and West Berkshire geography. From a practical perspective, two out of the three councils that would be created under the Greater Oxford proposal would be smaller than the ideal population building blocks for the new Strategic Authority (1.5m population target).

Criterion 6 – Enable stronger community engagement and deliver genuine opportunity for neighbourhood empowerment - overview

MHCLG Headline Criterion #6	Enable stronger community engagement and deliver genuine opportunity for neighbourhood empowerment					
Sub-criteria/overall rating #6	**Option 1 – Oxfordshire UA & West Berkshire UA**		**Option 2 – Ridgeway UA and Oxford & Shires UA**		**Option 3 – Greater Oxford UA & two other UAs**	
Show plans to make sure that communities are engaged	A	The proposal is anticipated to include proposals to show how communities will be better engaged with a new unitary council. There is however a risk that the scale of the new authority could impede effective mechanisms engagement	G	The proposal sets out a strong localities model that will enable effective community engagement across the two new councils. This will go beyond simple engagement and be built into the decision making and service delivery, where appropriate	G	The proposal is anticipated to include proposals to show how communities will be better engaged with a new unitary councils. It expected to be particularly strong in how it deals with the challenge of engagement across the city
Explain how any existing arrangements will enable strong community engagement	A	The county council has a less well defined track record of some aspects of community engagement and "more of the same" is a risk. It will be important to build on district approaches and to scale them up to the whole Oxfordshire scale	G	Several of the councils making this proposal already have strong localities models and have a proven track record of effective community engagement and growth e.g. Bicester Local Area Committee	G	The proposal is anticipated to include examples of good practice in terms engaging with communities It expected to be particularly strong in terms of current engagement across the city

R Does not meet the criterion

A Partially meets the criterion

G Meets the criterion

Criterion 6 – Enable stronger community engagement and deliver genuine opportunity for neighbourhood empowerment – commentary

Option 2 – Oxford & Shires and Ridgeway UAs	Green
Option 3 – Greater Oxford, Northern and Southern UAs	Green
Option 1 – Oxfordshire UA and West Berkshire UA (unchanged)	Amber

Option 2 builds on the fact that several of the existing councils making this proposal already have strong localities models and a proven track record of effective community engagement and growth, e.g. Bicester Local Area Committee. Option 2 includes a strong localities model that will enable effective community engagement across the two new authorities and help to restore public trust in government. To be effective, this will need to go beyond simple engagement and be built into the decision-making and service delivery of the new councils.

The size of the proposed Oxfordshire unitary council in **Option 1** will immediately create an inherent risk of communities feeling remote in terms of engagement, whether that is perceived or actual. The county council has a less well-defined track record in certain aspects of community engagement, so it will be important to build on district approaches and to attempt to scale them up to the whole Oxfordshire area. These approaches will need to work more effectively than in smaller council areas to overcome challenges related to a lack of trust in government bodies and perceptions of remoteness from communities and their local neighbourhoods.

While the size of the unitary councils proposed in **Option 3** has some serious weaknesses in terms of other criteria, for community engagement, it could be an inherent strength, whether that is perceived or actual. Option 3 is anticipated to include proposals to show how communities will be better engaged and is expected to be particularly strong in addressing the challenge of engagement across the city. The creation of a Greater Oxford unitary would also help partially resolve the challenges of how best to engage communities and neighbourhoods in a collective way across the city area.

4.5 Financial comparison of the options

PwC cost-financial benefit modelling for LGR transition and transformation

Option	Level of change	Recurring net financial benefits (£m)	One-off costs (£m)	Payback period (years)	Addresses financial sustainability issues across Oxfordshire and West Berks
Option 1 Oxfordshire Unitary council and no change to West Berkshire Unitary council	Transition	27.3	23.8	3.1	No
	Basic Transformation (Base)	20.9	14.6	1.7	
	Transition plus Basic Transformation	**48.2**	**38.4**	**2.8**	
	Ambitious Transformation (Stretch)	31.1	21.7	1.7	
	Transition plus Ambitious Transformation	**58.4**	**45.5**	**2.7**	
Option 2 Oxford & Shires and Ridgeway councils	Transition	21.9	30.4	4.2	Yes
	Basic Transformation (Base)	25.6	17.9	1.7	
	Transition plus Basic Transformation	**47.5**	**48.3**	**3.4**	
	Ambitious Transformation (Stretch)	37.9	26.5	1.7	
	Transition plus Ambitious Transformation	**59.8**	**56.9**	**3.2**	
Option 3 Greater Oxford, Northern and Southern councils	Transition	9.5	32.5	8.7	Partially
	Basic Transformation (Base)	25.8	18.1	1.7	
	Transition plus Basic Transformation	**35.3**	**50.6**	**4.7**	
	Ambitious Transformation (Stretch)	38.2	26.7	1.7	
	Transition plus Ambitious Transformation	**47.7**	**59.2**	**4.2**	

Our work with PwC has included a financial appraisal of the three options under consideration – on a like-for-like basis.

The **recurring annual net financial benefits**[8] reflect the savings that the modelling shows are expected from:

- **Transition** to the new structures including:
  - aggregating and rationalising services, assets, contracts, roles, etc, in transitioning to the new councils
  - minus any additional recurring costs required to create new functions that have been disaggregated into smaller services; plus
- **Basic or more Ambitious Transformation** opportunities following initial transition including:
  - improving service delivery models; and
  - transforming ways of working supported by technology and culture change

In terms of transition and basic (base) transformation, Option 1 and Option 2 are very similar in terms of recurring annual benefits and implementation costs, with Option 1 paying back slightly quicker. Critically, though, this option does nothing to address the current financial challenges in West Berkshire, whereas Option 2 creates sufficient savings to resolve them, at least in the short to medium term. **When transition and more ambitious (stretch) transformation benefits are considered, Option 2 has the potential to deliver the highest annual recurring benefits of £59.8m p.a.** Option 3 can help address the West Berkshire financial challenge to a certain extent, but the lower overall benefits mean that the improvement in financial resilience prospects will not be as significant. The financial analysis shows that the lower aggregation benefits and higher additional disaggregation costs associated with creating three new unitary authorities under Option 3 result in a materially lower recurring annual benefit and a significantly longer payback period.

It should be noted that the analysis for this Options Appraisal used publicly available data and consistent assumptions applied in the same way across all three proposals for local government reorganisation. More detailed analysis was undertaken for the Detailed Financial Case of the Oxford & Shires and Ridgeway proposal to further develop anticipated benefits and costs, using local insights and tailored assumptions. That more detailed analysis resulted in more refined and slightly more prudent totals that have been included in the Detailed Financial Case. It is anticipated that the councils preparing proposals for other options will have refined their more detailed financial cases in a similar way.

[8] A more detailed breakdown of costs and benefits for transition and transformation can be found in Appendix B – PwC Financial Options Appraisal

PwC financial viability modelling

PwC have also assisted in modelling the Day 1 position of the proposed councils under the three options by analysing the projected income and expenditure for each.

Option	Day 1 Income (£m)	Day 1 Expenditure (£m)	Difference (£m)	Difference % of income
Option 1				
Oxfordshire UA	881.5	906.6	-25.1	-2.8%
West Berkshire UA	205.6	210.6	-5.0	-2.4%
Option 2				
Oxford & Shires UA	537.6	555.9	-18.3	-3.4%
Ridgeway UA	549.5	561.3	-11.8	-2.1%
Option 3				
Greater Oxford UA	316.2	320.8	-4.6	-1.5%
Northern UA	309.1	320.6	-11.5	-3.7%
Southern UA	461.8	475.8	-14.0	-3.0%

The modelling shows that collectively there will be a £30.1m difference between income and expenditure on Day 1 and this will be split in different ways across the proposed councils dependent on the geographical boundaries being put forward. Option 1 has the largest differences in absolute terms but the most balanced when considered as a percentage of population. This needs to be considered in conjunction with the risks around financial resilience of West Berkshire as shown in the CIPFA modelling below. Option 2 shows a level of imbalance in Day 1 position between the two proposed authorities, although this would be balanced in the short-term using reserves whilst changes and transformation take place. Option 3 shows the largest imbalance with Greater Oxford inheriting a more advantageous Day 1 position than the other two proposed authorities.

CIPFA Financial Resilience Index [9]

Option	New authority	Comprised of	Total Risk Score	Top 3 risk metrics
Option 1	Oxfordshire UA	All districts and Oxfordshire CC, minus West Berkshire	43.79	Growth Above Baseline, Fee Charges to Expenditure Ratio, Child Social Care to Expenditure Ratio
	West Berkshire UA (unchanged)	West Berkshire		Interest Payable to Expenditure Ratio, Change in Reserves, Change in Earmarked Reserves
Option 2	Oxford & Shires UA	Oxford, West Oxfordshire, Cherwell and 63% of Oxfordshire CC	24.12	Fee Charges to Expenditure Ratio, Council Tax to Expenditure Ratio, Unallocated Reserves
	Ridgeway UA	Vale of White Horse, South Oxfordshire, West Berkshire and 37% of Oxfordshire CC		Child Social Care to Expenditure Ratio, Social Care Ratio, Adult Social Care to Expenditure Ratio
Option 3	Greater Oxford	Greater Oxford and 27% of Oxfordshire CC	35.28	Overspend (£000), Council Tax to Expenditure Ratio, MRP/CFR
	Southern UA	Vale of White Horse, South Oxfordshire, West Berkshire and 37% of Oxfordshire CC		Child Social Care to Expenditure Ratio, Social Care Ratio, Adult Social Care to Expenditure Ratio
	Northern UA	West Oxfordshire, Cherwell and 36% of Oxfordshire CC		Fee Charges to Expenditure Ratio, Change in HRA Reserves, Total Assets / NRE

The data used for this analysis does not reflect the impact of the Fair Funding reforms, but it gives an indication of future financial resilience based on the current financial baseline. The challenges around the ongoing financial sustainability of West Berkshire are clear. Option 1 does not address these challenges and leaves West Berkshire with a very high-risk score in comparison to any of the other proposed authorities. This imbalance is significantly reduced with Option 2 and this represents the lowest overall risk score. Option 3 creates a marked imbalance, this time between the proposed Northern authority and other two proposed authorities and a high overall risk score when compared to Option 2.

[9] The CIPFA financial sustainability tool pulls together data from a range of different data sources, to calculate 24 different metrics which are relevant to a council's financial sustainability. Each of the metrics touches on a different aspect of councils' finances, for example MRP/CFR, reserve levels, and debt ratios. These metrics are then processed to calculate an overall risk score for each council. The data primarily comes from the Revenue Summary and the Capital Outturn Return The latest year of complete financial data we have available is 2023-24

4.6 Overall evaluation and recommendations

Summary of the overall evaluation of each option

Option 2 fully meets the government criteria when they are applied to the Oxfordshire and West Berkshire geography. The proposal would see the creation of two, well balanced unitary authorities, that are at the optimal scale to withstand financial shocks, improve efficiency and drive devolution as part of a new Mayoral Strategic Authority. This is reflected in this option having the highest potential overall transition and transformation recurring annual benefits (£59.8m) when more ambitious change plans are achieved. Not only are these the highest overall benefits, but this proposal directly addresses the Exceptional Financial Support and financial resilience issues in West Berkshire by including them in the proposed Ridgeway authority. The proposal also scores well in terms of improving public services and meeting local need. The scale of the new authorities is ideal in terms of being large enough to benefit from economies of scale and yet small enough to benefit from a more direct connection to local need and provision. Many of the challenges of two unitary solutions are resolved with this proposal because of the fact that the authorities involved already have two sets of upper tier services to act as a foundation for the new councils in ensuring the delivery of safe and legal services from day one, but will still have the catalyst of reorganisation to drive further transformation.

Option 1 partially meets the government criteria when they are applied to the Oxfordshire and West Berkshire geography which has been used as the common basis for this appraisal. Whilst there may be some merits in a single unitary for the whole of Oxfordshire in terms of providing a positive benefit position for transition, in a relatively short timescale, there are a number of major drawbacks with this proposal. Critically, Option 1 would create a relatively large unitary authority for Oxfordshire and leave a very small unitary in West Berkshire. This is considerably below the government guidance level and it is already struggling with financial sustainability issues that would not be addressed by Option 1. Notwithstanding this missed opportunity, a unitary as large as the one proposed in Option 1 could face some considerable challenges. As unitary councils increase in size, the risks of becoming remote from local communities increases significantly. Research also shows that both outcomes and costs of critical services such as Adult Social Care can be less favourable despite the potential benefits of economies of scale. From a transformation perspective, benefits are lower than with the other two options. There is also a material risk that many of the crucial services identified in the Government criteria will not have the same catalyst for change, as with the other options, as they will remain largely unchanged in terms of structural reorganisation.

Option 3 does not meet the government criteria when applied to the same geography in the same way. The proposal would see the creation of one unitary that may have the necessary scale to succeed but two smaller councils that would face significant financial challenges from the outset. These challenges would be compounded by the proposal creating the lowest transition benefits (£9.5m) and a payback period of nearly nine years. The creation of duplicated services in areas such as Adult Social Care would be costly at a time when demand for such services is already causing material challenges for all upper tier councils. There is a significant concern that this option has been developed with a significant focus on the city of Oxford and with inadequate focus on the rest of the Oxfordshire and West Berkshire area and two other authorities. Some of the apparent benefits of the focus on Greater Oxford in terms of improving growth in housing supply also appear flawed as the requirements to redesignate greenbelt land will take significant time delaying any potential benefits. There is also strong local concern about the expansion of the urban area of Oxford and the removal of the greenbelt, and this does not appear to have been adequately reflected in the proposals.

Chapter 5 Vision and Ambition in a nutshell

Quick Chapter Summary

This chapter sets out each of the two new unitary councils' visions and ambitions

The current system cannot meet rising demand or deliver services in ways residents now expect. The vision for reform is clear: councils designed around people and places, not bureaucracy:

- Two new unitary councils that put communities at the heart of decision-making, delivering better outcomes, sustainable services and inclusive growth.
- Prevention-first services, modern digital platforms, and locality-led delivery.
- Large enough to plan effectively for housing, infrastructure and growth, while keeping services local, responsive and accountable.

What people told us

"It is very important for a council to be close wherever possible to the community it seeks to serve."

"Accountability to residents is very important. Large councils have been shown not to be sympathetic to local requirements."

The two-unitary model will:

- **Have ambition that goes beyond reducing costs.** It is about **transforming services** - investing in early intervention and prevention to reduce demand on high-cost services like social care.
- **Provide digital-first platforms that make access simple, modern and efficient.**
- **Establish locality teams** that join up housing, health, social care and community support.
- **Build stronger partnerships** to tackle housing, skills and climate challenges.
- **Put people and neighbourhoods first**: making sure towns, villages and rural areas get a strong voice.
- **Create councils that will be trusted by residents:** moving from councils "talking at people" to genuinely empowering them to shape decisions.
- **Make every pound work harder:** using data and digital tools to cut waste and improve services.
- **Drive economic growth will be inclusive and sustainable**: utilising the benefits of Oxford city but also preventing it from being too focused by also harnessing the high-powered economies across the rural towns, villages and rural areas.

Together, the two councils will give people better services, better value, and a stronger local voice – while helping the whole region grow fairly and sustainably.

5. Vision and Ambition

5.1 Our Proposed Visions

In this chapter, we set out our vision for each new unitary authority and how we see two unitaries as the best way of securing improved outcomes for the communities, places and economies of Oxfordshire, West Berkshire and the broader region.

These long-term visions act as a guide and will help to shape all functions and activities for the new councils, not just the delivery of statutory services. They will enhance accountability and transparency in the decisions taken and provide a 'north star' to direct the changes and transformations needed as the unitary authorities shift from transition to sustained improvement. Our visions and the content of this proposal demonstrates how the proposed authorities will meet the government's six criteria and go beyond this in their ambition to improve the lives of people in Oxfordshire and West Berkshire.

Our vision for the two unitaries

The councils of Oxfordshire and West Berkshire have a long track record of reimagining their functions and approaches, which has been built upon in this LGR proposal. We believe that our two-unitary proposal offers tangible benefits to those who live, learn, work and play in the area, through sensible population size and a shared service ethos.

Our visions are built around being able to respond to place and neighbourhood while operating at a scale that achieves efficient and effective service delivery. We see a clear opportunity to recharge, renew and refocus our activities to deliver growth and change while protecting what is special about the communities and places of Oxfordshire and West Berkshire.

Our Vision for Oxford & Shires

Our vision is that:

- We will create a modern council that will hold communities at the heart of all that we do, promoting neighbourhood-based service delivery championing climate action. Our **localities model** will prioritise participation, partnership and prevention across our city, our market towns and our thriving villages
- Trusted by residents, we will develop our historic towns and urban centres to make them great places to live, work and visit. We will seek to preserve our rural places, building cohesive and sustainable communities across Oxford & Shires, **shifting from community engagement to community empowerment** ensuring no one and nowhere is left behind
- We will harness the global reputation of Oxford City and the economic excellence within North and West Oxfordshire including our world class innovation and engineering heartlands to unlock greater potential and establish genuinely **inclusive growth.** This will support new and existing industries, including our strong visitor economy, across the whole of Oxford & Shires, bringing prosperity and a higher quality of life to all of our residents and communities, across towns and rural places alike.

Our Vision for Ridgeway

Our key vision statements are:

- We will create a **modern and effective** council that puts people and communities at the heart of strong, healthy and robust local government, all while providing a firm base for wider regional growth.
- Our Localities approach will be tailored to **strengthen local voice, build resilience, and celebrate the distinctiveness of our towns and villages**. We will be trusted partners, working hand-in-hand with residents, parish and town councils, and the voluntary sector to co-produce solutions that meet local needs.
- We will be known as a **responsive, high-performing council** that makes the most of its resources. By being digitally confident and evidence-led, we will simplify access to services, ensure fairness across our communities, and make every pound work harder to deliver sustainable, affordable, and effective local government.

"We welcome the proposals for Ridgeway Council, which aim to strengthen and support our local communities. By improving services, investing in sustainable initiatives, and promoting efficiency and collaboration, these measures provide a practical framework for positive change. Greenham Trust looks forward to the opportunities this new council will bring."
Chris Boulton, CEO Greenham Trust.

These ambitions for new unitary authorities for Oxfordshire and West Berkshire are fully complementary. By establishing two new authorities, we can not only deliver well against the government's six criteria, but more importantly, refocus and recharge the role of local government. Modelling service delivery based on two broadly similar-sized organisations will be the best platform for reducing cost uncertainty, engaging and empowering local solutions and underpinning the economic opportunities derived from the larger mayoral authority they will sit within.

5.2 How we will help secure better outcomes

When the government invited Oxfordshire councils to bring forward proposals for new unitary councils in our area, rather than starting with an end goal and engineering the evidence to fit it, we looked at the make-up of local authorities in our area and asked ourselves – how can we make this jigsaw puzzle fit together to achieve the best outcomes for our communities, and help the government achieve its ambitions for reorganisation and ultimately devolution?

Our assessment:

- Including West Berkshire means that we can build on two existing upper-tier authorities and create two right-sized unitary councils with the optimum fit against the government criteria.
- Two councils for an area approaching a million residents at vesting day delivers resilience whilst remaining close to our local communities.
- A proposal for two councils meets the government's criteria and ambitions and has the significant bonus of taking an existing, smaller unitary authority out of receiving exceptional financial support from the government.
- A single unitary council for Oxfordshire meets some of the government criteria for LGR but it will be a very large authority, with housing growth over the next decade, and sheer scale alone will not generate efficiency and stability. It would not take the opportunity to transform and improve services prolonging existing problems of poor service delivery and financially inefficient upper-tier services. Importantly, a large unitary authority would not support local needs of the communities it serves in the most effective manner.
- More than two councils for this area would exacerbate the existing problems of small unitaries the government is seeking to eradicate. It would be costly and financially unsecure. It would not meet the government's criteria, nor would it resolve any of the more significant challenges we face.

Our proposal for new councils will create two distinct but coherent individual unitary councils that work for the communities and provide a firm basis for devolution.

- **Oxford & Shires Council** would be able to tackle the county's most complex social care and children's services challenges, as well as areas with urban deprivation in places such as Oxford, Banbury and Bicester. It would do this while using the transformational opportunities reorganisation brings to allow us to bring existing, costly services in the north of our area back to a rational and manageable scale. It would provide a firm platform for economic and housing growth to help the city of Oxford meet its needs and support the surrounding area.
- **Ridgeway Council** would focus on the needs of its older and more rural communities, improving access to care, housing and local services. It would do this while using existing strong, cost-effective services as a robust base for expansion and transformation. The area's advanced science and high-tech industries will provide a firm basis for the Ridgeway economy, while continuing to support the city and its university, and ultimately contributing to a diverse and prosperous economic growth for the wider Mayoral Strategic Authority Area.
- **Together**, these two authorities would be the right size and would create a more responsive, efficient and sustainable system.

Our two-council proposal is the strongest viable option available. It delivers genuine transformation and value for money and gives residents clearer accountability for local services. With two strong councils working in partnership, it would strengthen local democracy, provide a solid foundation for future devolution, and ensure the whole area benefits from better services, stronger communities and sustainable growth.

Chapter 6 Planning for Devolution – Our Growth Offer in a nutshell

Quick chapter summary

- Our proposal commits to meeting the government's housing aspiration as a foundation and driver of economic growth – in particular on affordable housing, which was also a key issue coming out of our community engagement.
- Oxford & Shires with its high-performing engineering, and Ridgeway with its advanced science, space and nuclear research industries provide two distinct but coherent economies to support strategic economic development at the MSA level.
- We will build on extensive local experience and expertise of using Local Development Orders to speed up planning and unlock economic growth and business development.
- By strengthening accountability and providing the right balance of scale and local knowledge we can ensure growth is aligned with national ambitions and local priorities.

What people told us:

"Focusing on small businesses is vital, attract larger ones where practicable with insistence on long term full time jobs."

"I believe benefits will come from councils supporting economic growth, through transport improvement and attracting investment. All the other priorities will then be achieved through the increased prosperity."

"We need to ensure we are part of a larger geographic footprint i.e. mayoral combined authority to ensure the regional voice we are part of is strong."

"Investment in where we live is key to the wealth and health of our communities"

The two-unitary model will:

- **Have a strong focus on the distinct strengths** of the two proposed council areas and how they can independently and collaboratively contribute to driving growth across the Thames Valley
- **Build on proven track records** of delivery in each proposed area
- **Create councils that are the ideal size as building blocks for the new MSA**

Our two new councils will have a single, accountable role in shaping local places and prioritising investment. Oxford & Shires will harness the economic strengths of Cherwell and West Oxfordshire and manage growth linked to Oxford. Ridgeway will coordinate larger-scale projects across shared growth corridors, ensuring transport, housing and skills investment are aligned.

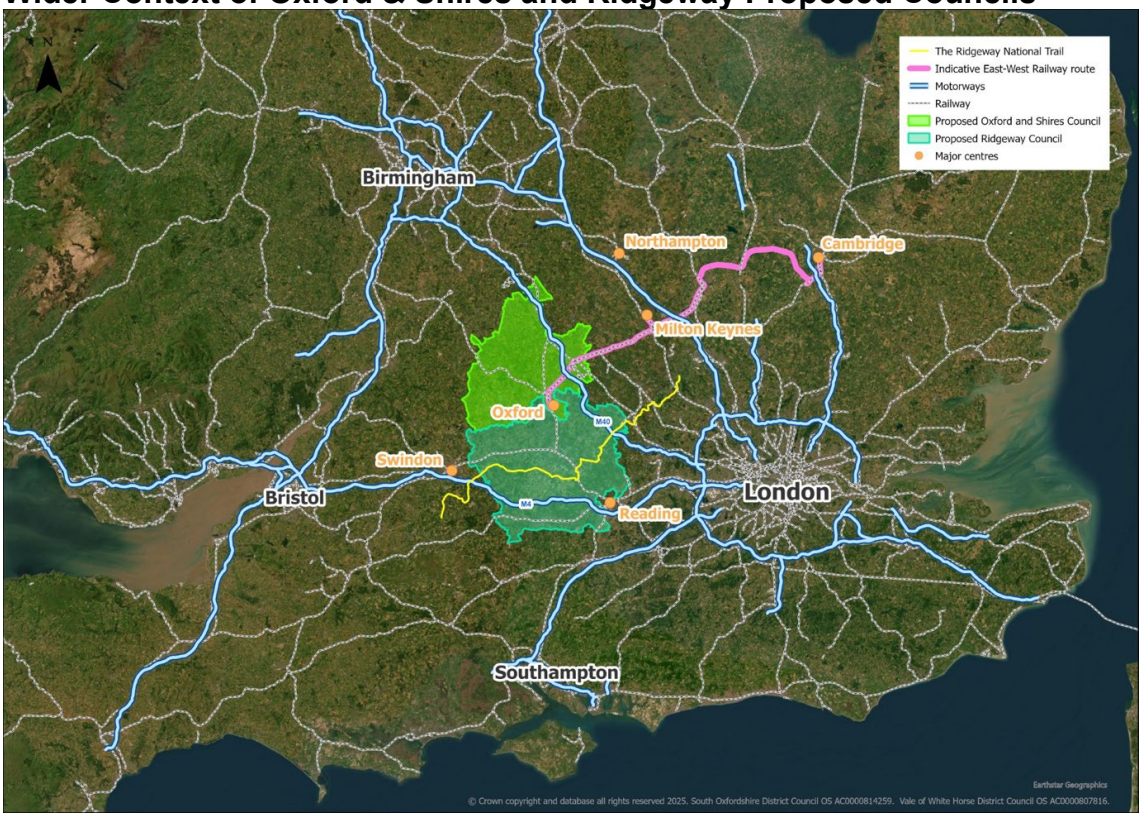
6. Planning for Devolution – Our Growth Offer

6.1 The importance of devolution

Our proposal for two unitary authorities covering Oxfordshire and West Berkshire is a foundational step towards achieving improved growth and devolution across the area.

Formation of a Mayoral Strategic Authority (MSA) for the Thames Valley region, within which Oxford & Shires and Ridgeway sit, affords an opportunity to make growth work for all our communities, create one voice for investment, scale and impact across the Thames Valley and beyond, and deliver on national growth priorities at pace. Oxfordshire and Berkshire's economy is one of significant strength, and devolution is an opportunity to release its potential as a means to drive globally significant economic growth. This strength comes not solely from the cities of Oxford and Reading but from the network of assets that lie in their hinterland across a range of sectors and clusters, and the harnessing of the interrelatedness between the two. These include high-performance engineering at RAF Brize Norton, Banbury, Bicester and the Oxford Technology Park in Kidlington, together with Oxford North and other sites in the city of Oxford, Science Vale at Harwell, Culham, Milton Park and Greenham, nuclear research at Aldermaston and Burghfield, and tourism attractions of Bicester Village and Blenheim Palace. We are seeking to tap into the unfulfilled potential of our assets through devolution to maximise our economic and commercial potential. Oxford & Shires and Ridgeway councils are the right size and with the level of ambition and connection to collaborate with established partners and the MSA to realise the area's potential as a world-class economy.

Wider Context of Oxford & Shires and Ridgeway Proposed Councils



Our ambitious proposition on positive growth and the contribution that Oxford & Shires and Ridgeway councils can make to the government's growth ambition is set out at Appendix D in 'Planning for Devolution – a 'Growth' Offer from the proposed 2 new Unitary Councils' (Authored by spatial and strategic planning specialists Adrian Colwell and Catriona Riddell). This includes an intention to scale up growth delivery by unlocking additional sites.

An MSA will help at a local level by facilitating joined-up strategic planning to tackle regional challenges, including those related to housing and transport, which do not stop at the Oxfordshire-Berkshire borders. This will include the unlocking of stalled sites to increase delivery. Beyond planning, targeted and regionally coordinated support can address shared challenges such as deprivation, poor health outcomes, and skills shortages and mismatches while enabling innovative preventative approaches, such as cohort-based investment. There is a real opportunity for an MSA to provide a dynamic forum where each Unitary Authority, retaining its local leadership and identity, can work in partnership across the region. By engaging effectively with our communities, including businesses, we will be able to build on individual unitary area strengths while amplifying the strengths of partner authorities across the Thames Valley and unlocking more growth than we would be able to on our own. Enterprise Oxfordshire (the former Local Enterprise Partnership) can provide an established, strong voice for the business community for Oxfordshire, from across the private sector and Oxford universities. The Berkshire Shared Prosperity Board offers the same opportunity.

By providing clear strategic leadership for the region and a coordinating role across councils, other public bodies and the private sector, an MSA will counter the current fragmented structures that can slow investment in housing, transport, energy, skills and growth corridors. By unlocking investment at scale, the MSA will help drive greater expansion of key sectors, connect and capitalise on the world-class assets in the region by bridging Oxfordshire's global research base, Berkshire's business ecosystem, and significant human capital to accelerate productivity and growth.

From a national perspective, a Thames Valley MSA offers a credible counterweight to the economic strength of London. It is one of only a few regions that is a net contributor to the UK economy and has the scale and capability to rebalance growth from the capital, even more so when considered in the context of the Oxford to Cambridge Growth Corridor, of which it is an integral part. It is polycentric but interconnected, offering a model of distributed prosperity which can serve as a template for other regions. It is well placed to help solve next-generation national challenges that the country must tackle, particularly in areas around energy, water and housing. The region has a pipeline of projects with partners and plans in place but requires the tools to deliver them at pace and at the scale needed. With an MSA in place, this region can deliver more of what the government wants – building on a strong base in advanced engineering and technology, defence, life sciences, creative industries, digital and NetZero infrastructure, among others. We can work together to accelerate the addressing of national priorities.

How LGR helps with devolution and growth

We recognise that Local Government Reorganisation is an integral step towards delivering the benefits of devolution, in which the relationships between our two proposed unitary authorities with the new Mayor and Combined Authority will be of critical importance.

The government has mandated Spatial Development Strategies in the English Devolution White Paper 2024. These, along with Local Plans, will shape a new era of strategic planning for positive, balanced and sustainable 'Good Growth' where enabling a higher quality of life and wellbeing for residents, reducing health inequality and where the importance of addressing the climate emergency and focusing on nature recovery are recognised as essential outcomes of planning for development and infrastructure.

These planning reforms to both the local and national planning system dovetail with a wider national approach to delivering growth, especially in relation to economic priorities, closing infrastructure gaps (in transport, water, and electricity supply), securing national infrastructure investment, energy supply and environmental recovery. The unitary structure resulting from LGR for Oxfordshire and Berkshire will play a fundamental role in supporting the delivery of devolution ambitions across the region.

6.2 Proposal for devolution for Oxfordshire and West Berkshire within the Thames Valley

Oxfordshire and Berkshire authorities have convened a series of Devolution Summits (November 2024 and January, March and September 2025) to pursue their commitment to a new Thames Valley Mayoral Strategic Authority and an associated devolution deal with government. Swindon Borough Council has also participated in these discussions and has stated its aspiration to be part of an MSA for the Thames Valley region from the outset. Buckinghamshire is open to collaborative working on joint economic growth initiatives, although they have declined an invitation to participate in a Thames Valley MSA.

Two substantive pieces of work have been jointly commissioned to inform the formation of a proposal for a Thames Valley MSA to government, and these have provided clarity on the scale of opportunity for the region and the scope for it to contribute even further to national prosperity priorities.

The first of these commissions by Inner Circle Consulting makes an independent ‘case for change’. Early analysis identifies that the Thames Valley region’s economic success has masked persistent challenges, including a rural-urban divide, housing pressures, fragmented infrastructure and skills mismatches. It noted that a new MSA offers a platform to overcome institutional fragmentation and develop collaborative solutions that deliver real benefits for residents across the region, respecting local identities and uniting communities around shared goals.

As discussions have progressed, a clear commitment to collaborate on vision, purpose and governance of the MSA has been made. A draft vision has been developed for a proposed Thames Valley MSA, which seeks to build on individual area strengths to make a compelling case for the potential collective impact of an MSA with the clear goal of driving economic innovation and inclusive growth through devolution.

A second joint commission by Metro-Dynamics provided a ‘deeper dive’ into the data that sits behind the Inner Circle Consulting ‘case for change’. Titled ‘Thames Valley Devolution: Evidence Base (Sectoral Complexity, Industrial Composition and Economic Geography) it provides insights into important indicators related to sectoral complementarity, industrial make-up and the economic geography across the Thames Valley region (Berkshire, Buckinghamshire, Oxfordshire and Swindon). These are provided to aid in reaching an agreement on a practical geographical area for the MSA and foster early agreement on how devolution might benefit local communities while also driving national growth.

Its analysis found that the Thames Valley ‘does not currently function as an integrated economic area, but its constitutes share many positives including equivalent economic complexity and sectoral composition ... Such complexity reflects not only the diversity of sectors present but also the depth of specialisation and interconnectivity between them’. It suggests that the Thames Valley region is well positioned to absorb economic shocks, pivot towards emerging technologies, and sustain long-term growth.

In summary, a clear steer is provided that deeper economic integration across the Thames Valley is key to sustaining growth and global competitiveness. It cautions that the region’s growth trajectory is uncertain. While the region is home to some of the UK’s most advanced and productive economies and demonstrates high levels of economic complexity, sectoral diversity and export strength, there are nationally significant centres for innovation, resilience and growth, and they are not merely strong local economies, the M4 corridor is showing signs of fatigue. The divergence highlights the need to move beyond fragmented local approaches and towards a more integrated regional strategy.

Qualifying Oxfordshire and Berkshire's position that a Thames Valley MSA provides us a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to unlock the region's full economic potential, the commission offers us a recommendation that the MSA sets a framework for doing so. Through coordinated governance and strategy, the sectoral complementarity can be harnessed to drive resilient and globally competitive growth.

Oxfordshire and Berkshire, within which the proposed Oxford & Shires and Ridgeway councils will sit, is demonstrating collective leadership to deliver a devolution solution which drives local economic development, generates wealth and fosters local prosperity for our communities.

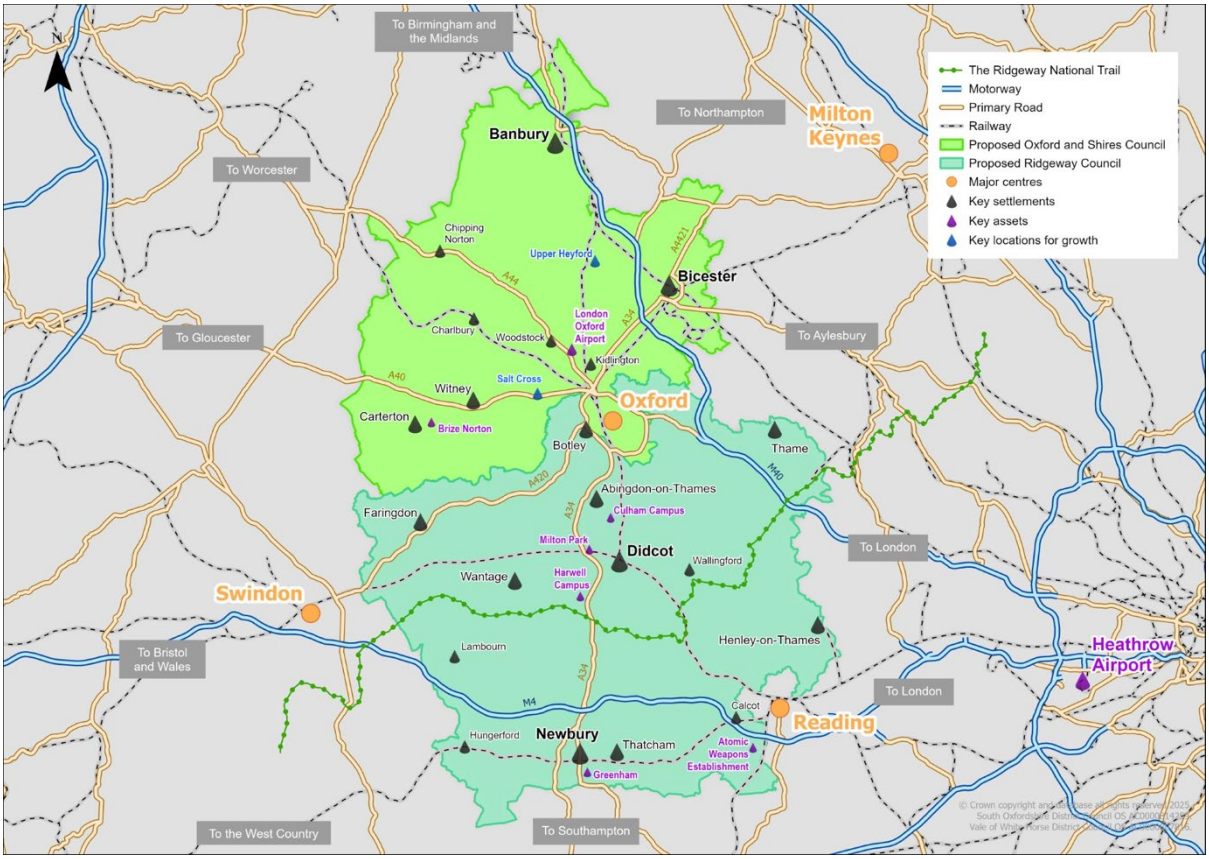
6.3 The benefits to devolution of two unitary councils in Oxfordshire and West Berkshire

In devising the Oxford & Shires and Ridgeway Council proposals, careful consideration has been given to the strategic and geographic context, national growth priorities and local ambitions to ensure that Local Government Reorganisation in Oxfordshire and Berkshire enables the devolution benefits for the area of the two councils, for the region and into the Oxford to Cambridge Growth Corridor and beyond.

Our statement of ambition and intent titled 'Planning for Devolution – A 'Growth' Offer from the 2 new Unitary Councils' (Appendix D authored by spatial and strategic planning specialists Adrian Colwell and Catriona Riddell) is a clear demonstration of our understanding of the opportunity afforded by devolution and our absolute commitment to working with the new mayor to plan for and deliver growth for our local area – harnessing our local knowledge of the opportunities and challenges to deliver good growth and the social, environmental and economic benefits that this will be bring our area and its residents. We want to establish two new councils, which will apply lessons from the past and take new approaches to sustain a dynamic economy in each unitary council, not deliver more of the same on a bigger footprint.

Oxford & Shires and Ridgeway Council geographies are based on a set of corridors (including A34, A44, A40, M40, A420 and M4) which link the current Oxfordshire districts and existing West Berkshire Unitary Council together. All are located in the Oxford to Cambridge Growth Corridor and the proposed Thames Valley MSA region, in which the two proposed unitary councils will sit. The ambitious 'Growth Offer' defines how the new mayor and the two unitary councils could interact and makes proposals for areas of collaboration between the mayor and each unitary council to deliver a significant package of growth at pace.

Spatial development context of Oxford & Shires and Ridgeway Councils – a corridor approach



The proposals recognise the importance of the Oxford City economy, as well as the surrounding economies of the four districts and West Berkshire which, taken together, total twice the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of the City.

According to data published in June 2025, the Gross Value Added (GVA) per hour worked in West Berkshire was estimated at £50.80, compared to the UK average of approximately £38.10. Similarly, West Berkshire continues to demonstrate economic strength, with a GDP per capita of £62,603, representing a figure which is double that of the national average, placing the district among the top-performing local authorities in the UK.

By taking a networked approach, our aim is to strengthen the joint economy of all of Oxfordshire and West Berkshire.

In addition to working with the mayor, the two unitary councils will work together on cross-boundary issues to deliver the best outcomes for the area. Current Oxfordshire and Berkshire structures provide potential platforms for continued joint working with external partners, for example, the former Oxfordshire and Berkshire Local Enterprise Partnership, Enterprise Oxfordshire as a representative body for business, the Universities and skills providers, and Destination Management Organisations in relation to tourism and the Berkshire Shared Prosperity Board. We will advocate a strong ‘place’ voice for our areas on the regional and national stage.

Some of the proposed growth opportunities in our ‘Growth Offer’ are common to both new unitary councils, and we also set out the common features and ambitions for accelerated economic growth and housing delivery, including a focus on affordable housing to generate the social benefits associated with this for communities, alongside securing investment in transport and other infrastructure priorities.

Within the ‘Growth Offer’, each unitary council proposes an offer which reflects the unique strength of the locality and its relationship with and potential contribution to the Oxford-Cambridge Growth Corridor in which each sit.

Both new unitary councils will draw upon the growth record and innovation experience of the current councils. In developing the 'Growth Offer', the councils have considered how to ensure the proposals are sustainable and support 'good growth'; support major sectors and lead to a close engagement with business; take forward housing innovation and responses to climate change; and identify infrastructure priorities critical to enable growth in both unitary areas.

The offer is defined in terms of:

a) Meeting housing need
b) History of the relationship of the composite authorities
c) Our Growth aspirations
d) Maximising our economic and commercial potential
e) Our transport and infrastructure priorities

Ridgeway Council’s geographic and institutional positioning provides a unique strength to this two-unitary proposal for Local Government Reorganisation at the meeting of regional aims for the area. It acts as a bridge between Berkshire and Oxfordshire, anchoring the success of a future Thames Valley MSA and enhancing local productivity across the entire geography. In doing so, it offers a powerful vehicle for realising the transformative potential of devolution in the region.

Our commitment to delivering on devolution

In working with the MSA, our focus on effective placemaking and delivering new communities will include consideration of the environment, health, and stakeholder engagement to ensure that we support an inclusive economy. In so doing, we make the following commitments:

Offer on Economy – build on strengths, key sectors and clusters

- Provide more active support for the skills and training measures essential to economic growth and the individual and social benefits that this will bring.
- Establish a process of engagement with businesses on strategic planning matters and how the local economy is evolving, not just consultation on Local Plan stages.

Offer on Housing – meeting government housing aspirations, especially on affordable housing delivery. Delivering a joined-up approach to economic growth, infrastructure and housing delivery, recognising that quality housing, including affordable housing, is essential to meet the needs of industry and commerce.

- Increase the provision of more affordable housing to support economic growth and generate the social benefits of this for communities.
- Support housing innovation, self-build and climate positive housing.
- Place responding to climate change at the centre of our proposals, applying the lessons from the net-zero approval of the Salt Cross new settlement.

Ask on Infrastructure – transport (road and rail), power and water

- Secure investment in a programme of agreed infrastructure priorities, in transport, expansion of the energy grid and in upgrading essential water and sewerage infrastructure.
- Secure investment into a series of bus and rail transport corridors to create a new generation of transport hubs to enable growth and mixed-use development to reduce the need to travel.
- Delivering transport and digital infrastructure to drive connectivity to maximise economic growth.

Initial priorities of the two councils model include:

- A focus on regeneration and growth of our market towns, using design codes to secure high-quality development.
- Take measures to tackle climate change in our housing, transport and economic development initiatives
- Support the growth of Oxford without the wholesale opening up of the Green Belt by supporting the growth of a new town at the former USAF Airbase Heyford Park, with improved transport links to Oxford. Take measures to speed up the planning process, from consents to proposed development and the making of Local Plans – giving more certainty in the planning process.
- Use Local Development Orders to support economic development at all business parks across the two unitary authorities, based on the effective Milton Park model, with a commitment to a 10 working day planning approval. This new approach to planning will have the effect of 'derisking' planning as a factor in investment decisions and speeding the delivery of economic projects in critical sectors. Greenham in West Berkshire provide a similar example.
- Play a full part in the development of the Oxford – Cambridge Growth Corridor, with support for a programme of measures designed to support its development as a driver for economic growth and prosperity.

Public Service Reform under a Unitary and Mayoral Arrangement

Turning to the delivery of public services under a new regional MSA for the Thames Valley and unitary structure, there is an important opportunity to unify public services, where we currently have a disjointed set of boundaries that do not align with each other, causing confusion for residents and challenges for public sector delivery. The government has specified that in time the Mayor will take responsibility for wider public services in the area, potentially including the Police and Crime Commissioner and Fire and Rescue services. Shared working for efficiencies and a more sensible geography that residents can understand, and that is better aligned to local communities, could be explored.

Under a two-unitary model, we would have unitary councils in place that have both the scale to support our public sector partners, while also retaining a local focus to support partners in delivering local community needs. This would apply to:

- **Police -** we would be better aligned to our communities to aid in crime prevention and improving public safety by using the models set out in this proposal.
- **Fire and Rescue** – we can engage at a local community level to support community and neighbourhood safety and resilience, and emergency planning.
- **Environment Agency** – we can focus on the different and specific areas of the Thames catchment covered by the two unitary council proposals. This would allow strategic and practical intervention on flood prevention, which has been lacking in Oxfordshire under a county-wide model

- **Health** – by having geographies better aligned to communities and of a sensible size, we would be able to focus on prevention work for the social care sector and NHS services. We expect our innovative approach to Adult Social Care and Children's Services will have a positive impact for a range of public sector partners.

There would be opportunities for exciting new approaches to partnership working across the public sector, not just those above, with our approach to creating new, ambitious councils keen to explore the best ways to deliver services. This would build on the existing track records of district councils in Oxfordshire that have formed strong community and public sector partnerships to deliver locally and nationally significant work. An example of this is the Oxfordshire Migration Partnership involving the Thames Valley Police, Fire and Rescue Service, the Health and Voluntary and Community sectors and all local authorities. Ridgeway will provide an anchor for Oxfordshire and Berkshire and will provide an opportunity to develop interventions based on the experience and best practice of both county areas. It will help drive partnership working across the MSA and wider public services.

This proposal supports the current direction of travel for the Oxfordshire Fire and Rescue Service, whereby we are working towards a harmonised approach across the Thames Valley to include systems, equipment and procedures. In Berkshire, arrangements are already in place for the harmonisation of equipment and staff. We believe devolution provides an opportunity for further harmonisation within the proposed MSA to enhance efficiencies and follow a number of areas nationally that have successfully taken this approach. A transitional arrangement would be required, where the Oxford & Shires Council would manage the Oxfordshire Fire and Rescue service on an interim basis on behalf of the county while any restructures take place. The practicalities of this arrangement would be explored in detail during the transitional period leading up to vesting day.

6.4 Making it Happen – Support Required

Delivering the benefits of Local Government Reorganisation for Oxfordshire and West Berkshire and the creation of a Thames Valley MSA go hand in hand. Our ask of government, therefore, is fourfold:

1. There is a synergy between the establishment of a new unitary model for local government in Oxfordshire and Berkshire and that of a Thames Valley MSA. Enabling alignment of the establishment of each structure will help unlock the benefits of each.
2. Request prioritisation of Oxfordshire, Berkshire and the Thames Valley for implementation of devolution – we are a net contributor to the Exchequer and wish to increase this value expediently.
3. We need assistance with developing an effective model to attract and secure inward investment to help realise our collective aim of local 'good' growth, which benefits our communities and the region. This includes contributing to the achievement of the Oxford to Cambridge Growth Corridor ambitions and the national economic benefits that will flow from this.
4. Share the geography that the Spatial Development Strategies will apply to. This will enable us to align Local Plans and transport plans from an early stage and also facilitate further discussions around the geography and governance as part of our Thames Valley MSA proposal to government by the end of 2025.

With this support and certainty from government, we aim to progress a submission to government for a Thames Valley MSA in tandem with this LGR proposal submission for a two-unitary council structure for Oxfordshire and West Berkshire. We are motivated and committed to delivering the mutual benefits of each tier of local government for our area and realising the benefits of these at the most local level.

Chapter 7 Service Delivery and Transformation in a nutshell

Quick Chapter Summary

- **The Oxford & Shires and Ridgeway option is specifically designed to achieve transformational improvements to services as well as ensuring continuity of provision from day one.**
- We will harness the best of current working arrangements and use LGR as a catalyst for significant improvement across all of our service areas.
- Our focus is on the services highlighted in the government criteria, but we have also responded to what our communities have told us are the most important services to them. For each service area we set out our proposed future model and why we believe it is the right approach for Oxfordshire and West Berkshire.

What people told us:

“Schools, training and education, affordable housing, local transport, children services needs investment now to avoid a lost generation.”

“Housing and affordable housing is in such a shortage locally most residents do not realise this. Helping families and individuals effectively and reduce homelessness and a record increase in emergency accommodation is frustrated by a lack of joined up working between housing and adult/children’s services. So much could be achieved if these stressful high-cost services worked together including looking at ways of developing new approaches and strategies.”

“I live in a rural area which is poorly served by the county council due to being on the border of Berkshire and Oxfordshire. I believe the opportunity of creating ‘The Ridgeway Council’ would allow for a better and keener focus on local concerns, which include flooding and the incredibly poor conditions of our roads.”

The two-unitary model will:

1. **Prioritise prevention and focus on locality working:** place-based teams joining up housing, health, care and community support to prevent escalation into high-cost services.
2. **Protect statutory services:** guarantee safe and legal services from vesting day and ensure continuity for children’s and adult social care, homelessness and regulatory functions.
3. **Transform the experience that people have when they interact with their council** including a single digital gateway for residents.

7. Service Delivery and Transformation

7.1 Introduction

A key component of achieving our vision statements and ambitions is the way we will design and deliver local government services by using both our economies of scale and our deep insight into localised demand to find the best ways to meet it. We will design these with authentic collaboration amongst our partners, residents and service users, agreeing on delivery models that bring the best of our collective efforts. Central to our approach to all services is that we will create viable services for our two councils without the need to share services to be financially viable. Where sharing makes sense, we will investigate and develop these opportunities fully but we do not start from a position of being dependent on sharing to be sustainable.

It is paramount that these services are ready to deliver on day one of the new authorities. We have sought expert advice from a range of sources on how best to aggregate and disaggregate existing services, and to re-establish them with our principles at their core. In this section, we consider the transition efforts (during the initial phase of change), our aspirations for key services, and the transformation needed to achieve this (the latter phase).

As per the priority areas outlined within the White Paper, we have focussed our attention on five crucial service areas:

- Adult Services
- Children's Services
- Education and SEND
- Homelessness
- Public Safety and Public Health

We have also considered future transformation opportunities for other services that will be materially impacted by reorganising, such as Planning, Economic Development, Highways and Transport, Waste and Street Scene, Leisure, Parks, and Communities and Culture.

The existing local authorities that make up each of the proposed two unitaries are already well placed to transition and then transform these services. The Ridgeway Council proposal will build on South Oxfordshire's and Vale of White Horse's expertise in delivering community-focussed, district-level services in close partnership, while integrating with West Berkshire's well-established unitary service delivery. It will benefit from increased geographic scale while remaining local enough to relate to local communities and be responsive to communities' needs.

Cherwell, West Oxfordshire and Oxford City share a service delivery ethos, meaning many services are currently provided in-house or through council-owned companies. This commonality offers a coherent base on which to merge existing functions with those currently provided by the County Council as the Oxford & Shires Council.

Through recent public engagement with our key stakeholders, including residents, communities, businesses, and town and parish councils, we have received clear feedback that our communities want to receive better services than they currently do, particularly in areas such as highway maintenance, strategic planning, and adult social care. We will ensure frequent and comprehensive engagement with residents, partners, and stakeholders. This further engagement will help to shape the design of new services before they are finalised and implemented. Our clear and coordinated communication plans will facilitate a full understanding of the LGR process, aiming to maintain and further improve the trust of service users throughout the transition period.

Through this proposal, we highlight opportunities for transformation, improvements and efficiencies across service delivery. In some cases, services could function better at a mayoral strategic authority scale, and we could strengthen locality working to retain close relationships with communities.

Both proposed unitary authorities can deliver significant contractual savings, primarily through consolidation, standardisation, and increased buying power across a wider population and budgetary baseline. Key areas where savings could be realised include:

- Aggregated contracts for goods and services across the current authorities which make up the proposed geography – securing better pricing through bulk purchasing.
- Reduction in duplicate contracts and renegotiation under more favourable terms.

The two-unitary proposal creates the right structural opportunity and with the right commissioning reform, prevention programmes, workforce stabilisation, digital innovation, and careful transition management, the savings and resilience benefits will be maximised.

Local government across Oxfordshire and West Berkshire faces profound demographic, demand and financial challenges over the next two decades. At the same time, residents and communities expect more visible leadership, stronger local accountability, and services designed around their distinct needs. We aim to meet these challenges through modernised, collaborative, impactful local public services.

Transformation Elements required to deliver savings for people services

Commissioning & Market Reform	• Strategic market shaping to stabilise fragile residential/nursing markets • Block contracts, fostering hubs, and IFA conversion to reduce volatility • Outcomes-based commissioning to contain costs and improve sufficiency
Prevention & Reablement	• Home First and reablement-first approaches to reduce long-term admissions • Family hubs and early intervention in children's services to reduce demand escalation
Workforce Transformation	• Joint recruitment pipelines, retention incentives, and standardised practice models • Reduction in reliance on agency staff, with shared training and workforce strategies across both UAs.
Digital & Data-Driven Services	• Digital-first models: resident care accounts, AI-enabled triage, predictive analytics • Improved transparency and quality monitoring (particularly in Ridgeway markets).
Partnership & Integration	• Align with NHS/ICS footprints for joint commissioning in ASC, SEND and public health • Embed stronger VCSE and community partnerships for place-based delivery
Financial Management & Risk Pooling	• Recalibration of unit costs to national benchmarks • Pooling risks across balanced UAs to absorb demand shocks and sustain long-term financial viability

Note: these elements are set out in commissioned research undertaken by PeopleToo - more detail is available in Appendix E.

7.2 Adult Social Care

Our proposed approach

This section covers all social care functions for working age adults and older people, including Information and Advice, Prevention and Early Intervention, individual and carer's needs assessments, safeguarding, direct payments and housing support.

We believe that the two-unitary model provides a better service delivery platform to: [10]

- manage future demand by embedding locally driven preventative approaches across all Adult Social Care services and reducing long-term care costs.
- fully embed place-based and neighbourhood delivery models (working closely with the community and voluntary sector, and the NHS), improving our ability to tailor services to local needs and capacity that delivers a better, more sustainable workforce model.
- further develop and enhance the strategic commissioning model and approach to market management to deliver more efficient and effective local care and support services.

Why we believe this is the right approach

The current geography of Oxfordshire and the way in which Adult Services are organised means that service users in many parts of the county are remote and harder to reach, with the population equally spread throughout the county. The proposed smaller authorities would offer the opportunity to locate teams closer to residents, decrease travel times and increase the time available to provide services. Oxfordshire County Council's 2025 CQC assessment report highlighted inconsistencies in adult social care support provided for carers, especially in rural areas.[11] The report also indicated that people supported by adult social care who live in more rural parts of the county face barriers and inequalities.

The challenges faced by both proposed new unitary areas are stark but differ in nature. The proposed authorities will enable more tailored approaches to address these different challenges. Oxford & Shires will need to focus on managing high-cost, complex needs and reshaping the fragile provider markets.[12] Ridgeway will require a focus on ageing models, rural access and reducing older adult care admissions. Oxfordshire demonstrates a 'low demand, high cost' profile, with fewer service users than comparable areas but significantly higher per-person costs driven by market pressures, workforce shortages, and complex needs.[13] Without reform, demographic growth (24–27% aged 65+ by 2035) will severely compromise the financial sustainability of Adult Social Care.[14]

How we will achieve this

For this, the design and delivery of services must be tailored to the two geographies, but we have a shared vision. This is aligned with the Government's 10-Year Health Plan and CQC's assessment framework for local authority assurance. Our Adult Services principles and the way they translate into transformation opportunities are:

[10] For more information on the service delivery models that we believe will provide better service delivery models, see Appendix E
[11] See Oxfordshire County Council's 2025 CQC Report for further information
[12] For future trend data, refer to Appendix E
[13] For further information, see Appendix E
[14] For future demographic trend data, see Appendix E

Principle	Transformation opportunity
Person-centred – designed around the goals and strengths of individuals, families and carers	Multi-disciplinary triage at the front door will help understand an individual's complete needs and strengths, ensuring people are directed to universal or short-term solutions before long-term care is considered.
Integrated – joined-up across health, housing, welfare, and community support	Aligned to Primary Care Networks/ICS footprints, co-locating social workers, Occupational Therapists, NHS staff, and voluntary sector partners.
Preventative – focused on keeping people well and independent for longer	Strategic commissioning and market management at the unitary scale will adopt outcome-based contracts, micro-care ecosystems, and strong joint commissioning with the NHS/public health.
Community-based – delivered close to where people live, reflecting the diversity of needs across urban and rural areas	Carers at the Heart, adopting structured engagement with unpaid carers and service users, providing expanded access to respite, training, and peer networks.
Digitally enabled – using data, technology, and innovation to improve access, experience, efficiency, and outcomes	Including resident care accounts, online self-assessment, AI-enabled triage, and assistive technologies to support independence.

The proposed geography for both will be large enough to benefit from the efficiencies afforded by integrated commissioning; streamlining contracts, pooling budgets, and prioritising preventative services, yet still small enough to ensure truly personalised and local care.[15]

The Ridgeway unitary will benefit by using West Berkshire's successful quality assurance framework to standardise quality assurance processes, while employing Oxfordshire's robust model for performance monitoring and complaints resolution to ensure accountability. West Berkshire Council Adult Services are currently rated 'Good' by the Care Quality Commission and are characterised as having strong leadership and safeguarding. This will provide a strong platform for building improved Adult Services in the Ridgeway area.

The Oxford & Shires and Ridgeway unitaries will work together closely when redesigning services, applying shared learning and common methodologies where appropriate, while tailoring the design to their respective demographics and geography. There are opportunities to combine West Berkshire's lower cost of care for working age adults with South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse, enabling the ability to manage the market in a different and more localised way.

This will help bolster service resilience and the ability to better withstand financial shocks. The unitary authorities will seek to share staffing resources across localities to reduce pressure, balance caseloads, and improve continuity of care. This will, in turn, bolster workforce resilience and avoid the risks of over-centralisation or fragmentation.

[15] For further reference to the proposed efficiencies see Appendix E

Oxford & Shires will aim to retain a small centralised coordinating function, overseeing discrete locality teams that will build relationships with complementing partner agencies. Both will implement a digital inclusion strategy to address inequality and ensure access to digital care tools and portals. This will reduce some pressure on the workforce caused by increased demand, while also tackling important equity issues.

Both unitary authority models are committed to strengthening partnerships. By working across our combined geography, we will improve coordination with health services, housing, the community and voluntary sector, and carers' organisations to provide holistic, joined-up care for our residents.

Case Study: Strengthening independence through integrated home care
West Berkshire Council has demonstrated strong adult social care practice by greatly reducing delays in hospital discharge through effective workforce development in the home care sector. By supporting recruitment, sponsorship, and training, the council ensures timely access to intermediate care beds and home care services. This proactive approach enables people to return home swiftly, promoting independence and reducing long-term care dependency. Carers report improved access to respite and replacement care, with support tailored to both planned and emergency needs. These efforts reflect West Berkshire's commitment to person-centred care and responsive service delivery.

7.3 Children's Services

Our proposed approach

This section covers all children's social care functions , including referral and triage, early intervention and targeted early help, assessment, multi-agency safeguarding arrangements, Children in Need, Children on Child Protection Plans, and the full range of Corporate Parenting and leaving care services, as well as specialised services including but not exclusively children with disabilities, young carers, youth justice and Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children.

We believe that the two-unitary model provides a more agile and responsive service delivery platform to:[16]

- deliver on the government's Family First reform agenda
- manage future demand by coproducing and delivering locally driven tailored preventative approaches across a place, thereby reducing the need for statutory intervention
- fully embed place-based and local community delivery models (working closely with the community and voluntary sector and statutory partners including the NHS and police), improving our ability to co-design services to address local needs and manage capacity in a way that delivers an agile more sustainable workforce model
- further develop and enhance the strategic commissioning approach to more effectively manage the market delivering more responsive, efficient and effective local care and support services

[16] For information on the proposed model for children's service see Appendix E

Why we believe this is the right approach
The two-unitary proposal represents credible and sustainable reform. It provides a balanced scale to deliver financially resilient, high-quality children's services, aligned with national reforms. By reorganising this way, we have the best opportunity to:

- Respond effectively and efficiently to meet the needs of children and families at the earliest opportunity supporting family networks within local communities
- Tackle Oxfordshire's increasing costs
- Shield West Berkshire from small-scale volatility
- Create a commissioning platform capable of reshaping sufficiency, stabilising markets, and achieving long-term savings

Despite considerable strengths in current practice (both rated 'Good' by Ofsted), Oxfordshire and West Berkshire experience challenges. Similar to adult services, Oxfordshire experiences a 'low demand, high cost' situation- while the number of Looked After Children (CLA) in Oxfordshire is 29% below the England average, weekly outturn costs are significantly higher - £2,500 per week compared to £2,193 (statistical neighbours) and £2,060 (South East average).[17] This is driven by higher complexity and fragile placement markets. Residential costs are lower than peers (7% below England) but rose by 31–42% in one year, showing acute volatility.

In West Berkshire, CLA unit costs are 14% below those of its statistical neighbours; however, as a small authority, it will struggle to absorb demand shocks.[18] Workforce costs are 30% above the national average, and residential costs rose 42% in one year, highlighting market uncertainty.[19] Together, these dynamics create a fragile baseline. West Berkshire do though have relatively high numbers of children placed with West Berkshire Foster carers and are having significant success in line with the Family First reform placing children with kinship carers thereby increasing stability for children and reducing the overall cost of care.

We believe that the two-unitary proposal begins to address these issues, while still requiring national-level system change to ensure long-term service sustainability. The reduced population size gives a more manageable scale than a single county unitary, with the diversified footprint spreading demand, reducing volatility, and increasing resilience to demographic shocks. Our modelling suggests that fostering sufficiency could improve towards 67–70%, reducing reliance on high-cost residential care.[20] Crucially, national benchmarking suggests that current authorities with a population of 350–500k delivering Children's Services achieve the best performance and Ofsted outcomes.

How we will achieve this
To achieve our ambitions, the design and delivery of services must be tailored for the two geographies, with our shared vision. This is based on both a deep understanding of our communities and the policy direction outlined by central government's 'Keeping children safe, helping families thrive'. Our Children's Services principles and examples of the way they translate into transformation opportunities are:

[17] Costings within Oxfordshire can be further seen in Appendix E
[18] Costings within West Berkshire can be further seen in Appendix E
[19] Workforce costings for children's services can be further seen in Appendix E
[20] For information on our modelling, see Appendix E

Principle	Transformation opportunity
Community-centred early help – efforts made to identify solutions before issues require statutory intervention	Embed integrated services like family hubs, peer support, and Family Network Meetings to increase kinship placements, while improving partnership arrangements and consistency with the NHS and voluntary sectors through a more comprehensive place-based working model. Efforts will focus on expanding early intervention networks using West Berkshire's refreshed model.
Tailored – recognising the different requirements in urban/rural geographies	Shaping services based on specific demographic factors (e.g. higher rates of deprivation in Oxford City, sparser populations further afield).
Co-designed – learning from service users and those around them, not assuming we know best	Youth engagement will be strengthened by expanding West Berkshire's successful Children in Care and SEND engagement. Building on coproduction and activity delivered through Public Health and the Building Communities Together model across Ridgeway and reviewing existing practice across Oxfordshire to build on what's already in place.
Outcomes-focused – ensuring all provision delivers for residents, not just reducing short-term costs	Shift to outcomes-based contracts, along with block arrangements and tailored arrangements e.g. sibling discounts that stabilise residential market costs and improve transparency and joint working.
High-functioning workforce – helping our staff do their best work	Implement an integrated workforce strategy, with shared training, strengthened Principal Social Worker oversight, reduced agency reliance, and Social work academy driven workforce pipelines with universities and training providers. Social work practice will be enhanced through the expansion of the social work academy including the development of tailored support including the further development of joint training hubs and practice forums.
Multisectoral – close working with providers, and risk pooling across two balanced authorities to mitigate CLA demand shocks	Strengthen our relationship with private sector providers through the development of Strategic Partnerships to better understand and respond to needs with potential for cost reduction, further enhanced through inter-unitary commissioning and close alliance with the Regional Care Collaborative.

The proposed Oxford & Shires unitary authority should focus on addressing cost volatility, tribunal challenges, and market sufficiency.[21] The Ridgeway unitary authority could consolidate strengths in fostering, parental engagement, and prevention, while tackling workforce cost pressures and improving SEN Support. Together, they can learn from one another.

[21] Children's Service current cost volatility, tribunal challenges and market sufficiency can be seen in Appendix E.

7.4 Education and SEND

Our proposed approach

We have a great opportunity to create a new, smaller, and more agile set of services, better connected to the needs of children and families, the local market and communities, and more focused on complexity drivers of demand in this geography. If implemented in line with our vision, this should result in lower, more consistently and closely managed costs and improved outcomes for all children.[22] We believe the two-unitary proposal is better placed to drive the inclusion agenda across the education sector including for children with SEND and to tackle the growing deficit in the High Needs block of the Dedicated Schools Grant. Ensuring that children and young people are appropriately educated and supported within their communities is central to this inclusive agenda, while building trust between parents, local schools and the council whilst enhancing and strengthening the effectiveness of the mainstream offer.

Why we believe this is the right approach

We believe our two-unitary model provides the balance needed to further strengthen our ability to address local needs with local solutions, manage the provider market, whilst further strengthening the strong bonds with the communities we serve. This forensic understanding of local need and responsive organisational right-sizing will expedite our market shaping and strategic commissioning approaches thereby better managing demand at the right level in the right place leading to reduced costs.[23]

In particular, the two unitary authorities are well placed to drive a 'relationship-reset' with the community of SEND children, their parents and the wider education and care systems, which will pave the way for thoughtfully codesigned local early help provision that addresses need while being cost-effective.[24] The fresh start offered in establishing new unitary authorities will allow us to return to first principles in the way we engage and support.

There are increasing calls nationally for a radical rebalancing of the system towards early intervention and prevention support. The close relationships that the two new unitary authorities will develop with their communities will drive this process locally, targeting community based preventative services, securing and allocating investment aligned to need and listening to communities as to how services should be accessed.

School capital investment, pupil place planning and SEND place planning are best delivered by the new unitary authorities.[25] Their geography allows for local and responsive approaches to meet the inclusion of all children at a local level. The impact on home to school transport is expected to be positive, reducing costs where children are best educated close to home within their own community where appropriate. Solutions to local education for all children will be coproduced across the education and SEND system including all relevant stakeholders.

[22] For further details on the two-unitary modelling for education and SEND, refer to Appendix E
[23] To further understand how the two unitary model will further our market shaping and strategic commissioning approaches to reduce demand and cost refer to Appendix E
[24] For information on the relationship reset refer to Appendix E
[25] Further information on how the new unitary authorities can best delivery school capital investment, pupil place planning and SEND place planning refer to Appendix E

How we will achieve this

This approach will be delivered through principle-led transformation focusing on the 'relationship-reset' with the community of SEND children, their parents and the wider education and care systems, ensuring that the changes in the initial transition period and beyond are grounded in a shared understanding of the goal:

Principle	Transformation opportunity
Inclusive – championing the needs of all, including those traditionally underserved children and young people with Social, Emotional, and Mental Health difficulties, autism and complex needs	Adopting an inclusion agenda that supports families to access peer support and local community support on a universal and targeted supported services level. Supporting the needs of children in mainstream education in line with research and the government's emerging agenda on SEND.
Preventative – giving children and young people the best start in life	Challenge ourselves to protect and increase investment in services that minimise future need, through robust multi-agency support for the very youngest children, supporting the development of and access to intervention that supports school readiness and delivers whole-family assistance.
Proportionate – ensuring good quality universal services, with enhanced tailored support for those who need it most	Reviewing and refining the balance of services available to all including targeted preventative activities, and high-intensity support. Measuring the impact of intervention on all target groups.
Assembling – being proactive in the provider market, improving the public-private partnership	Become more active in convening providers, sharing our strategic direction, testing changes and driving costs down through improved assurance.
Predictive – using data and digital capabilities to support decision making and transparency	Enable the unification of Oxfordshire's strengths in analytics and statutory focus with West Berkshire's contextual insights. This will facilitate the creation of robust, real-time performance dashboards.
Pooling – shifting the local public sector partnership from agreeing joint strategies to committing to action through shared resources	Gathering assets and budgets to improve services like SEND provision, using Delivering Better Value frameworks and integrated funding strategies. Joint commissioning can streamline transitions and reduce waiting times.
Scaling – capturing what works well now, and expanding cover to all parts of the new geography	Broaden the work of West Berkshire's school effectiveness team, children missing education approaches, emotionally based school avoidance approaches along with the targeted early years support and intervention through the Family Hub model.

While the principles are shared, each new authority will need to respond to its distinct strengths and challenges. As examples, Oxfordshire has Education Health and Care Plan (EHCP) growth through higher SEN support, but faces elevated tribunal challenge, while West Berkshire aligns with national EHCP levels but demonstrates strong parental confidence.[26] Our model allows each new authority to tailor responses to these distinct pressures, while sharing best practice across the system to strengthen outcomes and financial sustainability. There is a key opportunity to share what works well across the existing local authorities in the area. We propose combining West Berkshire's engagement-led approach with Oxfordshire's improvement structure to deliver optimal SEND services for families.

A key strength of Oxfordshire County Council's SEND services is its structured SEND Improvement Board, which includes the NHS and parent partnership. West Berkshire's strengths within SEND services include co-production, with the council having co-produced its SEND and Inclusion Strategy 2023-2028. It demonstrates a commitment to service improvement, having participated in the national Delivering Better Value in SEND programme, and boasts a transparent Local Offer which is regularly updated and informed by user feedback.

However, there are pressing issues to address. Oxfordshire County Council has been subject to a statutory improvement notice after an Ofsted and CQC report in 2023, which identified systemic SEND failings.[27] Challenges include an average ASD/ADHD waiting time for EHCPs exceeding 500 days, poor communication with parents, and a lack of transparency in EHCP processes.[28] West Berkshire's financial pressures in SEND school placements persist, as they do across the country, with debt projection in West Berkshire up to £37million and £84 million in Oxfordshire.[29] The foundations of SEND services in West Berkshire are strong, but resourcing constraints are evident.

We need to hold on to what works well in education too, while prioritising the functions that need to change. Oxfordshire's education services benefit from strong data systems, including statutory returns and performance analysis, and effective support for schools through the Performance and Information Team. West Berkshire's Education services comprise active school improvement services, including a focus on governance and continuous professional development.

The area is home to high-performing schools and targeted interventions for vulnerable pupils, and benefits from early years support provided through Family Hubs. Fostering good relationships with non-local authority-maintained schools in both areas remains a priority. However, the performance of disadvantaged Key Stage 2 pupils in West Berkshire is historically low, sitting in the bottom quartile, and there are challenges related to school readiness however recent developments in this area have seen West Berkshire move from 63rd to 16th place in the national league tables.[30] In addition, there is limited use of data dashboards to track and respond to school outcomes, and Home to School Transport costs are high.

[26] To see EHCP growth in Oxfordshire and West Berkshire refer to Appendix E
[27] See 2023 Improvement Notice - Oxfordshire County Council
[28] See 2023 Improvement Notice - Oxfordshire County Council
[29] Debt projection in Education and SEND refer to Appendix E
[30] To see further information on school readiness refer to Appendix E PeopleToo Report

Case study
During a 2025 Ofsted SEND Thematic Review, West Berkshire's multi-agency collaboration was highlighted as a key strength in supporting children with SEND who are not in school. Schools reported strong relationships with the Local Authority SEND team, which was consistently accessible and responsive. Regular joint planning meetings ensured alignment across education, health, and social care professionals, while children on the Dynamic Support Register received well-coordinated support. Health professionals, including diabetic nurses, worked closely with schools and the Medical Tuition Service to maintain attendance and build parental confidence. Social workers and Early Help teams used relationship-based approaches to keep children's needs central. These efforts improved engagement, reduced fragmentation, and led to more timely interventions. Going forward, more strategic information sharing, use of digital solutions, and development of shared protocols could further strengthen data flow and service provision across the Ridgeway geography.

7.5 Homelessness

Our proposed approach
Our two-unitary model offers a significant opportunity to transform the way we tackle homelessness:

- recognising the different challenges for communities across our geography, not focusing solely on the towns and cities where existing provision is concentrated
- managing future demand by better understanding the causes of housing insecurity, and generating a shared mission under one banner
- applying our localities model to homelessness prevention, working in close partnership with the voluntary sector, Police and the NHS to embed place-based and local community delivery models that reduce siloes and place individuals or families at the centre of support
- increasing the delivery of and access to affordable housing, which may be assisted by using the Housing Revenue Account in the Oxford & Shires area

Why we believe this is the right approach
Homelessness is a traumatic and debilitating experience for anyone, affecting their health, financial and social outcomes. It also heaps pressure on local public services, where individuals require more complex and acute support from frontline services.

By reprioritising access to affordable housing as one of the cornerstones of wider social outcomes, we can reduce the burden on other frontline services. The two-unitary model offers appropriate scale, connection to communities and delivery experience to achieve this.

How we will achieve this

By applying the following principles, we have an improved chance to strengthen housing security and mitigate the impact of homelessness:

Principle	Transformation opportunity
Scaling – using our increased resources to improve delivery, grounded in the community insights of what is needed where	Applying the combined purchasing power of the unitary authorities will enable Strategic Housing to acquire property for Temporary Accommodation, improving efficiency savings for the aggregated Homeless Service.
Addressing root causes – increasing focus on the drivers of homelessness, including domestic abuse, end of short hold tenancies, and family evictions	Homelessness is a symptom of wider social complexity, so the solution cannot be solely vested in housing services. Investing in community safety measures, mediation and poverty reduction will have a multiplying effect on the success of housing support services.
Single points of access – simplifying the way housing support is offered, through accessible systems and processes	Having a single gateway, including one registration on a single housing register and a common allocations policy across the new authorities, will assist those in need of housing support through a consistent, simplified approach to accessing housing.
Common cause – generating a shared mission for complementary public sector services	Establishing governance and accountability to prevent homelessness alongside services including Private Sector Housing, Benefits, Planning, Social Care, Public Health and Education.
Enabling – recognising that many people affected by homelessness do not want to engage with statutory agencies	Maximising the role of the Oxfordshire Homeless Alliance to ensure partners are best placed to design, commission and deliver based on their competencies and reputation.
Evidencing – building the business case for holistic preventative interventions	To ensure the longer-term financial sustainability of approaches like Housing First (intensive person-centred support via a tenancy) and assertive outreach, we will adopt a test and learn mindset to the way we design, deliver and collaborate.

Oxfordshire boasts high homelessness prevention rates of around 80% across all districts. However, while the county as a whole has low levels of rough sleeping, general homelessness, and Temporary Accommodation usage compared to the rest of England, these levels are slowly rising.[31]

The Oxfordshire Homeless Alliance brings together Oxfordshire councils, the Integrated Care Board, and local community and voluntary sector partners to commission and provide homelessness and rough sleeping services across the county. While this is generally an efficient delivery mechanism for services, the majority are based in and around Oxford City, as it is the source of most demand. Due to Oxford's housing crisis, many housing issues are shifting further outside Oxford City into surrounding areas and increasing pressure on local services. By refreshing our shared strategy, we will ensure all partners are aware of their obligations and contributions to preventing homelessness. We will work to streamline funding and develop our workforce using the principles outlined above.

[31] For Oxfordshire Homelessness data refer to: JSNA Report on Homelessness

Through capital investment and government funding, West Berkshire Council has supported Temporary Accommodation solutions and delivered successful targeted local interventions such as Housing First. The additional scale also maximises the opportunity to increase existing Housing First models and Temporary Accommodation provision across the whole Ridgeway area.

Housing services are an inherently local service, so the two-unitary proposal would enable residents to benefit from increased efficiency afforded by a larger council without sacrificing the 'local' feel of the service. Through our proposal, we would benefit from being able to share best practice in homelessness prevention and rapid relief from our principal authorities, driving up performance standards in tackling homelessness and rough sleeping.

Case study
West Berkshire Council's Walnut Close project exemplifies how local authorities can repurpose assets to deliver better outcomes, reduce costs, and engage communities. Originally a care home in Thatcham, Walnut Close was repurposed to host court-mandated family contact sessions, which were previously held in unsuitable, costly venues. The new set-up significantly improved the experience for families and staff.
The centre, now known as Walnut Tree House, supports 35 families weekly and fosters a welcoming, personalised environment. Phase 2 converted the remaining space into temporary accommodation for homeless families, addressing rising housing costs and the lack of council-owned stock. With an £80k investment, the Council realised £600k in annual savings and £150k in housing benefit income, while gaining control over local housing supply.

7.6 Public Safety and Public Health

Our proposed approach
There is a broad range of public services that protect the public from harm and promote their wellbeing at both the individual and community levels. Within council services, these include:

Private Sector Housing enforcement
Disabled Facilities Grants administration
Environmental Protection
Food and Workplace Safety
Environmental Crime and Environmental Enforcement
Licensing
Community Safety
Health and Safety
Public Health
Trading Standards
Fire and Rescue
Emergency planning
Safeguarding

Our new unitary authorities will have the opportunity to merge and reconfigure these services to improve effectiveness. Despite varying technical specialisms, statutory obligations and service standards, these functions shared three common aims: promoting life-long wellbeing, protecting the public from harm and taking enforcement action where required. Our approach will reshape these services around the three aims.

Why we believe this is the right approach

The proposal could achieve initial cost savings by enabling the removal of duplicate management posts across the existing organisations' public safety and environmental protection services. There will also be clearer lines of accountability due to the removal of the two-tier system, both for the two proposed new unitary councils and for people accessing services. In addition, there will be an opportunity to build on the strong relationships and partnership working which already exist.

How we will achieve this

Principle	Transformation opportunity
Consistent and fair – all universal services should be provided across the entire geography, not concentrated in areas like the city	Ensuring that universal services are evenly distributed, for example, in working with private sector landlords, administering the Disabled Facilities Grant, and establishing dedicated tasking teams for anti-social behaviour, CCTV, youth diversion, and rural crime.
Cohesive – services provided by different teams and agencies should work in unity, not in competition	Via a single Community Safety Partnership for each unitary, we can replace service fragmentation and standardise interventions across domestic abuse, modern slavery, and safeguarding, informed by Oxfordshire's frameworks and West Berkshire's trauma-informed approach.
Preventative – alongside responsive functions, we need services that identify early risks and mitigate their impact	Oxfordshire is one of 37 'Marmot Places'- adopting the principles of Prof Sir Michael Marmot to address the social determinants of health (housing quality, income, education, etc), not just 'symptoms' like smoking and obesity. By coalescing the strategic leadership of Public Health with technical service delivery via Environmental Health, Trading Standards, Licensing and wider public safety, we will help achieve the 'Marmot Place' aims and improve health protection.
Systemic – recognising the contributions of services at all geographies, in pursuit of common goals	By combining the resources and expertise of multiple councils, public protection partnerships can achieve economies of scale, streamline operations, and deliver services more effectively. This collaboration allows for a more flexible and efficient allocation of resources.
Harmonising – establishing common priorities and working practices	Competing priorities and varied ways of working across local partners make it challenging to prioritise activity. We can establish shared aims and governance, through improved back-office systems, reporting arrangements, data analysis and delivery.
Developmental – ensuring we attract and retain the best staff	Proactively attract qualified staff to fill vacant posts in specialist functions through appropriate remuneration and continuous personal development. Operating as a unitary authority will increase the availability of training and resources for the development of staff, like Environmental Health and Licensing professionals, allowing improved career progression and workforce resilience.

Clearly, it is vital that these services work in close partnership to maximise the impact of their efforts. Existing examples of effective collaboration include:

- The Oxfordshire districts' Private Sector Housing teams work closely to share expertise, best practice and intelligence. This is particularly helpful where landlords operate across multiple districts, as it contributes to a more consistent approach to private sector housing across Oxfordshire.
- Oxfordshire County Council's Public Health team and the community and voluntary sector via initiatives like the countywide 'Better Housing Better Health' fuel poverty advice service.
- Food and workplace safety (through the Thames Valley Food Group) and health and safety (through the Thames Valley Health and Safety Group).
- Licensing functions in Oxfordshire, using a Joint Operating Framework amongst councils and Thames Valley Police to ensure harmonisation of standards and information sharing to protect residents. In addition, Oxfordshire councils carry out joint enforcement work, including with authorities outside of Oxfordshire.
- West Berkshire's Building Communities Together Partnership delivers a strong public-health-informed approach to serious violence and successful youth and anti-social behaviour interventions in its key towns. Through the use of restorative approaches, 'Safe Places', and home security, there is a commitment to supporting vulnerable residents to feel safe. In addition, strong partnership working with Thames Valley Violence Prevention Partnership and engagement with the health sector help to secure positive outcomes for residents.
- The West Berkshire Council hosted Public Protection Partnership is a shared service which delivers a wide range of public safety and regulatory services across West Berkshire, Reading, and Wokingham. This improves efficiency and value for money across environmental health, trading standards, licensing, food safety, and consumer protection services. The model, which combines the capabilities and expertise of three local authorities, enables the pooling of resources, increases service coverage, and delivers a consistent experience for service users.

Fire and Rescue Services provide a range of public safety services, including fire prevention, protection and emergency response services. Locally, these are delivered by the Royal Berkshire and Oxfordshire Fire and Rescue Services. As mentioned in Chapter 3, the government has specified that in time the regional Mayor will take responsibility for wider public services in the area, potentially including the Police and Crime Commissioner and Fire and Rescue services.

We will continue working towards a harmonised approach across the Thames Valley, including systems, equipment and procedures. In Berkshire, arrangements are already in place for the harmonisation of equipment and staff. Transitional arrangements covering both new unitary authorities will be required to maintain current service standards and further embed Fire and Rescue in local public sector partnerships.

7.7 Other service areas

A range of other service areas will be materially impacted by reorganising. The transition to two unitary councils presents an opportunity to harness the benefits of a new footprint through transformation, thereby enhancing service delivery.

Planning and Development

The Planning and Infrastructure Bill will create statutory strategic planning powers that will apply to the proposed Oxford & Shires and Ridgeway authorities. Unitaries will be responsible for providing universal coverage of up-to-date Local Plans for the geography that, along with the new Spatial Development Strategy (SDS), will form a new statutory development plan for each area. In aligning with the SDS, we will look to share specialist skills/resources with emerging strategic planning teams.

Through the transition of placemaking functions to the new unitaries (such as minerals and waste planning and the Lead Flood Risk Authority function), there is an opportunity to reshape the approach to be more responsive to the smaller geography of Oxford & Shires and Ridgeway allowing integration to align development and infrastructure delivery to enable growth. Spatial planning, transport, regeneration and housing delivery will see increased collaboration with partners to influence their direction. Central to this will be working with the MSA to secure investment and joined-up approaches to cross-boundary issues.

There will be opportunities to establish new working relationships with stakeholders (especially infrastructure providers) and communities that can be used to inform unitary service planning and shape strategic policies managed through the MSA.
Appendix D ‘Planning for Devolution – A ‘Growth’ Offer from the two new unitary councils advises how the new Planning and Development service may function and interact with key stakeholders to deliver growth for Oxford & Shires and Ridgeway. Suggestions include:

- Collaboration of the planning and development functions of the two unitaries through a new forum linking into Berks and wider TV area.
- Area Delivery Boards established within each unitary for joint working with partners in shaping identified localities, the market towns and areas of Oxford City to consider delivery coordination, infrastructure and cumulative impacts of development. Note that these are distinct from Local Neighbourhood Areas, which collectively cover the whole unitary area and cover matters beyond planning and development, but they would work closely with them.
- Establishment of Area Panels to address the lack of consistency in engagement with the development sector.
- A concerted focus on service design to speed up planning decision-making, including the use of Local Development Orders to expedite planning approvals of business parks.
- The approach to meeting the growth needs of Oxford and the economic and infrastructure challenges associated with this will be shaped by the findings of the Oxford Growth Commission.

Housing Delivery

Moving to a two-unitary model is a fresh opportunity to prioritise the acceleration of housing delivery, particularly affordable housing, of the right mix and tenure to meet locally identified need. This is crucial to addressing the homelessness challenge and wider economic barriers arising from a lack of housing supply.

Current arrangements unique to Oxford City Council will accelerate housing delivery for Oxford & Shires. Oxford City's Housing Revenue Account (HRA) will enable Oxford & Shires to efficiently grow the collective stock of properties, making more suitable properties available, enabling wider management moves and assisting in reducing housing waiting lists. In addition to this, the Ox-Place delivery mechanism (owned by Council-owned Oxford City Housing Limited) could open up further opportunities to acquire housing stock, develop collective land assets, manage property and contribute to the stock of the HRA.

A number of transformation opportunities apply to both Oxford & Shires and Ridgeway to achieve accelerated housing delivery with the required infrastructure through the two-unitary model across the whole of Oxfordshire and West Berkshire:

- The aggregation of land assets presents opportunities to bring forward development in key locations across the Unitary Authority.
- A larger authority will have greater influence with Homes England as funder and facilitate more productive relations with delivery partners, Registered Housing Providers, and housebuilders.
- The potential for land assembly will be improved as assets can be reviewed as a unified single tier rather than the existing two-tier system.
- Increased opportunities for wider regeneration through maximising initiatives such as the 'One Public Estate' (OPE) programme.
- Increased competitiveness when bidding for Brownfield Land Release Funds (BLRF), thus supporting regeneration aims and placemaking objectives.
- Greater efficiency and effectiveness in how we approach Town centre regeneration projects from a housing delivery perspective across both public and private sectors.
- Access to wider housing markets across the Unitary Authority presents opportunities to diversify housing products and display innovation. This offers greater scope to take a strategic view of cross-subsidy and increase affordability options for residents in need of social rented accommodation.
- Amalgamated delivery of social rented homes from a unitary authority will include more move-on accommodation and permanent settled accommodation across the area, thus reducing housing demand.
- A unitary structure can benefit the delivery of specialised and extra care needs through close links between commissioning teams and delivery teams. Strategic Housing can offer better enablement of commissioning requirements by negotiating for Adult Care services from the outset of the proposed development.
- Spatial planning can be improved through strategic analysis of collective housing need and market areas. Planning decisions can be made with improved, collective intelligence of the wider spatial picture.
- Policy requirements can be well coordinated to deliver a coherent and consistent stance on key strategic housing matters (such as tenure requirements across the unitary).

Economic Development

Bringing together the strengths of strategic economic development functions that currently sit with Oxfordshire County Council and West Berkshire Council with the more localised, interventionist economic development approach of District Councils through the establishment of Oxford & Shires and Ridgeway Councils presents an opportunity to accelerate inclusive economic growth across the whole geography in a more joined up collaborative way, with the scope for economies of scale and impact that come with this.

Through the creation of the two-unitary model working in conjunction with the Mayoral Strategic Authority, we will achieve a holistic approach to economic development in conjunction with infrastructure, housing, social and leisure facilities and enviro quality. Each council will ensure that both areas:

- Continue to pursue inward investment, enabled through high-calibre and globally significant sectors, including those affiliated with the global brand of Oxford, and business clusters linked through strong transport corridors to regionally and nationally significant logistics and transport hubs.
- Continue to invest in their mature and well-functioning economic partnerships, facilitating the active involvement of regional partners.
- Structure teams to operate on key strategic economic priorities: business engagement, regeneration, infrastructure and strategic planning, including accelerated employment site delivery, digital infrastructure, tourism and the rural economy.
- Focus on skills development to support the growth of existing businesses and attract new.
- Have greater accountability for economic development with clear streamlined governance, thus expediting economic growth initiatives and improved cohesion between different economic development disciplines and other council functions, which are core to their delivery (for example, Planning Policy). This rationalisation will bring cost savings, enabling the targeting of resources to initiatives with the greatest impact.

In following the principles above to inform the structure and resourcing of two new economic development functions for Oxford & Shires and Ridgeway councils, the total area will benefit by bringing together the high-performing economies of Oxfordshire and West Berkshire closer together, further forging regional links, and bringing more economic growth than they would be able to do on their own.

Unique to Oxford & Shires is the opportunity for Oxford as a globally significant destination with 32 million annual visitors. A dedicated tourism team will address the challenges presented by this overheated market by facilitating greater linkages to the wider visitor economy within Oxford & Shires and adjacent areas, including Ridgeway and further afield.

Transport, Highways and Public Rights of Way

Highway services are outsourced across Oxfordshire and West Berkshire, with the exception of Public Rights of Way. Oxfordshire maintains a Highways Strategy and implements this through an asset management approach guided by condition surveys to target services. This has reduced reactive maintenance repairs and maintenance of the substantial rural highway network has been deprioritised. West Berkshire employs a lifecycle-based asset strategy and condition surveys to deliver service, along with innovative use of low-carbon surfacing technologies. A performance-based approach to contract delivery is also central to their approach.

In preparing for the transition to Oxford & Shires and Ridgeway Highways services, it is essential to scope current contractual arrangements, key milestones, and succession arrangements, as well as how they will apply to the new geography, as they do not currently align.

Current contract arrangements

Authority	Contractor	Contract expiry
Oxfordshire	Milestone Infrastructure	2033 with a possible extension of up to 14 years
West Berkshire	VolkerHighways	Currently preparing for the procurement of a 10-year maintenance contract expected to start in 2027. Engaging the market to shape, scope and deliver the model with a focus on innovation, net-zero and local supply chains

The establishment of highway services in both Oxford & Shires and Ridgeway provides an opportunity to develop an effective Highway model which incorporates elements of Oxfordshire's strategic highways asset model with West Berkshire's innovative, responsive, and effective operations. By uniting these approaches, Oxford & Shires and Ridgway will benefit from a best-in-class Highways service with improved equity, sustainability, and resilience for residents in both rural and urban areas.

In establishing the function, we will look at other authority models for the direct delivery of integrated public transport solutions as a means of expanding solutions that improve accessibility and respond to NetZero ambitions.

The Public Rights of Way statutory duty under the Highways Act 1980 centres on ensuring that the substantial network of Public Rights of Way across Oxfordshire and West Berkshire is not obstructed, routes are maintained and kept in reasonable condition. Both Upper Tier authorities meet this statutory duty in-house and with the support of volunteers – Parish Path Wardens in Oxfordshire and, less formally, the Ramblers Network Party and Local Access Forum in West Berkshire.

An updated Rights of Way Improvement Plan for West Berkshire will run from 2025-2035. The Oxfordshire Plan ran from 2014 to 2024, and a successor Plan is under development. There is scope to reshape the geography to which the forming Oxfordshire Plan will apply, reflecting the Oxford & Shires geography and transition arrangements for Ridgeway as its Public Rights of Way function moves from an Oxfordshire to delivery under a West Berkshire Rights of Way Improvement Plan.

Waste and Environmental Services

The current authorities that form Oxford & Shires are already collaborating to deliver waste and environmental services for the area. West Oxfordshire and Cherwell District Councils have been working with Oxford City Council and Oxfordshire County Council to develop a new operating model for Waste Collection, Disposal and Environmental Services (including Street Scene). This model would be implemented for Oxford & Shires post 2028.

A detailed business case has been produced that identifies significant opportunities to transform waste and environmental services for Oxford & Shires, including:

- The creation of a shared company model to provide an agile approach to the transformation and delivery of the Government's waste and climate targets
- Delivery of significant financial efficiencies
- Investment in 'end of life' infrastructure

A Waste and Environmental Services Transformation Programme has been established, and the authorities are completing a shared companies option appraisal to determine the future delivery model.

South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse are following their own procurement pathway with a retendering of their current joint Waste Management contract for waste collection (and street cleansing) with Biffa due to end in June 2026. Oxfordshire County Council currently provides the disposal function. Under a two-unitary model, the disposal function for Ridgeway would shift from Oxfordshire to West Berkshire. A 25-year waste management contract (including street cleansing) with Veolia for West Berkshire runs until 2032. Under the Ridgeway model, alignment and strengthening performance across the area through a shared waste collection and disposal contract would eliminate duplication and enable a standardised cost-effective service model, driving a higher standard of environmentally responsible waste management delivering waste reduction and improving recycling.

Parks and Grounds Maintenance

Oxford & Shires: Cherwell maintains parks, play areas and open spaces through an in-house team of landscape officers, with some capacity outsourced to contractor Krinkel UK. Ubico Ltd provide this function in West Oxfordshire, as a Council owned company jointly owned with Gloucestershire authorities. Similarly, Oxford City wholly owns Oxford Direct Services (ODS), which delivers a range of facilities management capacity, including grounds maintenance, for its geography.

A single model of direct delivery for parks and grounds maintenance will be established to cover Oxford & Shires. A strength of ODS as an option is its strong track record in these spaces in Oxford, which can be rolled out to adjoining West Oxfordshire and Cherwell, offering a ready-established model that is Council-owned and benefits from direct control, performance management, and the efficiencies that come with that.

Oxfordshire County Council and West Berkshire both have an in-house countryside service which, along with Public Rights of Way and countryside access (see above), provides capacity on nature recovery and land management. A future model should identify how both Oxford & Shires and Ridgeway will support the delivery of their respective Local Nature Recovery Strategies covering their respective geography and ensure active membership of the Oxfordshire and Berkshire Local Nature Partnerships.

Ridgeway: Currently, in-house teams oversee parks and grounds maintenance with some outsourced capacity through grounds maintenance contracts. In West Berkshire, this sits within the Countryside Service. In South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse, a dedicated Parks Team is responsible for managing a range of parks, open spaces, and play areas, as well as riverside moorings and wildflower meadows. A new service delivery model under a Ridgeway footprint would consider how to further reinforce the strengths, knowledge and skills of in-house teams, as well as any further outsourcing of grounds maintenance capacity through a single, streamlined, cost-efficient contract.

Leisure

Oxford & Shires: Oxford City embarked on a new 10-year Leisure Services contract in 2024 with Serco and More Leisure Community Trust as an operating partner. The contract includes a number of planned improvements, with a focus on inclusive access, youth engagement, and carbon reduction. Cherwell leisure provision is partly contracted to Parkwood Project Management and Cherwell Leisure, with some functions being brought back in-house to achieve contract savings. West Oxfordshire has a contract with not-for-profit charitable enterprise Greenwich Leisure Limited, which is due to expire in April 2027. In establishing a new footprint for leisure services, aligning with a new single model offering a greater range of services across a wider geography, with a focus on improved accessibility, carbon reduction, and greater investment, will see an improved leisure offer for residents of Oxford & Shires.

Ridgeway: South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse hold a joint leisure services contract with Greenwich Leisure Limited (ending August 2026 and a three-year extension to this is underway), while in West Berkshire, leisure services operate under a 10-year outsourced management contract with Everyone Active (to July 2033 with scope for a 5-year extension). There is some commonality in scope across the contracts, including: community outreach, social value and inclusion, helping people stay active and healthy, increasing participation in sports and leisure activities, decarbonisation and capital investment. In establishing a new footprint for leisure services across the area, aligning with a single model that addresses this scope will result in a more diverse leisure offer for the residents of Ridgeway.

Cultural, Arts and Communities

Oxfordshire and West Berkshire provide a strong cultural and arts offer to communities, whether through Upper Tier authorities such as libraries and culture and heritage services, or through localised community teams working at a District level who have a solid understanding of their residents and the local Voluntary and Community Sector. The richness of this offer can be carried through to the Oxford & Shires and Ridgeway Councils through the integration of both levels of service to provide a more comprehensive service that benefits rural and urban communities alike.

Working with partners, including the Voluntary and Community Sector in particular, both areas will sustain and further develop a network of cultural facilities, museums, libraries and heritage assets. The quality of these services will be supported by a combination of investment, community participation, and efforts to integrate cultural provision with broader priorities, such as education, tackling isolation and health. The sustainability of these services will be of paramount importance, and structures that are cognisant of financial viability through demonstrating adaptability, high standards of delivery and innovation will ensure that this offer to communities continues under a two-unitary model.

Transformation opportunities for a Cultural, Arts and Communities Service include:

- Development of combined locality teams in urban and rural areas utilising council assets to meet communities where they are
- Enhanced career progression, retention and development opportunities for staff
- Supercharging of local delivery with the use of currently underutilised buildings for community benefit
- Streamlining of processes to distribute resources for community and cultural enhancement through Section 106 and Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL)
- Ease of access for residents to key services and opportunity to consider cultural hubs to maximise use of built assets

Chapter 8 How the new councils will work in a nutshell

Chapter Summary

- The Oxford & Shires and Ridgeway councils will be designed as brand new councils from the outset. We will fully grasp the chance to rethink ways of working through this process.
- Our councils will share many common principles but will be fully independent, sustainable modern councils focused on the distinct needs of their different geographies.
- We will adopt an approach to locality working and community empowerment that will mean we can manage the risk that larger councils face of being too remote from their communities.
- We will build on existing strengths and collaborative working with town and parish councils, public and voluntary sector partners and the business community.
- Two councils will have fewer councillors than the current arrangements but our approach ensures strong local accountability and democratic representation.

What people told us

“Local councillors must be active in promoting local improvements in all the areas that effect local people, local services, local amenities, all of the community features that provide improvements to the modern features that benefit our life and enjoyment within our own home and community.”

The two-unitary model will:

- **Provide clear accountability:** simplifies governance, making councils easier to navigate.
- **Increase capacity and resilience:** each council large enough to sustain specialist statutory teams.
- **Preserve and enhance localism:** locality teams and parish links not only maintain but enhance grassroots accountability – formalising it for the first time on this scale.
- **Deliver efficient corporate services:** shared platforms and consolidated teams reduce duplication.
- **Secure credible partnerships:** two balanced councils provide strong footprints for collaboration with health, police, transport and regional bodies.

8. How the New Councils will Work

8.1 Introduction

Introduction

LGR provides a 'once in a generation' opportunity to redesign the way that local government will work across Oxfordshire and West Berkshire. The vision, ambition, and service outcomes outlined in the previous sections can only be achieved through a significant reimagination of how local government will operate to deliver them successfully.

This section sets out the proposed target operating model (TOM), a desired way of working, for the two new councils. A TOM helps us highlight the things that the councils will need to do, such as community engagement or customer service, and the enablers that will need to be in place to support these capabilities, like assets, technology, skills or culture.

At this stage, this is a combined model that describes the direction of travel, providing a strong sense of how it will feel to engage with or work in the new councils. More detailed design and implementation decisions will be the preserve of the shadow authorities for each council. We will continue to consider the way the proposed councils work, beyond the submission of this proposal and will begin to design specific features, as required, to meet the different needs of the two distinct areas.
Throughout the development of this proposal, significant stakeholder and public engagement was undertaken, and a number of workshops and strategy sessions involving officers and members who have worked jointly on this proposal were held. These have informed the following principles, which will underpin how we work as local authorities, regardless of our operating model. These principles reflect the needs of those we serve, the views of local people, and the practical considerations of operating as a unitary authority.

8.2 Target Operating Model

Underlying design principles

The design principles for the Oxford & Shires and Ridgeway councils are intended to guide a forward-thinking and future-proofed approach to shaping the way the new councils will work in practice. The principles have informed the high-level design undertaken so far and will inform more detailed design in due course. These principles are organised into seven categories.

Our **customer** core principles are that we will:

- Collaborate on solutions with our individuals, communities and local partners to enable them to help themselves wherever possible – focusing on prevention rather than intervention
- Design services to achieve the best outcomes, focusing on the needs and experience of service users and always striving to be proactive and get things right the first time
- Strive for easy-to-access, easy-to-understand, self-service, digital interactions for our internal and external customers as a default, while providing non-digital channels where necessary

Our **delivery model** core principles are that we will:

- Maintain a long-term plan of future delivery decisions with appropriate lead-in times, to enable options to be fully appraised
- Always look at who is best placed to provide our services, acknowledging that it might not always be ourselves but we will always strive for delivery options that produce the best outcomes for our customers
- Consider carbon impact, climate change and adaptation

Our **finance** core principles are that we will:

- Continually monitor and benchmark the true cost of our statutory and discretionary services and adopt a more commercial mindset to identify areas of efficiency
- Embed effective financial management practices, driving budget-based decision making and cost/benefit assessments
- Pool budgets, assets and resources across the local public and voluntary sector, wherever this makes sense, to maximise outcomes and benefits for our communities

Our **people** core principles are that we will:

- Match our workforce numbers and skills to our service priorities
- Empower our staff to own their service delivery and outcomes, and to get things right for our communities
- Support our workforce to evolve with us, providing upskilling opportunities and succession planning, with a strong focus on employee wellbeing

Our **ways of working** core principles are that we will:

- Embed a high-performance working culture framed by clear and appropriate parameters with effective escalations
- Acknowledge and manage risk to maximise positive service delivery outcomes and opportunities to improve
- Use a test-and-learn approach to support the continuous development and innovation of our services

Our **supplier and partner** core principles are that we will:

- Maximise both value for money and the social value that we achieve from our contracted services
- Manage our suppliers effectively and proportionately, to achieve the standards of delivery for our customers that we expect
- Maintain productive and mutually beneficial partnerships that contribute to our strategic objectives

Our **process, data and technology** core principles are that we will:

- Simplify, standardise and share our ways of working, with a focus on good customer outcomes and continuous improvement
- Drive a culture of evidence-based decision-making across all of our work, with the right data being available, at the right time, to drive improved performance
- Invest in our use of modern technology, using common platforms and off-the-shelf products wherever possible and ensuring we exploit all available functionality and process automation when implementing new systems

Key Council-Wide Transformation Opportunities

Through LGR transition and further transformation, there are some significant council-wide opportunities to make material improvements to the way the two councils work by adopting these principles. These go beyond the service-specific improvements that have already been outlined and include:

- Fundamentally redesigning services from an 'outside-in' perspective (resident centred design), starting by collaboration on solutions with individuals, communities and partners, including access and delivery approaches, where appropriate
- Significant rationalisation and improvement of the technology used to underpin council operations
- Investment in richer data collation and analysis capabilities to create more valuable insights to drive decision-making
- Systematic simplification, standardisation, automation and sharing of processes across the new councils
- Consolidating and reviewing contracts and their management to better achieve council objectives
- Focusing on employees and encouraging high levels of empowerment, performance, development and recognition

Example of how these principles could inform key capabilities for a Target Operating Model

To be most effective, the two councils will need to apply these principles by designing and implementing consistent capabilities across all service areas. The key capabilities that will be required are set out below. This approach offers a way to directly address feedback from residents who expressed a desire to reduce local government bureaucracy and multiple access points across Oxfordshire and West Berkshire.

Prevention, Community Empowerment, Place Making and Locality Working

- Investing in dedicated capabilities that will undertake thorough engagement and will actively and consistently encourage, equip and empower people and communities to create their own solutions without the need for council intervention. They will also undertake place-making activities, forging partnerships with key stakeholders such as town and parish councils, the private sector, and third-sector organisations to solve problems collaboratively and significantly enhance local outcomes.

Communication and Engagement

- Building enhanced proactive communication capabilities which can tailor targeted engagement to reinforce prevention and locality working supported by the skills and tools to enable richer data analysis, predictive analytics, and appropriate use of AI. This will assist in the early identification of situations where people will need more intensive or specialist support.

Self Service, Information Provision and Customer Management

- Investing in the right technology, skills and service design to provide genuinely effective, self-service and integrated customer management for all council services and other agencies where appropriate. Dedicated provision will continue to be made for specific services that deal with issues that are sensitive or time-critical, such as safeguarding or emergency response.

Complex Assessment and Case Management

- Building simplified, standardised and automated systems and processes to support effective complex assessments and case management to improve user experience, reduce bureaucracy and avoiding double handling. Vulnerable residents should not be expected to share their stories more than once, and service users can expect proactive updates on progress to help in managing their expectations.

Service Delivery

- As the new councils deliver services we will maximise time spent in communities where it is most impactful. Services will be designed and prioritised to reflect need, and will always be based on a deep understanding of customer insights and locality context

Enabling and Support

- Building enhanced data management, big data, AI and analytics capabilities to underpin better decision-making, supporting improved service design, performance management, financial oversight, and strategic prioritisation. There will be a strong focus on promoting customer-focused internal services that recognise the end goal of supporting effective external service delivery.

Commercial Focus

- Fostering a strengthened commercial approach will enable the council to be highly effective at managing costs, deriving maximum value from market shaping and engagement, improving contract management, and carefully balancing revenue generation against potential hidden costs and service failure.

High-Performance Culture

- Cultivating a culture of high performance across the new councils will promote ownership and accountability across all levels of the organisations. Clearly articulated strategic goals and empowered leadership will facilitate decisive and timely action, supported by rigorous performance management systems.

8.3 Democratic arrangements and governance

Democracy and governance

The approach to governance for Oxford & Shires and Ridgeway councils ensures that the move to a unitary authority maintains existing structures wherever possible, with some flexibility for the new authority to adapt and evolve from these structures once established.

The political leadership structure will be a Leader and Cabinet model as prescribed by Government. Local democracy for Oxford & Shires and Ridgeway councils will be strengthened by executive governance arrangements, providing strong political and strategic leadership in each of the two unitary councils.

Under unitary councils, communities will be clear who the elected representatives are. Councillors will be supported to champion their local area.

Current Councillor Numbers	Ridgeway UA Population[32]: 472,000	Oxford & Shires UA Population: 464,000
County Councillors	25	40
Unitary / District Councillors	117	145
Totals	**142**	**185**

Proposed councillor numbers and boundary issues

We propose to generally reflect the existing County Council electoral divisions in the new unitary arrangements for the administrative areas covered by the 5 current district councils, and with the existing wards for the West Berkshire Administrative area.

To ensure we can progress LGR at pace, the proposed Ridgeway authority will not involve any changes that require any boundary reviews. The proposed Oxford & Shires authority, however, recognises the need to balance the overall reduction in Councillor numbers as per Government ambitions set out in the English Devolution White Paper with the need to provide residents with the right level of access to political representation over a largely rural area.

We have modelled councillor numbers for the shadow authority elections and will seek a view from the Local Government Boundary Commission for England (LGBCE) on the right level of democratic representation in the new unitary authorities in due course. Our modelling is based on LGBCE guidance that the number of councillors should be below 99 per authority as a starting point.

This level of representation has been informed by due consideration of future strategic leadership, accountability and community leadership for the proposed new councils. The councillor-electorate ratio for both authorities is in line with research into other LGR areas with a geographically large and similar rural-urban mix, such as Cornwall, North Yorkshire and Buckinghamshire. Our

[32] ONS 2025 projected population figures

proposal also maintains effective representation for each division within the new councils. Councillors will have the right powers to focus on delivering for residents.

We propose a model of whole council elections every four years to ensure effective scrutiny and facilitate more stable and strategic leadership. This will create clearer accountability for residents, lowering costs by reducing the frequency of elections and reducing voter fatigue, with the aim of seeing increased voter participation at each election.

This is a shift from the current approach of some districts and boroughs within Oxfordshire, where elections are held in thirds or halves.

Ridgeway

- **Totalling 96 Councillors** within the area currently administered by South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse District Councils and West Berkshire Council

Oxford & Shires

- **Up to a maximum of 92 Councillors** within the area currently administered by Oxford City, Cherwell and West Oxfordshire District Councils

The formation of committee structures will be an important priority for the shadow authority in due course, reflecting the need for effective scrutiny and the separation of executive and council functions. Based on the experience of previous of LGR we would anticipate a boundary review within two years of the new authorities being created.

Civic and Ceremonial Tradition

We are committed to protecting historic assets and civic traditions across Oxfordshire and West Berkshire, as it is integral to local identity and democratic heritage.

This proposal is therefore seeking to continue with the existing Lord Lieutenancy arrangements in place across Oxfordshire and Berkshire, and recognises the crucial role that the Lieutenancy plays in our communities.

The particular importance of the heritage and ceremonial traditions to the city of Oxford, along with the significance of its City Charter and Lord Mayoralty, is recognised, and the future model will seek to protect these as a priority. Government also recognises that civic identity and service distinctiveness can and should be protected within wider governance structures. We therefore propose a structure that allows the two unitaries to deliver the efficiency and capacity that the government requires, while ensuring Oxford, as part of the Oxford & Shires council retains the appropriate powers, identity, and accountability befitting a city of its scale, pan-regional economic influence and global profile.

The model we propose builds on these elements, and existing arrangements in Oxfordshire and West Berkshire, ensuring communities retain the traditions that connect them to place, history and public life.

8.4 Future Engagement Model

Key principles of engagement

The two new unitary councils will develop their own consultation and engagement strategies, but the universal principles of strong consultation and community engagement will always be applied, meaning that all activities will be:

- **Timely** – give respondents sufficient time to absorb the information and provide a considered response, and before decisions are set in stone
- **Fully informed** – ensure respondents have the full details in an easy-to-understand way so they can give an informed opinion
- **Meaningful** - ensure communities have a genuine opportunity to influence decisions
- **Accessible and inclusive** – strive to reach all members of our communities and ensure the engagement is provided in a way they can access and understand it
- **Fed back** – communicate openly with communities on how their feedback has influenced decisions and services

Community Engagement Activities

The two new councils will be structured from the outset to enable all our diverse communities to take an active role in influencing services, strengthening local accountability and participation. Examples of community activities could include:

- **Engagement impact monitoring –** during our extensive LGR public engagement activities, most of the respondents told us they thought their views had little or no impact on how councils do things, and so restoring and maintaining trust at a larger, single-tier council is vital to ensuring local accountability.
- **Town and parish engagement –** during our LGR engagement, towns and parishes councils were clear that better clarity over who and how to get in touch with questions and requests for support would significantly support their productivity and enable them to provide greater input.
- **Community engagement forums and focus groups –** forums by which all our diverse communities could engage in a meaningful way supporting locality working.
- **Data driven approach –** targeted engagement using data sets to focus our activities based on local need.
- **Partnership working –** meaningful engagement with all partners to ensure the best use of our collective resources to support the communities we serve.

8.5 Localities working and community empowerment

Locality working

Our proposed approach to ‘locality working’ could lead to a significant shift from traditional, top-down service delivery to a more preventative, localised, and collaborative approach. It aims to improve public services by delivering them closer to and in more integrated ways with and for the communities they serve.

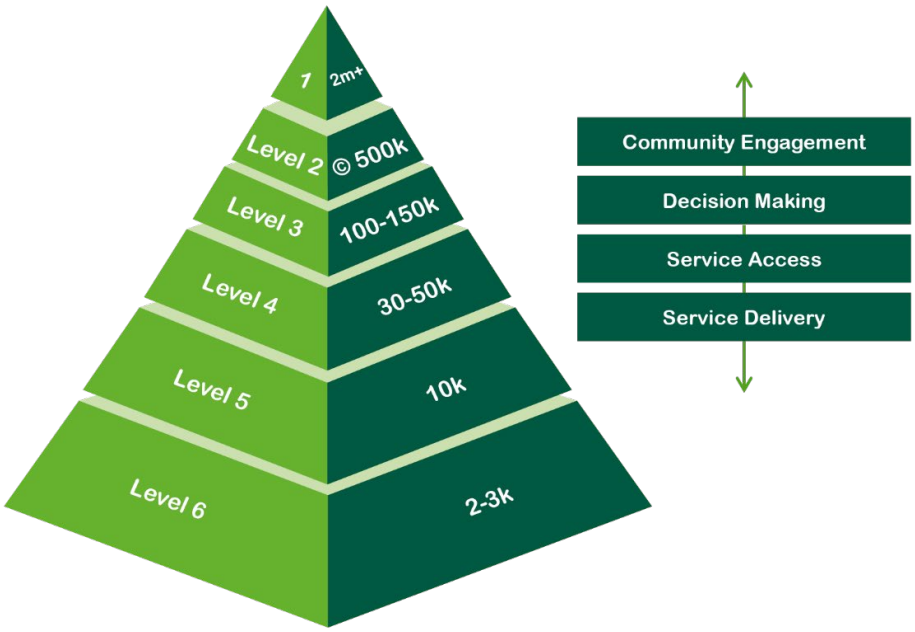
Our key principles and features of how a new locality model would work include:

- **Place-based, not service-based:** Instead of services being simply organised by a specific function (e.g. social care or housing), they are increasingly structured around a particular geographical area or ‘locality’. This allows for a deeper understanding of the characteristics of different localities and a much more holistic and tailored approach to meeting the needs of that specific community
- **Joined up and integrated services:** breaking down the silos between different public sector organisations such as local authorities, the NHS, the police, and the voluntary and community sectors. Seeking to create more multi-agency functions that work together to address the root causes of issues for individuals and families, rather than just treating the symptoms
- **Early intervention and prevention:** A core aim is to intervene more consistently, ‘upstream’ to prevent problems from escalating. By working more closely with communities and partners, services can identify and address issues at an earlier stage, which is more impactful and less costly than dealing with them in high-intensity, high-cost care services later
- **Shared resources and assets:** promoting the joint use of resources, including staff, data, and physical assets like buildings, across different partner organisations where this adds most value. This can lead to more effective use of public funds and better accessibility to services
- **Improved democratic accountability:** The model will help to strengthen the role of local councillors, who, working more closely with frontline officers and community groups, can better represent their constituents and address local priorities

Locality working is a cultural and operational transformation designed to make public services more responsive, efficient, and effective by decentralising decision-making and fostering a collaborative, community-focused approach.

The role of Locality Working in Local Government and wider Public Services

Public services, including local government services, are designed and delivered at various geographic levels that serve different-sized population groups. These geographies are complex and overlapping, but many of them follow a pattern of being at a series of levels that are characterised in the “place pyramid’ below.



Different public services are currently organised at different geographic levels across Oxfordshire and West Berkshire. The White Paper sets out to make significant changes to the scale at which different aspects of local public services are organised. Oxfordshire and West Berkshires examples include:

	Current	Likely future changes
Level 1	The Buckinghamshire, Oxfordshire and Berkshire Integrated Care Board (BOB ICB) serves a population of over 2 million people. Thames Valley Police are of a similar scale	A new Mayoral Strategic Authority A new Thames Valley Fire and Rescue Service
Level 2	Oxfordshire County Council currently provides services for c. 750,000 people Separate Fire and Rescue Services for Oxfordshire and Berkshire	New Oxford & Shires and Ridgeway Unitary councils providing services to c. 470,000 population Removal of county councils and existing FRS
Level 3	The other five principal local authorities across Oxfordshire and West Berkshire unitary authority all serve populations c. 150,000	Removal of district, city and smaller unitary councils

Level 4	Primary Care Networks are specifically designed with the NHS to help organise services for populations of between 30,000 and 50,000, and the BOB ICB oversees over 50 Primary Care Networks across the area	Local Neighbourhood Areas covering 30,000 to 50,000 people
Level 5	GP surgeries typically provide services for around 10,000 people	
Level 6	The majority of Town and Parish Councils serve populations of between 2,000 and 3,000 people, but some serve significantly larger numbers	

More effective alignment within and between these different geographic levels is crucial to improving public services in any given place. Critically, Devolution and LGR are going to fundamentally change the way local government operates alongside other public services in Oxfordshire and West Berkshire.

In establishing unitary government in Oxfordshire and West Berkshire, it will be imperative to recognise and retain the unique identity and function of key significant communities, such as the City of Oxford, alongside smaller and rural communities. Government has recognised this risk and has placed a requirement on the new authorities to put in place effective arrangements for neighbourhood governance, proposing Area Committees as an example of such arrangements.

Local Neighbourhood Areas will therefore be an important consideration for both proposed authorities to channel engagement and deliver accountability. As part of the overall governance arrangements, Local Neighbourhood Areas provide the potential to establish a dedicated link between the new authorities and residents and businesses in their localities, as well as enabling strengthened relationships with other public service providers, such as town and parish councils and existing partner groups.

The new authorities will have the opportunity to be bolder in their new form by reimagining how local authorities can collaborate and coordinate the services they provide to meet the needs of local people. Reshaping the influence of neighbourhood working and linking this to local communities will be essential for both new unitary areas. Building on work already underway in the BOB ICB, a new model of locality working can be developed with communities to work alongside and listen to their aspirations; working with them to achieve better resident outcomes and offer value for money.

Financial

The financial benefits of locality working primarily come from prevention and efficiency. By addressing issues early and in a coordinated manner, public services can avoid the high costs associated with crisis intervention.

- **Reduced Demand on High-Cost Services**: Evidence shows that early, proactive intervention can lead to a significant decrease in the use of expensive statutory services. In 2024, a group of leading organisations across social care found that earlier action and support interventions save approximately £3.17 for every £1 spent[33]
- **Operational Savings**: Locality working promotes the more efficient use of resources, through reduced bureaucracy, pooled budgets, better asset management through co-location; connecting communities to the right service locally helps build cohesion and resilience
- **Economic Empowerment**: focusing on place helps to direct public procurement spending to local suppliers, supporting community enterprises and providing skills training that leads to local jobs. This approach keeps money circulating within the community and increases business rates

Non-financial

Neighbourhood belonging, social connectedness, and community control all contribute to supporting the wellbeing of families and individuals. These benefits are harder to quantify, but arguably just as important as the financial efficiencies.

- **Better Outcomes for Citizens**: instead of treating a single problem, integrated teams can address the root causes of issues, such as poverty, social isolation, and poor health, leading to lasting change
- **Strengthened Community Cohesion and Resilience**: involving communities in decision-making and service design leads to a greater sense of community ownership, purpose, and identity. It also builds social capital, fostering stronger relationships and networks between neighbours, which makes communities more resilient and better able to support themselves
- **More Responsive and Empowered Workforce**: For public sector staff, locality working means breaking down departmental silos. This fosters a more collaborative and innovative culture, allowing frontline workers to be more responsive to local needs and exercise greater professional judgment. This can lead to increased job satisfaction and a more effective workforce

Building on our strong local context

Drawing on a rich landscape of good practice, existing authorities can promote their innovation and partnership working to bring about change for residents. Working closely with communities in different localities led to Cherwell District Council identifying specific needs for improve activity levels. This led to a pilot of Families Active Sporting Together (FAST) with funding from Sport England. This programme proved so successful in improving the health outcomes of low-income families by increasing their physical activity levels that it was adopted by the ICB and the Public Health team and funded for roll-out across the whole county area as You Move.

[33] https://www.local.gov.uk/publications/earlier-action-and-support-case-prevention-adult-social-care-and-beyond

A new locality model for unitary government in Oxfordshire and West Berkshire will align well with the ICB neighbourhood health strategy and draw on the expertise within our communicates and with the voluntary sector, ranging from larger umbrella organisations to smaller, place-based or issue-driven groups. It also builds on the Asset Based Community Development (ABCD) approach that Oxfordshire's district local councils already work to. This is a community-led approach that focuses on building from a community's strengths and existing assets, rather than addressing problems and deficits.

The pandemic revealed the real strength and depth that communities possess. Groups established at that time have continued to grow and thrive. Constituent district authorities have a solid track record of engagement and support with their residents, community and voluntary organisations, and the communities they serve. The two-unitary proposal offers the best opportunity to build engagement into empowerment and devolve activity to a level where communities decide outcomes for themselves.

The exact nature of how our two new councils will adopt our principles of locality working and community empowerment will be shaped by:

- Local engagement and consultation with communities and a range of local partners across Oxfordshire and West Berkshire
- Further research into the most successful examples of this approach locally and across the country
- Further government guidance on the nature of effective neighbourhood governance it expects to see; and
- Detailed design work informed by the above

Local Neighbourhood Areas will give us the opportunity to reimagine the relationship between local government and the communities and localities it serves. We have set out in our proposal our strong ambition and firm commitment to achieve this in accordance with the framework that government has committed to provide. We will collaborate with individuals, our communities and local partners to develop a locality working model for that works for everyone across Oxfordshire and West Berkshire.

An example of what this might mean in practice for Oxford & Shires

We have set out an example of how this could look in the Oxford & Shires area below. Our approach is specifically designed for the Oxford & Shires context and the fact that the city of Oxford is largely unparished in contrast to the rest of the area.

We are proposing the establishment of a series of Local Neighbourhood Areas across the Oxford & Shires area. These Local Neighbourhood Areas will provide a critical building block for the new council to establish effective locality working across the area. The nature and proposed boundaries of the new Local Neighbourhood Areas will be subject to engagement and consultation in due course. We anticipate that each Local Neighbourhood Area would serve a population of between 30,000 and 50,000 people.

The exception to this typical size, may be the city of Oxford, where a larger Local Neighbourhood Area, perhaps encompassing the entire city, may be optimal for providing effective neighbourhood governance. It is also recognised that, given the limited number of parish and/or town councils currently in the city of Oxford area, there may be a fuller future role for one or more directly elected bodies, at the local council level (e.g. town or parish councils). Further careful consideration will be required but the Local Neighbourhood Area approach has some clear benefits including:

- Embedding Oxford's economic and international role within the unitary framework, it does not absorb Oxford but provides a platform for recognising and building on its unique strengths;
- Creating clear subsidiarity, with powers devolved to the most effective level, including local councils (parish, town or city) where appropriate; and
- Establishing Local Neighbourhood Areas, ensuring every community – city or Shires – has a meaningful voice.

Each Local Neighbourhood Area would provide a forum for local elected members to work closely with the local community, local town and/or parish councillors, the voluntary sector, representatives of key public services such as health and police with responsibility for each area, local unitary council service teams and dedicated neighbourhood support teams. This approach has been successfully adopted in areas such as Cornwall, Somerset, Durham and others. Local Neighbourhood Area would be expected to have a purpose across four key aspects of the new unitary authority:

Key purpose	Key considerations
Community Engagement and Development	Each Local Neighbourhood Area will be responsible for encouraging deeper community engagement. They will use their convening expertise and local insight to develop a deeper understanding of the hopes and concerns of residents, businesses, and visitors and then advocate for change. Taking a strengths-based approach to this is crucial, ensuring that a community's assets are fully understood when considering solutions to local issues. Highly effective Local Neighbourhood Areas would be able to support community development, growing community capacity over time.
Specific Localised Decision Making	Each Local Neighbourhood Area would have a committee, including local elected members, at its core. Where appropriate, this would provide the opportunity to devolve some decision-making to a more local level for certain issues. For some services, direction may be provided at the unitary authority level, but some decisions could be taken at the Local Neighbourhood Area level about how best to enact this. For others, there will be services where a uniform approach across the whole of the unitary authority will achieve more consistent quality and lower delivery costs.
Local Service Access	By developing a deep understanding of their local areas in terms of both needs and available capabilities, Local Neighbourhood Areas can help in informing the most effective ways for people to access services. Strong local networks can provide more integrated support for individuals and customers, ensuring they receive the right help without being passed around between services or signposted to help elsewhere. Developing single points of access in communities would further enhance this, using existing trusted spaces such as libraries and VCS organisations.

Footprints for Service Delivery alignment	Local Neighbourhood Areas will also offer a geographical footprint for different services to help organise their delivery teams in a more aligned way in different localities. There is real benefit where service teams from the different parts of the new unitary council and a range of partner organisations can collaborate in a common geography. This can foster better, more trusted relationships and enable more integrated multi-agency practice to thrive. This approach would allow services that already tailor their services to the specific needs of a particular neighbourhood (for example areas with higher homelessness rates) to be even more effective by aligning with others working in the same locality.

In designing these Local Neighbourhood Areas, work will be guided by the following principles:

- We will design services and engagement mechanisms according to a locality's specific geography and demographics - what's right for Oxford as a city may not be for the countryside or a market town
- We will build on current strengths in each area, for example in terms of town and parish councils and also support the development of new strengths in areas where this would make the most difference
- We will collaborate, co-design, and co-deliver services wherever it makes sense, and we will seek to make more decisions closer to where the responsibility for outcomes sits and near where actions are taken.
- We will recognise that different services need different approaches and will embrace what works for each service, commissioning and delivering these at appropriate scale and geographies to harness economies of scale, embracing digital solutions where possible

Local Neighbourhood Areas will give us the opportunity to reimagine the relationship between local government and the communities and localities it serves.

An example of what this might mean in practice for Ridgeway

The entire proposed Ridgeway geography is already comprehensively served by town and parish councils, which provide well-established and locally accountable governance structures.

Town and parish councils across Ridgeway play a central role in representing local communities, influencing service delivery, and supporting civic engagement. These councils are embedded into the governance of rural and urban areas and are often the first point of contact for residents on hyper local matters. Their presence ensures that all communities, regardless of their size or location, have access to democratic representation and a mechanism for shaping local priorities.

Several rural unitary and district councils across England have adopted forms of neighbourhood governance that rely on and build upon their existing network of parish and town councils. Examples of this include:

Herefordshire Council, which works closely with its extensive network of parish councils to deliver local services and engage communities.

North Yorkshire Council, which, despite its large geographic footprint, has not adopted local area committees, instead leveraging its strong parish council infrastructure. In this example, however, there are committees at Parliamentary constituency level which feed into the work of the Mayoral Strategic Authority. This could be considered as an additional community governance option once the MSA is established.

Shropshire Council, which supports community governance through its town and parish councils and area-based partnerships.

These councils demonstrate that in areas with comprehensive town and parish coverage, such as the proposed Ridgeway area, this provides a strong basis for community enablement. Town and Parish engagement forums already operate successfully across Ridgeway and provide a structured platform for dialogue between the Council and local town and parish councils. These forums could be refined and scaled up to further strengthen and enhance community governance across sectors and interested partners.

The consultation and engagement work regarding these proposals highlighted that Parishes were 'cautiously' optimistic and eager to play an enhanced role supporting their communities. It is clear that to be effective, town and parish councils will need to be engaged from an early part of the design process to help shape the future of what good and effective neighbourhood governance would look like to ensure sufficient capacity and capability in neighbourhood areas. This will help to maximise the benefit of those arrangements for those living, working and learning in Ridgeway.

Ridgeway Council would work closely with Towns and Parishes to ensure that the needs of communities are understood, so that relevant services are delivered to our communities in the most effective manner. Working collaboratively with the existing network of Town and Parish Councils will ensure that those councils in collaboration with Ridgeway Council, will continue to play a vital role in supporting their communities.

In summary

The proposed neighbourhood governance arrangements for the Oxford & Shires and Ridgeway council areas reflect their distinct local contexts, while offering complementary solutions to ensure strong community representation across both geographies. The ability to create governance structures that better reflect the communities they serve is an important benefit of the two unitary proposal for the whole of the Oxfordshire and West Berkshire area.

Together, these tailored approaches demonstrate a commitment to place-based governance, ensuring that each council area is equipped with the right tools to meet the needs of its communities, whether through new structures or by enhancing existing ones. Most importantly, these proposals align with the objectives of the Devolution White Paper, which emphasises the importance of bringing decision-making closer to communities, even within larger local authority areas.

Our roadmap for implementing the new arrangements may include:

<table>
<tr><th>November 2025 - Summer 2026</th><th>Summer 2026 – May 2027</th><th>May 2027 – May 2028</th><th>May 2028 – onward</th></tr>
<tr><td>Submission to Decision Point</td><td>Decision Point to Establishment of Shadow Authority</td><td>Shadow Authority to Vesting Day</td><td>Vesting Day – Transformation</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="2">Further research into optimal neighbourhood approaches including learning from other LGR proposals</td><td></td><td></td></tr>
<tr><td></td><td colspan="2">Discussions with Central and Local Government colleagues over optimal models plus potential Independent Expert Review</td><td></td><td></td></tr>
<tr><td></td><td></td><td>Deep engagement with communities and local partners</td><td></td><td></td></tr>
<tr><td></td><td colspan="2"></td><td>Design firm proposals for agreement with Shadow Authority</td><td></td></tr>
<tr><td></td><td colspan="2"></td><td></td><td>Begin Implementation of new arrangements</td></tr>
</table>

We have set out in our proposal our strong ambition to achieve this. We will collaborate with individuals, our communities and local partners to develop a locality working model that works for everyone across Oxfordshire and West Berkshire.

Chapter 9 The Financial Case in a Nutshell

Quick Chapter Summary

The Oxford & Shires and Ridgeway proposal provides the strongest case for making savings and significantly improving financial resilience

- **Option 1:** £27.3m recurring savings from LGR transition only; payback ~3.1 years; leaves West Berkshire financially exposed. With transformation, total recurring savings could reach £58.4m
- **Option 2:** £21.9m recurring savings from LGR transition only; payback ~4.2 years; secures West Berkshire's future. With transformation, total recurring savings could reach £59.8m
- **Option 3:** £9.5m recurring savings from LGR transition only; payback ~8.7 years; weakest case, highest risks. With transformation, total recurring savings could reach £47.7m

Option 2 can potentially deliver the highest recurring annual benefits from LGR transition and transformation across its geography and is the only deliverable model that secures sustainable finances across Oxfordshire and West Berkshire.

What people told us

"Local council funds should be spent on local benefits. Councils should facilitate the creation of jobs by creating an environment (planning, transport, rates) that encourages inward investment. Councils creating jobs removes money from the local economy as they do not, for the most part, create value."

"Value for money does not equal lowest cost to make do and mend... it means best value in terms of quality, sustainability, longevity, pride, contribution to reduced operating costs or increased revenues and general positive impact to people in terms of cost of living and wellbeing."

The two-unitary model will:

- **Deliver sustainable savings:** £21.9m recurring annually from LGR transition which could rise to £59.8m with associated transformation, reinvested into frontline and prevention.
- **Be fair and balanced:** both councils start life relatively financially stable, avoiding a two-speed system.
- **Fix current challenges:** helps to resolve West Berkshire's deficit and reliance on government support.
- **Support credible delivery:** manageable one-off costs and a payback of 4.2 years for LGR transition alone.
- **Support transformation:** savings create headroom for digital, prevention and locality services.
- **Improve outcomes for residents:** savings reinvested into care, housing and prevention.
- **Enhance service delivery efficiency:** streamlined corporate services and stronger commissioning.
- **Support strong local leadership:** stable finances allow focus on community priorities.
- **Resilience and deliverability:** clear payback, credible costs, and phased implementation.

9. The Financial Case

9.1 Introduction

This section details the financial case for two unitary authorities across Oxfordshire and West Berkshire. The financial case is compelling for the following key reasons:

- The two proposed unitary councils provide a solid basis for future financial sustainability, which is far more robust than the current scenario, helping to manage the impact of cost pressures and changes to funding.
- The proposal also provides a route map to resolving significant financial challenges across the geography in line with the government criteria.
- The analysis shows that neither of the two proposed councils can be deemed to be materially advantaged or disadvantaged from a financial perspective when the balance of demand, income, assets, liabilities, debts, workforce and other associated factors are considered.
- As with all LGR, this proposal requires an upfront investment of £30.4m, but it is anticipated that it will create significant transition benefits of £21.9m per annum and potential transformation benefits of up to £37.9 million. How this compares to the other options is shown in the table below[34].

Option	Level of change	Recurring net financial benefits (£m)	One-off costs (£m)	Payback period (years)
Option 1 Oxfordshire Unitary council and no change to West Berkshire Unitary council	Transition	27.3	23.8	3.1
	Basic Transformation (Base)	20.9	14.6	1.7
	Transition plus Basic Transformation	**48.2**	**38.4**	**2.8**
	Ambitious Transformation (Stretch)	31.1	21.7	1.7
	Transition plus Ambitious Transformation	**58.4**	**45.5**	**2.7**
Option 2 Oxford & Shires and Ridgeway councils	Transition	21.9	30.4	4.2
	Basic Transformation (Base)	25.6	17.9	1.7
	Transition plus Basic Transformation	**47.5**	**48.3**	**3.4**
	Ambitious Transformation (Stretch)	37.9	26.5	1.7
	Transition plus Ambitious Transformation	**59.8**	**56.9**	**3.2**
Option 3 Greater Oxford, Northern and Southern councils	Transition	9.5	32.5	8.7
	Basic Transformation (Base)	25.8	18.1	1.7
	Transition plus Basic Transformation	**35.3**	**50.6**	**4.7**
	Ambitious Transformation (Stretch)	38.2	26.7	1.7
	Transition plus Ambitious Transformation	**47.7**	**59.2**	**4.2**

[34] The detailed analysis underpinning this table is provided in Appendix B

- Based on the options appraisal, the proposed two-unitary model would payback the upfront investment in 4.2 years and create a potential ongoing benefit position of £59.8m p.a. from Year 5 onwards.
- This cost-benefit compares favourably to the proposal to create a large unitary council for the whole of Oxfordshire and to leave West Berkshire Council in a position of being deemed too small in relation to government guidance to achieve economies of scale.
- This cost-benefit also compares very strongly in relation to the proposal to create three unitary councils for the whole of Oxfordshire and West Berkshire.
- The two-unitary model proposal therefore presents the best Value for Money option in terms of providing better local representation at a similar cost-benefit level.
- It is important to note that the benefits of LGR will be essential in helping to bridge forecast funding gaps and for better meeting increasing demand in terms of Adult Social Care and Children's Services.

All the Oxfordshire councils, together with West Berkshire Council, are predicting increasing budget challenges over the coming years, with significant demand pressures expected in areas such as adult and children's services and homelessness. Government funding has not kept pace with increasing costs and service pressures, and council tax referendum limits restrict the income that councils can collect locally to support services.

Inflationary pressures in recent years have led to an increase in the cost of services councils receive from third parties. Additionally, councils that have borrowed externally have experienced an increase in borrowing costs due to rising interest rates. Councils without significant borrowing have seen an increase in income from their investments in recent years, but this will reduce as interest rates are expected to fall in future years.

These pressures manifest in the councils' Medium-Term Financial Plans (MTFPs)[35], which show an increasing pressure on future budgets that is either met through the use of reserves or savings targets. There is also considerable uncertainty over the level of future government funding and retention of business rate income.

As a two-tier area, the unitarisation of the existing Oxfordshire councils is expected to generate savings against current expenditure, though the timing and quantum of such savings depend on the proposal going forward. West Berkshire Council is currently in receipt of Exceptional Financial Support (EFS), having received its first allocation relating to financial year 2024/25. West Berkshire's population is currently under the threshold limit for a unitary authority deemed as financially sustainable by central government. The two-unitary proposal and the proposal for a single Oxfordshire authority are very similar in terms of the overall cost-benefit analysis. However, the two-unitary proposal has the potential to make the largest savings *and* the opportunity to create two financially stable unitary councils within the guidelines set out by central government, taking into consideration the current financial constraints faced by West Berkshire.

[35] Known in some organisations as Medium Term Financial Strategies (MTFSs)

9.2 Baseline, Approach and Assumptions

Baseline costs used for cost-benefit analysis

The estimated total net current expenditure of the proposed two new unitary authorities has been sourced from the MTFPs published in February 2025, or, where applicable, publicly available revisions. These projected the estimated budgets for the pre-existing authorities for 2027/28, and have been used to determine the core baseline for expenditure of the future unitary authorities on vesting day.

The February 2025 MTFP estimates of total government grant funding, council tax, and retained business rates income for each existing organisation have also provided the core baseline for the income of the future unitary authorities. The resulting transfers to or from reserves to balance the budgets on vesting day are also shown, as reflected in the February 2025 MTFPs.

Income and Expenditure			
	2 UA (£m)		
Category	Oxford and Shires	Ridgeway	Notes
Income*			
Council Tax	377.4	431.5	Currently 27/28 view. Includes Council Tax Surpluses.
Grants (inc. non-AEF)	45.8	63.0	Currently 27/28 view
Business Rates	114.4	55.0	Currently 27/28 view
Total Income	537.6	549.5	
Expenditure**			
All Staff	171.8	164.5	Does not include any staffing consolidation impact. Proportion based on FY25/26 establishment data shared.
All Non Staff	384.1	396.7	Expenditure excluding staff
Total Expenditure	555.9	561.2	Total Expenditure for all authorities in Oxfordshire and West Berkshire. FY27/28
Net Position	-18.3	-11.7	
Total Reserve Draws	13.4	6.8	Draws from reserves for FY27/28 to cover budget deficit
Final Position	-4.9	-4.9	

(Source – Oxford & Shires | Ridgeway Detailed Financial Case October 2025 – Appendix C)

*Income Sources: Draft statement of accounts (24/25), MTFS and MTFPs, Pixel Outputs
**Expenditure Sources: Statement of Accounts 24/25, Net Operating Expenditure (25/26 onwards), Newton Analysis, Establishment data (provided by LAs).

Approach to financial model, including estimating costs and benefits

To project forward the financial position of the two proposed unitary councils on vesting day, the first task is to allocate out the existing councils' budgets. This task is made easier in this proposal by the inclusion of two existing upper-tier authorities. As the costs of the districts and West Berkshire Council can be allocated in full to the two proposed unitaries, since there are no proposed boundary changes, the main focus in this area of work has been on allocating Oxfordshire County Council costs, income, assets and liabilities across the two proposed councils.

To support this work, and the work of estimating costs and benefits across transition and transformation, PwC and the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy (CIPFA) have been engaged as consultants. The work of PwC and CIFPA has built on the already constructive working relationships between the chief finance officers of the councils supporting these proposals, as well as the long-standing work of the Oxfordshire Treasurers' Association.

PwC has prepared two documents in support of this proposal; an options appraisal looking at all three of the unitary options under consideration, and a detailed financial case looking at the two-unitary authority proposal. These are shown in appendices B and C respectively. The documents draw on the experience of the consultants in working on current and previous LGR proposals elsewhere and in previous Oxfordshire LGR reviews. They are based on published data and using assumptions that have been agreed across the relevant S151 officers.

The options appraisal (appendix B) offers an objective view of the costs and benefits of different reorganisation options. It looks to illustrate the high-level financial implications of implementing and operating a single unitary authority, two unitary authorities or three unitary authorities across the geography. The appraisal has been undertaken on a like-for-like basis across the three options to allow for direct and fair comparison.

The detailed financial case (Appendix C) sets out the implications of the proposed two unitary option. It helps to model what future budgets will look like, provides a more detailed view on the starting financial position, and draws out the financial implications of local government reorganisation and wider transformation benefits. It provides a more detailed review of costs/benefits of the two-unitary proposal and begins to break down that analysis between the proposed Oxford & Shires and Ridgeway councils. It is important to note that the deeper analysis included in the detailed financial case produces differences in numbers to those included in the options appraisal.

Assumptions applied

As noted earlier, a key focus of work in estimating the budgets of the two unitaries on vesting day has been in allocating the costs, income, assets and liabilities of Oxfordshire County Council to the new councils. The assumptions used to allocate these costs are as follows:

Net revenue expenditure

Oxfordshire County Council's revenue costs have been primarily allocated between the two councils based on population, as per ONS population projections for 2025. The exception to this is Adult and Children's services, which have been allocated using modelling of demand on day one carried out by Newton Associates on behalf of the County Councils' Network.

Income from government grants, council tax and business rates

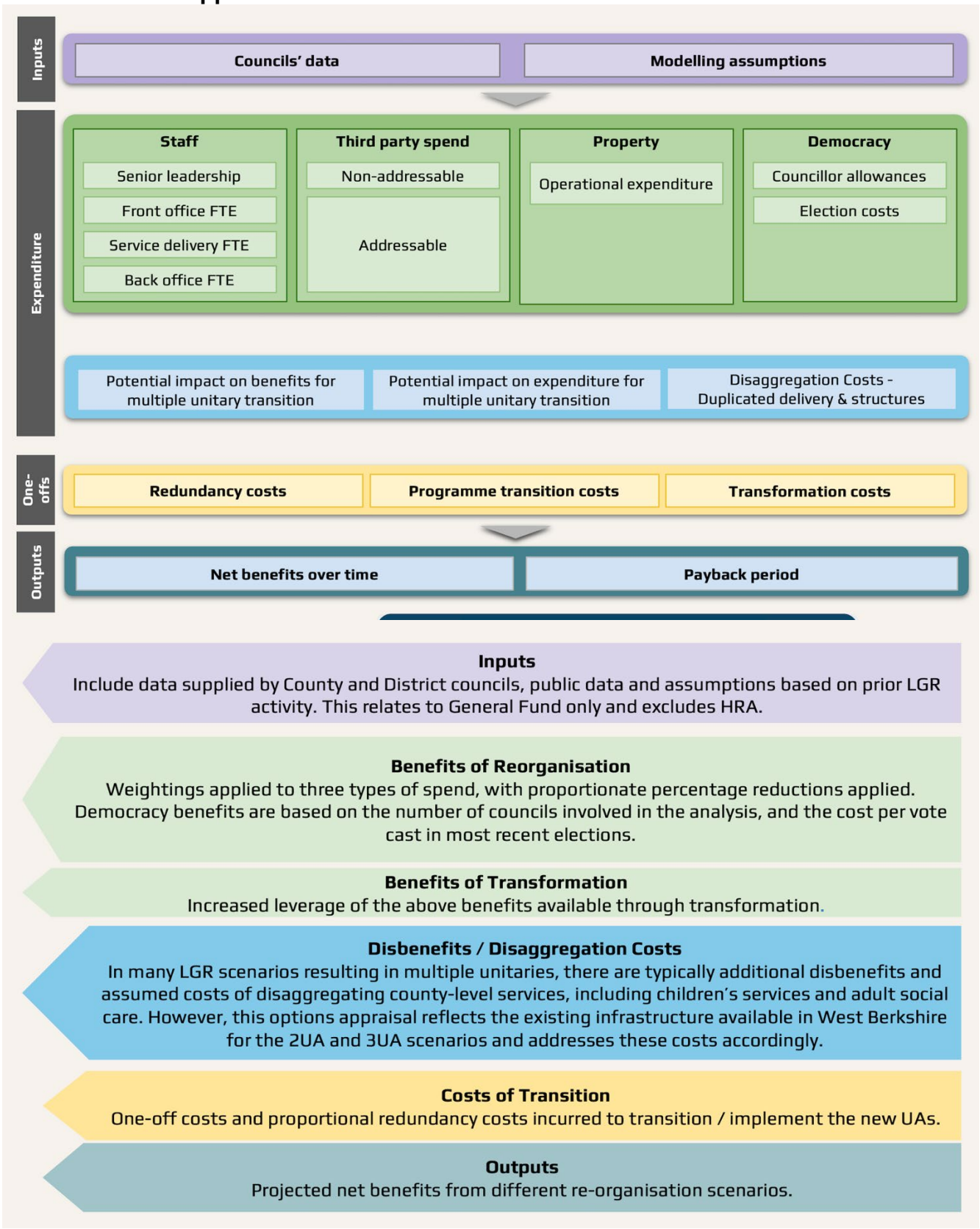
Income from government grants, council tax and business rates for the two unitaries has been projected using estimates included in the councils' MTFPs. Oxfordshire County Council's income has been allocated between the two unitaries based on modelling undertaken by Pixel. The projections do not include any estimates of the impact of the government's fair funding review, other than those made by the councils in preparing their MTFPs in February 2025 (and some revised positions in September).

In estimating future council tax levels, the weighted average council tax method has been used. This was modelled on 2028/29 Band D Council tax levels by applying tax base growth and expected precepts included in the councils' MTFPs, then harmonised to that rate on day one.

Transition and transformation costs and benefits
To determine the costs and benefits of transitioning to the new unitary councils and the transformation opportunities once in place, the councils have worked with their consultants to determine areas of opportunity and the likely costs to be incurred in delivering them.

SEND Deficits
For the purposes of this financial modelling it has been assumed that central government will assist local government in resolving the issue of SEND deficits.

Financial model approach



9.3 Cost-Benefit Analysis - Transition

Transition benefits
Under this proposal, the transition from seven councils to two presents significant opportunities for immediate and ongoing savings benefits estimated at £21.9 million per annum. These are detailed below. Savings and associated costs are taken from the options appraisal to enable comparison with the alternative proposals.

Salary savings
The existence of the two-tier system in Oxfordshire means there is significant duplication of senior management roles, which will be rationalised under the two-unitary proposal. The inclusion of West Berkshire Council in the proposal, however, means that many of the ongoing disaggregation costs that would be incurred if this were a two-unitary proposal wholly within Oxfordshire would be avoided, given the existence of two upper-tier management structures.

Analysis by PwC identifies ongoing annual savings, before additional on-going costs, of £17.2 million from year 5 onwards, resulting from the creation of the two unitaries. There are additional ongoing annual equalisation costs of £3.1 million for the proposed Ridgeway council, reflecting upper-tier services currently offered in Oxfordshire but not currently available in West Berkshire. It will be for the future Ridgeway council to determine whether these additional services are available in the future. These estimates exclude the impact of pay harmonisation.

Democratic savings
The transition to two unitaries will see a reduction in the number of elected councillors and a saving in the costs of running elections.

In terms of elected members, there are currently 331 district, county and unitary councillors across the seven existing councils, at a cost of £4.4 million per annum. Under the two-unitary proposal, this would reduce to between 160 and 200 councillors.

In terms of elections, the Oxfordshire district councils have a range of election cycles ranging from halves, thirds and all-out elections every four years. Oxfordshire County Council and West Berkshire Council both have all-out elections every four years. Transitioning to two unitaries and assuming that a four-year cycle is adopted will, together with the reduction in councillor numbers, lead to an annualised saving of £2.5 million per annum.

Savings from property
The existing councils all have extensive property assets, valued at over £3.6 billion, not all of which will be needed by the new unitary councils. Following discussions, PwC's analysis suggests that just under £10 million in one-off capital receipts and income could be delivered through property rationalisation as part of local government reorganisation, producing revenue savings of just over £2.2 million.

Third party spend
All seven existing councils procure a wide range of services, often individually, which means that there is significant scope for economies of scale in future procurements. PwC estimates the savings opportunity here to be of the order of £3.0 m per annum, based on applying a modest efficiency assumption in line with reductions found in other local authorities to have undergone LGR.

Transition Costs

The move from seven councils to two comes at a cost.

Having considered experiences elsewhere, PwC estimates that the transition costs of moving to a two-unitary model are likely to be around £30.4 million as set out in the table below:

One off transition / implementation costs	Total (£M)	Note
New unitarities setup & closedown costs • External Comms, Rebranding & implementation: • Internal Programme Management: • Creating the new council • Organisation closedown • Public Consultation • Shadow Chief Exec Costs	***7.5***	Programme management, administrative and legal activities linked to new council creation and closedown, public consultation, rebranding and communications ahead of vesting day, and shadow member and executive costs. Based on other actuals from other previous LGR experience.
IT & Systems Costs	***6.9***	Costs of data migration, systems migration, setting up new systems, hardware costs, integrating business systems etc. Based on other actuals from other previous LGR experience.
External transition, design and implementation support costs	***7.7***	Based on other actuals from other previous LGR experience.
Redundancy costs	***5.1***	Redundancy cost as a proportion of salary (current assumption) x total FTE saving
Contingency	***3.2***	Estimated 40% of total one off transition / implementation cost (excl. ICT)
TOTAL	***30.4***	

PwC's analysis of these costs compared to the two other proposals estimates the one-off transition costs of the one unitary council to be lower at £23.8 million, while those for the three unitary proposal are higher at £32.5 million. The one unitary proposal does not include West Berkshire, so it is not directly comparable.

Cost-Benefit Analysis and Profiling
The table below shows total forecasted benefits and costs of the reorganisation. The equivalent tables for the two other options can be found in appendix B.

BENEFITS OF AGGREGATION								
Category	Staffing Front Office	Staffing Service Delivery	Staffing Back Office	Staffing Management	Third Party Spend	Property	Democracy	Total aggregation benefits (annual)
Saving (£)	4,993,230	1,924,474	2,808,692	7,508,699	3,028,930	2,214,130	2,463,724	**24,941,879**

TRANSITION COSTS			
Category	Programme transition costs	Redundancy costs	Total transition costs (one-off)
Cost (£)	25,297,020	5,135,299	**30,432,319**

DISAGGREGATION COSTS				
Category	Additional senior leadership costs	Additional service delivery costs	Additional democratic costs	Total disaggregation costs (annual)
Cost (£)	0	3,058,000	0	**3,058,000**

NET BENEFITS		
Total net benefit after one year	Total net benefit after five years	Payback period
-24,909,667	16,632,379	4.2 years

Note: these only refer to transition benefits, not wider transformation benefits

Based on experience elsewhere, a conservative approach has been adopted to realising savings. Despite that, transitioning to two unitary councils is expected to payback within 4.2 years. This is compared to 3.1 years for the one unitary proposal, which focuses solely on Oxfordshire and does not consider the financial position of West Berkshire Council. The three unitary option has a payback period of 8.7 years.

9.4 Cost-Benefit Analysis - Transformation

Transformation benefits represent additional efficiency savings and income growth that the new authorities could achieve post-vesting day through localised service delivery agreements and transformation. These are over and above transition benefits. For the options appraisal PwC focussed on three key areas:

- Full Time Equivalent (FTE) staffing
- Addressable third party spend
- Income generation.

PwC's analysis shows likely benefits and costs of transformation against two scenarios, "base" – relatively conservative programme of change and "stretch" – a more ambitious programme of change (see table in section 9.1). PwC identified the two-unitary authority option as having the potential to deliver the highest level of savings through transition and transformation, noting that this is over the whole geography including West Berkshire. Examples of the type of transformation that underpins these figures are given in Chapters 7 and 8.

9.5 Detailed financial case

Building on the options appraisal, the second PwC document, the detailed financial case (appendix C) offers further details on the benefits and associated costs of the two-unitary authority proposal. This analysis has followed in-depth discussions between chief financial officers and their staff with PwC colleagues to produce a more refined view of the impact of transition and transformation, and to start to build a picture of the likely finances of the two councils.

Detailed financial case – transition

The transition benefits outlined earlier in section 9.3 have been refined. and the table below shows how the refined benefits are shared across Oxford & Shires and Ridgeway, as well as how they compare to the figures in the options appraisal.

	Option appraisal vs Detailed financial case				
	Option appraisal	Detailed financial case			
		Oxon & Shires	Ridgeway	Total	Variance to opt app
	£m	£m	£m	£m	£m
1) Benefits of aggregation					
Staffing					
Front office	5.0	2.4	2.3	**4.7**	(0.3)
Service delivery	1.9	0.9	0.9	**1.8**	(0.1)
Back office	2.8	1.4	1.3	**2.7**	(0.1)
Management	7.5	5.6	1.9	**7.5**	(0.0)
Total staffing	**17.2**	**10.3**	**6.4**	**16.7**	**(0.5)**
Third party spend	3.0	1.0	0.9	**1.9**	(1.1)
Property	2.2	1.4	1.4	**2.8**	0.6
Democracy	2.5	0.8	0.9	**1.7**	(0.8)
Total benefits	**24.9**	**13.5**	**9.6**	**23.1**	**(1.8)**
Additional service costs	(3.1)	0.0	(3.1)	**(3.1)**	(0.0)
Net benefits	**21.9**	**13.5**	**6.5**	**20.0**	(1.9)

As can be seen there is a modest reduction in the transition benefits as compared to the options appraisal, which used assumptions to enable comparability across the options.

Transition costs

Transition costs are as estimated in the options appraisal, and a detailed breakdown of that estimate is shown in the table below.

Category	Transition Costs	Oxfordshire 2UA Cost (£'000)
Programme transition costs	**External Comms, Rebranding & implementation** *Examples include: Staff Advertising, Venue/Room Hire, Subscriptions*	659
	External transition, design and implementation support costs *Examples include: Other Hired & Contracted Services & Consultants Fees*	7,686
	Internal programme management *Examples include: Staff Admin Recharge*	3,426
	Creating the new council: *Examples include: Training, Vehicle Parts/Maintenance and Contents Insurance*	1,464
	Contingency *Examples include: Other Expenses General & Miscellaneous Small Projects*	3,228
	Organisation closedown *Costs involved with legally and financially closing down councils and create sound budgetary control systems*	732
	Public consultation *Examples include: Survey Professional and Other Fees, General Materials, Entertainment and Refreshments*	494
	ICT costs *Examples include: IT Hardware, IT Repair Installation Maintenance and Training, IT Software & IT Licences*	6,862
	Shadow Chief Exec / member costs *Examples include: Electing the shadow cabinet, training costs*	747
Total Programme Transition Costs		25,297
Redundancy Cost - *Examples include: Redundancy payments (does not fully factor in pension strain)*		5,135
Total One-off transition costs		30,432

Transformation opportunities

The detailed financial case offers further insight into the transformation possibilities available to the new authorities. The table below is a high-level summary of what additional avenues can be explored, allocated against:

- Assets
- FTE
- Third party Spend (TPS).

Service Area	General Projections*	High-level Opportunities for Oxfordshire
Adult's	1-5%	• **Assets:** Examine opportunities to repurpose existing assets to support the provision of community-based services. • **FTE:** Organisational redesign to support effective service delivery model using latest technology to enhance impact and efficiency. Cross-cutting opportunities related to customer and contact management, as well as cultural and behavioural change. • **TPS:** Improved strategic commissioning across housing, mental health, and care homes to reduce duplication and improve' provider rate.
Childrens	1-5%	• **Assets:** Potential reduction in administrative buildings and integration of co-located services (e.g. care with housing, co-locating Family centres). • **FTE:** Rationalisation of commissioning teams and support staff across 2UA option. Cross-cutting opportunities related to customer and contact management, as well as cultural and behavioural change. Review use of data to support with enhance demand management, prediction and holistic care. • **TPS:** Review the care cycle, enhance preventative approach to care provisions and aim to reduce the rate of escalation for high-cost placements.
Place	6-10%	• **Assets:** Develop an asset strategy, identifying additional opportunities for income generation and cost recovery (eg. disposal of surplus assets post-reorganisation and review cost-recovery in comparison to similar Councils). • **FTE:** Review the service delivery model, to identify current service levels and standards, use of digital, efficiencies in existing operating model. Cross-cutting opportunities related to customer and contact management, as well as cultural and behavioural change. • **TPS:** Improved long-term contract management, commissioning and procurement capabilities to support greater grip over long-term management.
Corporate Services	6-15%	• **FTE:** Organisational redesign to remove duplicative activity and shadow spend within services, leveraging automation and emerging technology to streamline processes (eg. recruitment, P2P) and improve self-serve capacity. Cross-cutting opportunities related to customer and contact management, as well as cultural and behavioural change. • **TPS:** Review current use of agency spend as part of organisational redesign and assess opportunities to reduce reliance on external agency spend, particularly relating to specialist services (eg. Legal), and use of data to drive performance management.

**Transformation portfolios developed from working with Councils elsewhere, may vary depending on previous savings delivered, existing transformation in place, resource capacity. Savings projections draw on demand management, FTE release and reduced third party spend.*

Shown below is an assessment of additional transformation opportunities that may be explored following reorganisation, taking into account planned savings and existing transformation programmes, and drawing on conversations with officers.

Category	Reasoning
Front office FTE	Two Customer Experience Programmes are set to be delivered ahead of vesting day, which may give the incoming authorities with more digitised, capability-driven Front Office operations. However, given that this is only being explicitly delivered in two organisation, the overall size of opportunity is likely smaller than Back Office redesign.
Service delivery FTE	Benefits here would be focused on realising the benefits of more effective and efficient service delivery models, including implementing fundamental changes to service provision to reduce demand. Anticipated savings are lower than in the Front and Back Office, as service delivery activity is less impacted by digitisation but would still benefit from process optimisation.
Back office FTE	There are some planned transformation for back office and service delivery as part of OCC's organisational redesign, but there has overall been a greater focus on transforming the front office. Back office services are also more influenced by digitisation, improvements to ways of working and reduction of shadow or duplicative activity via the centralisation of operations.
TPS	There are opportunities to strengthen the grip over the future authorities' commissioning cycle, building on the initiatives underway in Oxfordshire County Council and enhancing the future organisation's overall commissioning, procurement and contract management capabilities.
Income	Some gains from income generation through review of sales. fees and charges for District charging of key services (eg. green waste, planning) and harmonising to new standards. Based on 23/24 RSX data, Oxfordshire has similar fees and charges rates with its comparator group (eg. Gloucestershire, Surrey, Buckinghamshire).
Assets	Review of current use of assets to assess cost recovery and usages of typically income generating assets (eg. car parks) and to align the strategic use of assets with service delivery models (eg. better co-location of services, repurposing certain buildings to enhance place-based service provision).

Potential savings from transformation firstly at Oxford & Shires, followed by Ridgeway, are shown in the tables below:

Category	Baseline (£'000)	Base %	Base (£'000)	Stretch %	Stretch (£'000)
Front office FTE spend	56,213	3%	1,686	5%	2,811
Service delivery FTE spend	59,279	1%	593	3%	1,778
Back office FTE spend	42,599	5%	2,130	7%	2,982
TPS	382,662	2%	7,636	5%	19,089
Income	73,496	0.5%	367	1%	735
Assets (Operational Spend)	11,225	0%	0	0.5%	49
Total			12,412		27,444

Category	Baseline (£'000)	Base %	Base (£'000)	Stretch %	Stretch (£'000)
Front office FTE spend	57,429	1%	574	5%	1,723
Service delivery FTE spend	60,561	1%	606	3%	1,817
Back office FTE spend	43,520	3%	1,306	5%	2,176
TPS	367,094	1.5%	5,506	3%	11,013
Income (Sales, Fees and Charges)	126,284	0.5%	631	1%	3,671
Assets (Operational Spend)	11,117	0.5%	49	1.5%	146
Total			8,672		20,546

In comparison to the options appraisal, the combined total of potential annual base transformation savings is £21.1 m compared to £25.6m the options appraisal, but the potential stretch saving is £47.9m compared to £37.9m in the options appraisal.

Council tax income

Within the detailed financial case are assumptions around what the Band D council tax could be for the proposed new authorities in 2028/29. This takes assumed Band D council tax, and estimated tax base growth, from the existing councils' MTFPs and uses a weighted average to harmonise these into a single rate for the new councils from day one.

Under this method, which has been favoured by most councils in recent rounds of LGR, there is no material change to aggregate council tax income. The decision on the level of Band D council tax for the new councils will be a matter for those councils, and they could choose not to use this method to harmonise, but whatever method is chosen will need to align with the government's referendum limits in place for the new councils. Based on the current referendum limits, the weighted average council tax levels calculated in this proposal are with those limits.

The 2028/29 weighted average Band D council tax for the proposed Oxford & Shires council would be £2,441.60. How this compares to the existing council's council tax is shown in the table below.

District	Tax base	County Precept (£'000)	County Band D (£)	District Precept (£'000)	District Band D (£)	Total Council Tax (£'000)	Total Band D charge (£)	Harmonised Band D (£)	Change on Band D (£)	Change %
Cherwell	62,034	137,223	2,212.1	10,765	173.5	147,989	2,385.6	2,441.6	56.0	2.35%
Oxford City	48,730	107,793	2,212.1	18,989	389.7	126,782	2,601.7	2,441.6	-160.2	-6.16%
West Oxfordshire	50,868	112,523	2,212.1	7,344	144.4	119,868	2,356.4	2,441.6	85.1	3.61%
Totals	161,632	357,540		37,099		394,639				

As shown in the table below, the equivalent 2028/29 weighted average Band D council tax for the proposed Ridgeway Council would be £2,325.80.

District	Tax base	County Precept (£'000)	County Band D (£)	District Precept (£'000)	District Band D (£)	Total Council Tax (£'000)	Total Band D charge (£)	Harmonised Band D (£)	Change on Band D (£)	Change %
South Oxfordshire	66,547	147,205	2,212.1	11,063	166.2	158,268	2,378.3	2,325.80	-52.5	-2.21%
Vale of White Horse	62,404	138,040	2,212.1	11,034	176.8	149,074	2,388.9	2,325.80	-63.1	-2.64%
West Berkshire	72,705	£0	£0	161,669	2,223.6	161,669	2,223.6	2,325.80	102.2	4.59%
Totals	201,655	285,245		183,766		469,011				

9.6 Investment

Approach to be taken to funding transition

As identified earlier, transition costs are estimated at £30.4 million for this proposal. There are currently sufficient reserves, including the ability to utilise the flexible use of capital receipts, across the seven existing councils involved in this proposal to meet these transition costs. Whilst no external funding is therefore required to support this transition, should government funding be available for transition costs we would expect all proposals for LGR to be treated equitably in terms of financial support. Further, we anticipate government funding for at least some of the transition costs will enable the councils to begin with a firmer financial footing, thus aiding long-term sustainability.

Approach to be taken to funding transformation

As it is transformation activity that will help support long-term financial sustainability and deliver better outcomes for residents, we would look to government to match fund our investment in these services to accelerate delivery.

9.7 Funding and Financial Sustainability

Key Assumptions around funding, including national policy developments

The timing of submission of LGR proposals coincides with the fair funding review, resulting in a lack of clarity over future levels of government funding for all councils.

In preparing the 2025/26 budgets, all seven councils prepared MTFPs covering the period to vesting day. All councils will have made their best estimates of funding levels for future years, based on the funding received for 2025/26 and on the direction of travel indicated in the initial Fair Funding Review 2.0 consultation.

Although there has been a further round of consultation on Fair Funding Review 2.0, uncertainty remains regarding future funding levels. As such, the key assumptions around future funding remain those reflected in the councils' latest published MTFSs.

Summary of financial sustainability of the two new councils

The two-unitary authority proposal for LGR offers the best solution for the future viability of local government in Oxfordshire and West Berkshire. It provides a unique opportunity to simultaneously address West Berkshire's exceptional financial support position, while creating two similarly sized, relatively low risk councils, that will be best placed to deliver the transition savings and transformation benefits outlined earlier.

The proposal enables these benefits by allowing existing unitary experience and infrastructure to be utilised in the creation and running of the two new unitary councils. The opportunity to utilise existing infrastructure allows for transformational efficiencies and limited disaggregation costs compared to the three-unitary proposal, which require an additional upper tier management structure to be created and produces smaller unitaries that may prove less financially resilient. The single-unitary proposal does not address the financial pressures experienced by existing unitary councils (social care commissioning budgets), which have created significant financial pressures in both Oxfordshire County Council and West Berkshire Council, the latter now being in receipt of exceptional financial support.

The analysis in this section demonstrates that the councils created under the two-unitary authority proposal will realise significant savings from transition and will have the potential to realise further savings from transformation. This will leave the new councils well placed to face future financial challenges.

Chapter 10 Implementation Plan and Approach in a Nutshell

Quick Chapter Summary

Creating two new councils is a complex task that must safeguard services, reassure staff and maintain public confidence. Without a clear plan, the risks of disruption, cost overrun and loss of focus on statutory responsibilities would be high.

The implementation plan addresses these risks through the following:

- **Objective:** Deliver two new councils smoothly and safely by vesting day, protecting statutory services, staff and residents.
- **Approach:** Phased, risk-managed implementation led by shadow authorities, overseen by an Implementation Board, and independently assured.
- **Continuity first:** Statutory services (children's, adults, housing, public protection) prioritised for safe transition.
- **Transformation next:** Early consolidation of corporate services (finance, HR, IT, procurement), followed by locality-led transformation.

Delivery will be sequenced and governed: shadow authorities and an Implementation Board will oversee the transition, supported by Senior Responsible Officers for each workstream, independent assurance and transparent reporting. Phased milestones, contingency reserves and

What people told us

"For the new council to secure trust from the residents, this will have to be set up from the beginning so that the new unitary council is seen as better than the previous councils."

The two-unitary model will:

- **Assure continuity:** clear leadership and accountability within each footprint.
- **Increase transformation capacity:** scale sufficient to modernise systems and roll out locality models.
- **Be future-proofed:** builds councils that are stable from vesting day and positioned for devolution.
- **Improve outcomes for residents:** continuity first with safe and legal services, then modernisation and prevention.
- **Enhance financial sustainability:** early corporate consolidation generates savings to protect services.
- **Improve service delivery efficiency:** streamlined contracts, shared systems and locality models reduce duplication.
- **Strong local leadership:** shadow authorities and early appointments ensure visible leadership during transition.
- **Resilience and deliverability:** phased milestones, independent assurance and risk mitigation provide confidence.

10. Implementation Plan and Approach

10.1 Introduction

This implementation plan has been prepared to guide the transition process towards the creation of two new unitary authorities for Oxfordshire and West Berkshire, ready for an assumed Vesting Day of 1 April 2028.

In developing the plan, we have had regard to the timetable issued by MHCLG and looked to local authorities that have already been through similar processes so that we can learn from their experiences and build on their successes.

Our approach will be guided by the principles of openness, transparency and collaboration. We will seek to involve local communities, stakeholders, and delivery partners in designing local government arrangements that respond to local needs and ambitions. We will build opportunities for co-production and ensure robust formal scrutiny mechanisms are in place throughout the process.

Our ambition is to create new unitary authorities that will operate safely and legally from day one, while providing a seamless transition for customers, staff, elected members, delivery partners, and other stakeholders.

The transition of services currently delivered by Oxfordshire County Council, including key services such as Social Care and SEND, will require detailed planning and an orderly implementation programme to minimise disruption and ensure outcomes for residents are unaffected across both proposed unitary authorities. This proposal has the benefit of having two councils which already provide upper tier services, with West Berkshire Council already operating as a unitary council and therefore providing good mitigation against the risks of disaggregation.

Services will be designed by those with the expertise and experience to do so and engagement with all stakeholders will be effective and timely. Robust governance will support the process and transition governance boards will oversee delivery and scrutinise progress, drawing on additional technical, legal, and financial expertise where needed to support sound decision-making. Elected members will play a vital role in this, providing democratic accountability and critical friend oversight to progress.

Recognising the different starting points for the two unitary authorities (Oxford & Shires merging services from three districts and a county council, Ridgeway combining two districts, a county council and an existing unitary authority), their approaches to ensuring a safe and legal transition will differ. There are learnings to share as well, as services across Oxfordshire and West Berkshire already have experience in aggregating and disaggregating, through previous initiatives like shared service delivery.

This will be a complex process, with many unknowns and hundreds of different strands that need to be brought together. There are also many risks associated with the transition that must be carefully managed. This will require an agile approach, and it is envisaged that the implementation plan will continue to evolve as the business case emerges and even after its rollout commences.

Vesting Day will be a key milestone. We are confident that the new arrangements will provide a sound platform for future transformation, to realise operational efficiencies and financial savings, while delivering improved outcomes for residents and service users.

Figure 1 sets out a high-level timeline with key phases and milestones, covering preparation, transition, implementation, and post-implementation transformation. Further detail on each of these phases is provided below.

10.2 Our phased approach

Phase 1 - Preparation and Mobilisation (December 2025 – Summer 2026)

During this phase:

- The proposals and supporting business cases will be submitted to government by the deadline of 28 November 2025.
- Government will review all the competing proposals for the area before deciding how to proceed.
- Government will then carry out a statutory consultation with affected local authorities, and other parties - it is anticipated that this will commence in early 2026.
- Once the consultation has concluded, Ministers will decide, subject to Parliamentary approval, which, if any, proposal is to be implemented, with or without modification. It is anticipated that an announcement will be made in the summer of 2026.
- Programme management arrangements will be put in place for each of the two new unitary authorities in advance of the government announcement to allow for rapid mobilisation in line with the government's ambitious timetable.
- The LGR process will be overseen by an LGR Board, which will include senior management representation from the constituent authorities. A series of thematic officer boards will be set up to progress particular workstreams. It is currently proposed to have seven boards, but the number and focus of the boards will be reviewed periodically to ensure they remain fit for purpose and reflect the priorities at the time. The programme board and project boards will be supported by a dedicated programme management office. The proposed programme management arrangements are shown in Figure 2 below.
- Communications with residents and stakeholders will continue throughout this and future phases to keep all parties informed of planned changes and developments, and to highlight opportunities for those living, working and learning in our communities to engage fully with this process whenever it is appropriate.
- A range of activities will be undertaken during this period to prepare for design in Phase 2. This will include working across all of the principal councils on preparation work that will be valuable irrespective of the option chosen by the minister. A degree of option specific work will also be undertaken to ensure that Phase 2 is best placed to proceed at the necessary pace.

Phase 2 – Design (Summer 2026 – April 2027)

Design and detailed planning work will begin once the government has confirmed the proposal it wishes to see progressed for LGR in Oxfordshire.

Once a decision is taken on which proposal to implement, the MHCLG will prepare the necessary legislation (Structural Change Order (SCO)) for Parliamentary approval.

New governance arrangements will be required during the transition period until the existing local authorities are abolished, and the new unitary authorities go live. Arrangements will be set out in the SCO; however, it is anticipated that a Joint Executive Committee will be established for each of the new authorities, with membership drawn from the constituent authorities' cabinets/executives. A Joint Scrutiny Committee will also be set up for each of the two new authorities to provide oversight and critical challenge of the transition process. Membership will be determined with regard to political proportionality. Member Task and Finish Groups may also be required to progress particular pieces of work.

Other activities that will take place during this phase will include:

- Confirming 'day one' requirements for all essential services so the new unitary authorities are safe and legal.
- Scoping of future requirements for all services.
- Reviewing existing contracts, including break clauses and expiry dates.
- Reviewing the property portfolio of each local authority, including any commercial investments.
- Developing service transition plans, including planning for the disaggregation and transfer of Oxfordshire County Council services and assets, and the aggregation of services across the constituent authorities of the new unitary authorities.
- Developing and agreeing HR plans for the transition of staff.
- Developing and implementing ongoing staff and trade union communications and engagement plans.
- Reviewing baseline ICT architecture and planning transition ready for day one (e.g. email addresses, building passes, Wi-Fi, printing, and systems access).
- Developing and agreeing on a budget for the transition year.
- Formulating governance proposals for adoption by the Shadow Authority, including:
- A new executive and committee structure
- A member code of conduct
- Member allowances
- Constitution
- Reviewing any ward boundary changes and making arrangements for the election of the shadow authority.
- The governance arrangements during the transition period will be determined by the SCO, but it is anticipated that this will involve the creation of a shadow authority for each of the new unitary authorities.
- Agreeing an external communications strategy and undertaking key stakeholder engagement to support transition.

Phase 3 – Implementation (May 2027 – April 2028)

The joint committees and joint scrutiny committees set up to oversee the transition will be stood down following the first annual meeting of the shadow authorities in April or May 2027.

Shadow authorities consist of elected members and appointed officers. Once created, the shadow authorities for Oxford & Shires and Ridgeway Councils will oversee key activities such as:

- Shadow authorities will be set up to support the smooth transition to the new local authority structure by Vesting Day on 1 April 2028. It is expected these authorities will be in place one year prior to Vesting Day, with the election of the shadow councils before 1 April 2027.
- Detailed integration planning and preparations for the transition of services to the new unitary authorities, including preparation of fully costed service plans based on previously developed blueprints.
- Development of the Council Strategy, and ensuring that all necessary services, policies and plans are in place for a safe and legal day one operation.
- Refining organisational structures set out in the design stage.
- Appointing the interim and permanent Head of Paid Service, other statutory officers and senior leadership roles.
- Budget setting for the new authorities, including consolidation of funding arrangements, such as council tax harmonisation, business rates collection, etc.
- Managing the transition of ICT systems.
- Overseeing the transfer of staff to the new authorities, with a focus on retaining a skilled workforce.
- Establishing payroll and pension arrangements.
- Ongoing staff and trade union negotiations.
- Ongoing stakeholder engagement, including reinforcing current partnerships and forming new partnerships, where appropriate.

Phase 4 - Post-transition (April 2028 onwards)

Once the new authorities formally come into existence on Vesting Day on 1 April 2028, the focus will move towards developing strategies for the medium- and long-term, which may include the following:

- Establishing a transformation programme.
- Implementing new enterprise resource planning/customer relationship management systems.
- Detailed review of existing contracts and third party spend, consolidating and rationalising spend, while seeking to take advantage of economies of scale.
- Harmonisation of fees and charges.
- Alignment of employee pay and terms and conditions.

Following Vesting Day, the focus will rightly be on delivering improved services for all those living, working and learning in the new council areas, but there will also be considerable work to close down the accounts of the former councils.

10.3 Key risks

We will adopt and apply the principles of effective risk management to support the transition to the new unitary authorities. This approach will follow an agreed-upon risk management framework, approved by the constituent authorities, and in due course, the shadow authorities, which will involve reviewing risks at the corporate, directorate, and service levels, while also ensuring that cross-cutting risks are captured to ensure appropriate identification, analysis, assessment, mitigation, reporting and review. There will also be appropriate levels of formal scrutiny throughout the process. Key risks and corresponding mitigations are set out in the table below.

Table 1: Key Risks and Mitigations

Risk	Mitigation
1. **Scale, complexity and pace of change**	
The LGR proposal involves a significant amount of change in a relatively short period, across multiple organisations, with the disaggregation and integration of assets, budgets, and services, while still delivering business-as-usual activity.	Our proposal lays the foundations for an efficient and seamless transition. Our proposed approach to programme management will ensure that the right skills, capabilities and governance are in place to deliver complex changes involving multiple workstreams. The constituent authorities have a successful track record on previous transformation and service improvement programmes that have delivered significant efficiency savings. Also, West Berkshire Council has the added benefit of being an existing unitary authority. Established in 1998, it has over 25 years of experience in delivering the full range of local government services, including services rated as good by Ofsted across Children's and Adults Services.
2. **Stakeholder support**	
The proposal involves multiple stakeholders who may have differing goals and priorities. This may result in disagreements in approach and preferred solutions. It may also result in a lack of alignment across other public services (e.g. police, health, etc).	We will work closely with stakeholders, both internally and externally, to build consensus and trust, identifying where there are different targets and agreeing on approaches to resolve issues as they arise. Decisions will be taken in an open and transparent manner, with reasons given for the decision made. A communications strategy will be developed to further support clear and consistent messaging throughout the transition process and beyond.
3. **Decision making and governance**	
There needs to be clarity on who is responsible for making decisions, when those decisions need to be taken, and that they are taken with the appropriate authority and consideration. Without this, there may be delays in implementing LGR, and the process may be open to legal challenge.	A framework will be established setting out the governance for the transition process, including roles and responsibilities (terms of reference for Boards, Committees, etc.). A clear timeline will be developed to show when each decision needs to be made. We will seek to learn from other authorities that have undergone this process, and we will consult regularly with colleagues in MHCLG to ensure that we have a safe and legally compliant setup from day one.

4. **Staffing**	
LGR will result in considerable changes for staff employed by the affected councils, including the transfer of staff to new employers, and changes to existing roles and responsibilities. The process will also place additional demands on staff, who will be required to support the transition while continuing to deliver business-as-usual activity. This could potentially result in additional stress, low morale, increased levels of staff sickness, and higher rates of staff turnover.	All staff across the affected councils will need to be involved in planning for the new unitary authorities. The HR process will be designed to support managers and staff, with comprehensive and timely communications throughout the process. Targeted support will be provided to specific individuals who have particular concerns or worries. Retention activity will be increased in areas where high turnover is anticipated, and prompt recruitment will be undertaken to fill any gaps created as a result of increased turnover. This will use secondments and agency staff if appropriate where shortfalls are forecast to be temporary.
5. **Finance**	
Budgets will be set to cover the costs of implementing the LGR process. However, there is a risk that these may be insufficient to cover the associated costs, especially if unforeseen activities are required. Also, there are uncertainties about the treatment of SEND High Needs Block deficits, which are currently off the balance sheet, but this arrangement is due to end in April 2028.	There will be close monitoring of costs throughout the LGR implementation process. This will ensure that any potential shortfalls or funding gaps are identified promptly as they arise.

Figure 1 - Implementation Timeline and Phasing

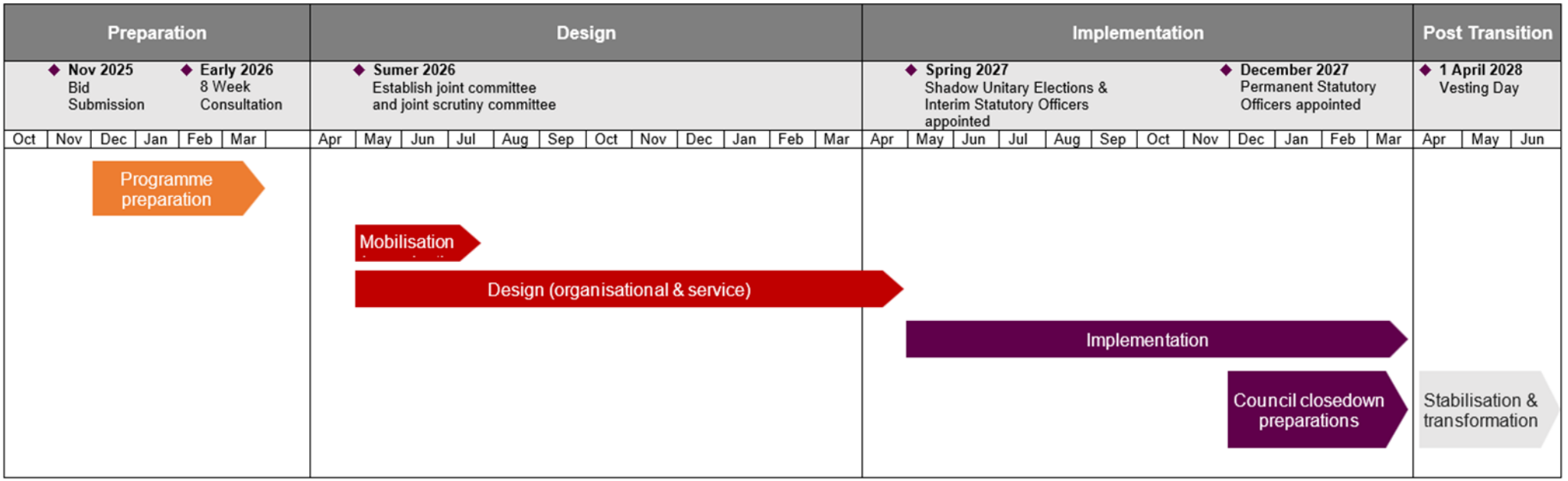


Figure 2: Programme Management Structure

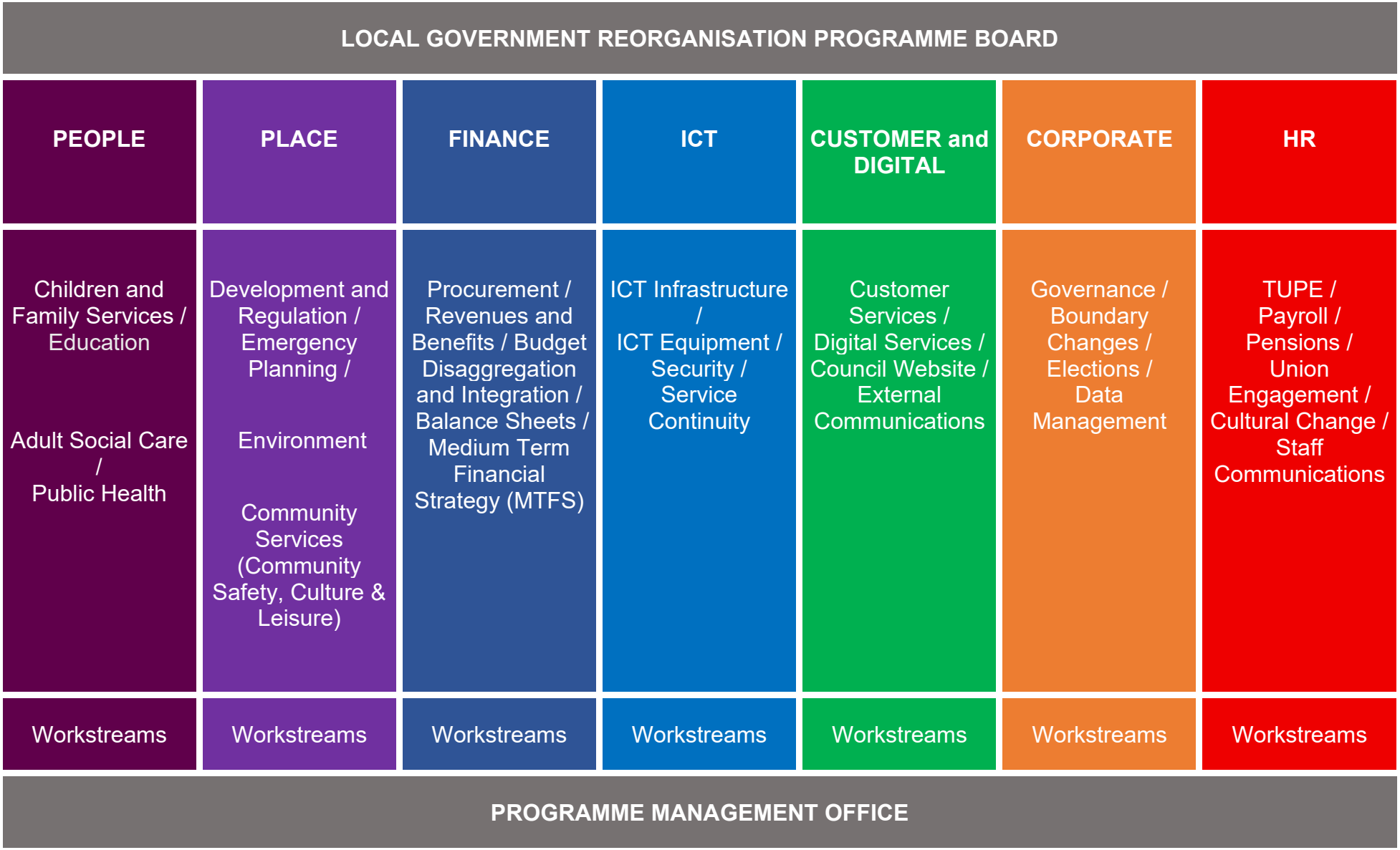


Figure 3 – High Level Timeline for Design Phase

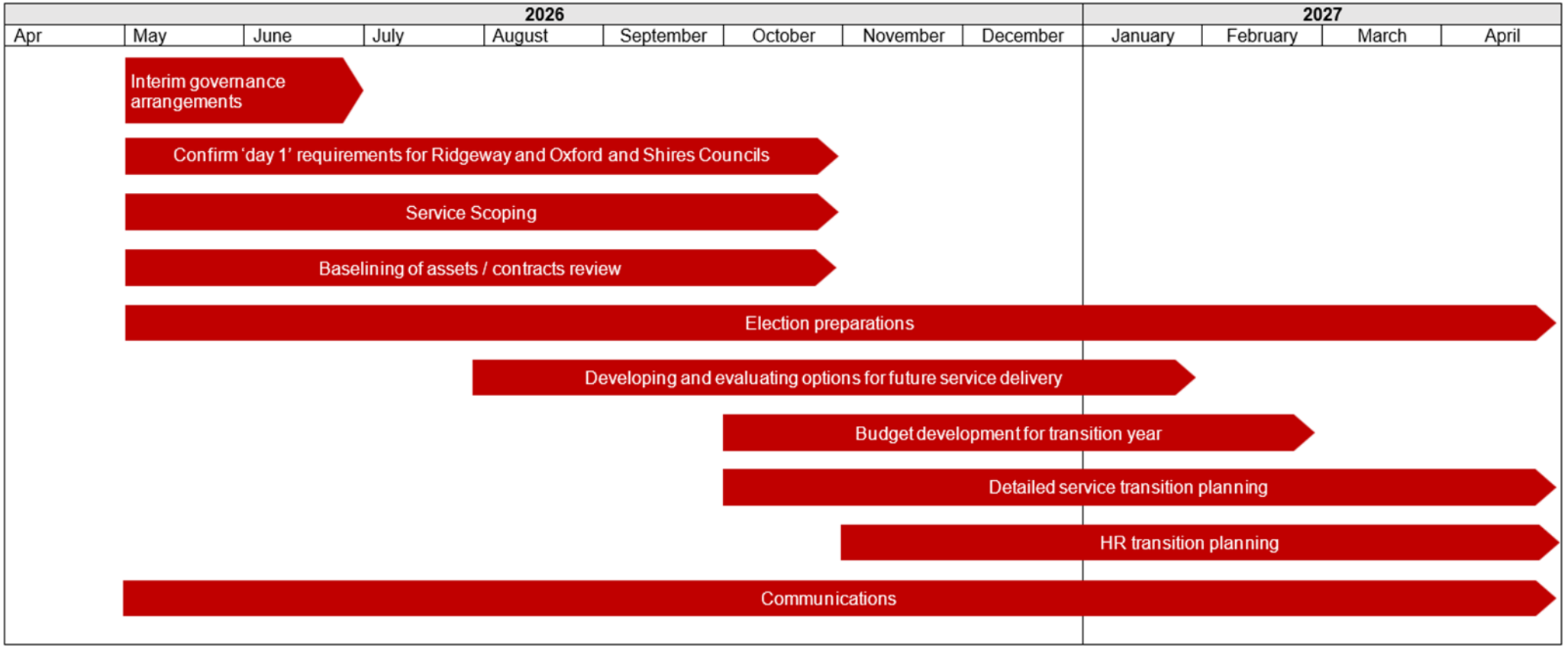
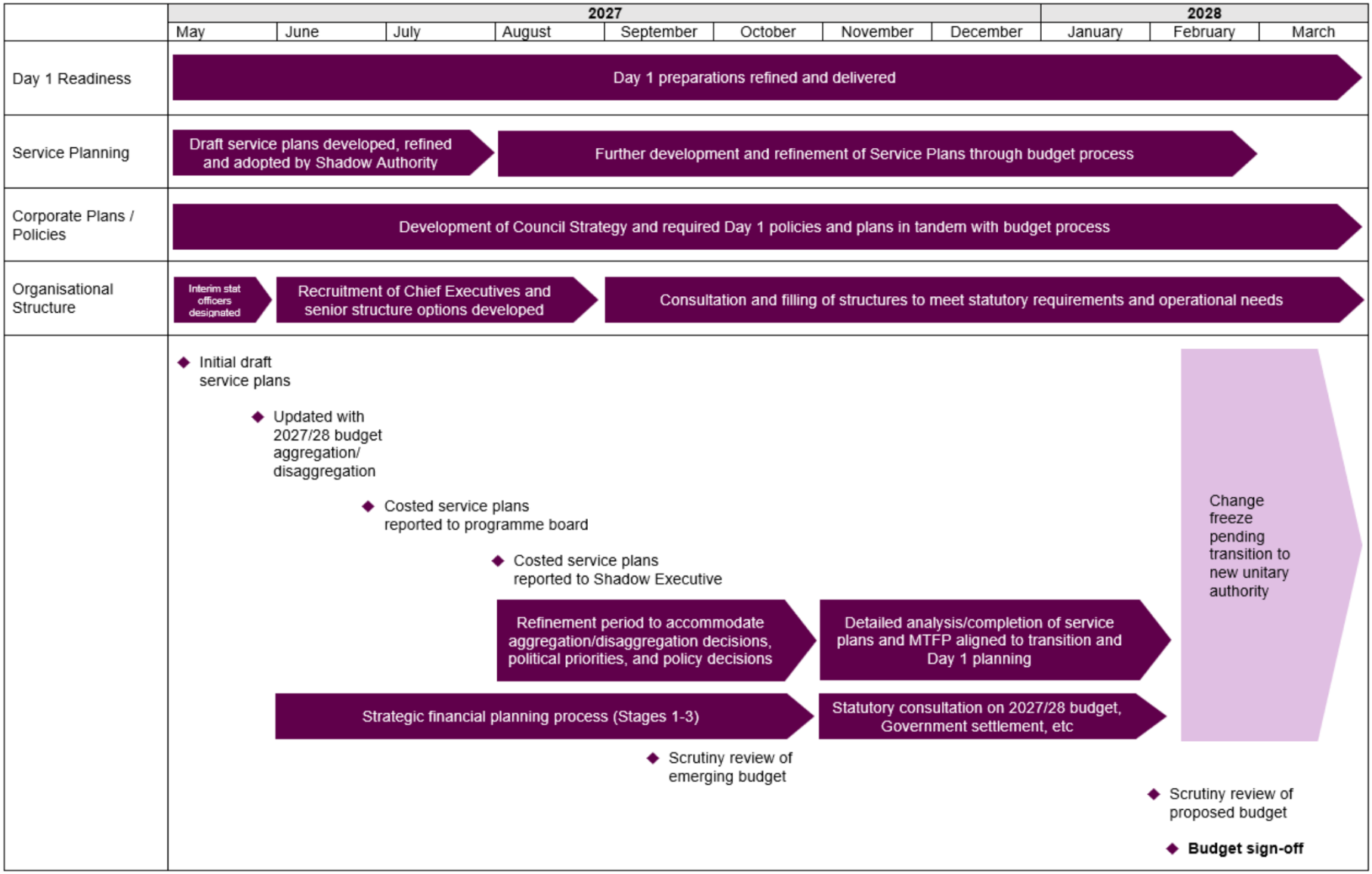


Figure 4 – High Level Timeline for Implementation Phase



Chapter 11 Engagement Summary in a Nutshell

Quick Chapter Summary

- **Our key engagement objective:** Reorganisation designed *with*, not *to*, communities — ensuring trust, legitimacy and local ownership.
- **This involved an unprecedented approach:**
  - Widespread and extensive engagement with residents, staff, parish councils, businesses, communities, public bodies, local partners and much more.
  - Engagement online, through surveys, face-to-face, in exhibitions in village and town halls, social venues like cafes, bars and pubs.
  - Many thousands of comments in response.
  - The most-extensive public engagement we've ever done, possibly the biggest ever carried out by councils in our area.

What people told us

"It is important that people feel they have a voice that will be listened to."

The two unitary option will:

- **Address the key findings of our engagement including:**
  - People want improvement.
  - They don't just want more of the same.
  - They want councils that are locally focused and responsive.
  - They want local accountability, identity and voice.
  - They want value for money, efficiency, better services, and protection of their communities.
  - They recognise the need for housing growth but are clear it needs to be managed strategically and carefully.

- **Outcome:** The engagement we carried out and the feedback we received has had a demonstrable and meaningful impact on our proposal.

11. Engagement summary

11.1 Introduction and response themes

From the outset of our proposal development, we knew that genuine, wide-reaching engagement would be critical to getting this right. We were clear that our engagement must be meaningful so that the proposal is based on a robust foundation of local views.

Local government reorganisation is clearly a big deal — it can fundamentally change how people access services that are vital to their lives and livelihoods, it affects how communities are represented, how future decisions are made, and it can have a generational impact on how people view their local identity. We wanted our communities to input into the design of new councils so that the proposal tackles the issues raised by our residents and creates a better future for the areas in scope.
And so, we ran a thorough and inclusive engagement process that informed people about what was happening but crucially also gave them a meaningful say in shaping the two-unitary proposal. The process was built around the simple principles of being open, local and collaborative. This chapter sets out how we did that, what we heard, and how it shaped the Oxford & Shires and Ridgeway proposals.

Top 3 most important council services
    - Education and schools
    - Roads and transport
    - Adult social care
- Top services that need improving
    - Roads and transport
    - Planning and development
    - Adult social care
    - Education and schools
- Most important economic priorities
    - Improving transport links
    - Revitalising high streets
    - supporting local business
    - Providing affordable housing
- Should decisions be made locally to help support economic growth and encourage new investment? - Yes 85%
- It is important that the council represents my local community's needs – Yes 75%
- It is important for the council to be based around an area that has a shared history and culture – Agree and strongly agree 75%
- It is important my council provides good quality services and value for money – strongly agree 83%

11.2 Our key takeaways from the engagement work

Summary breakdown of what we heard and what we learned

The following table breaks down the key points raised by different stakeholder groups

Stakeholder group	Key points raised
Residents	• Most important services are education/schools, roads and transport and adult social care. • A lot of services need improvement, mainly roads and transport, planning and development, adult social care and education. • Councils should do more to communicate, listen to residents and demonstrate that resident feedback is influencing decision-making. There is considerable concern about this currently, especially for county-wide services. • Economy is a big priority, especially improving transport, revitalising high streets, supporting local business and providing affordable homes. • Councils need to represent local needs. • Councils need to provide good quality services and value for money. • Concerns around a loss of their area's rural identity – this was common across the rural areas, but most acute in the areas immediately surrounding Oxford and to the east of West Berkshire near Reading. Conversely, those in Oxford itself were concerned that the city might lose its sense of identity. • Many people at our engagement events and in our survey expressed concern about the current performance of council services and want to see improvement. These were mainly county-wide services such as highways, transport and SEND.

Town and parish councils	• Real concerns and cautious optimism about what's to come, whichever proposal goes forward - but they need support to play their role. • Strong concern that the larger the unitary, the more parish and town councils will lose influence, feel ignored, or be marginalised. They pointed to the current lack of engagement or response from the county council on a range of issues and lamented the potential loss of district level. • Significant anxiety over the prospect of increased responsibilities for towns and parishes without the funding or staff to deliver them. Funding is the main barrier to taking on more. • Fears that power will concentrate in urban centres at the expense of rural and small communities. This was heightened in relation to the single county unitary and the Greater Oxford models. • Similar views were also expressed by residents living in the eastern part of West Berkshire, many of whom expressed a desire to remain part of a predominantly rural council rather than look to become part of any 'Greater Reading' urban settlement. • Town and parish councils want to be true stakeholders, involved in shaping their areas, but only with the support, respect and resources to do so.
Businesses	SME feedback: Strategic growth and business development: • They would value better collaboration and partnership programmes with the public sector. • Accessing support across all levels and departments of local government is a challenge, and a single point of contact would be beneficial. • They would value local government providing them with a doorway to networking opportunities and idea creation. • They wanted clearer pathways to selling their services to local and national government. • Business rate support, particularly in town centres where bricks and mortar businesses rely on each other for footfall. On a day-to-day business operation basis: • Better direct communication to businesses on service delivery updates and disruptions.

Community and voluntary sector	• Overwhelming support for locality-based working. • Questions raised about the continuity of care and maintaining safeguarding links. • Need mechanisms in place to ensure genuine local voice and accountability. • Concerns raised about potential overlap, competition, and closures due to boundary changes. • There is a strong call for scenario planning and transitional support to help community and voluntary sector organisations to adapt. • Protections need to remain in place for vulnerable individuals, especially those supported by non-commissioned services such as some domestic violence charities.
Developers	• Developers welcomed the opportunity to hear more, and the overriding concern was that they're keen for the transition process to be managed as smoothly as possible. In particular, they would like to see the Strategic Authority come forward as soon as practicable to enable regional spatial planning to support their growth plans.
Schools	• At the Head Teachers Forum, attendees were interested to learn about local government reorganisation and the positive opportunities that would arise from the proposals being presented for West Berkshire • Secondary school pupils told us they see South and Vale as being like West Berkshire. In West Berkshire they said they did not want to be aligned more closely to Reading as they do not see the geographical similarities between the two, and that it felt like a distinct place.

We have not included feedback from stakeholders where they may be identified, as we do not wish to put them in a difficult position or misrepresent their views in a published document. However, they have provided valuable input that has helped to shape the proposal. These stakeholders include:

- Local MPs
- Public sector partners such as police, health, local hospitals and fire service
- Oxfordshire County Council
- Oxford City Council
- Cotswold National Landscape
- Employers like Berkshire Youth, Greenham Trust and Newbury Racecourse
- Sports organisations like the Oxfordshire Football Association
- Oxford Civic Society
- Thames Valley Berkshire Local Enterprise Partnership
- Newbury Business Improvement District (Newbury BID)
- Oxfordshire Local Enterprise Partnership (Enterprise Oxfordshire)
- Housing associations
- Oxfordshire Association of Local Councils.

The feedback

Throughout our engagement work, we consistently identified several key themes. These themes have helped shape the design of this proposal, ensuring that we address the concerns raised and strive for the ambitions of our communities. The key themes are:

Our communities want change; they want improvement
Our survey responses were clear that people see a number of services currently performing poorly, such as highway maintenance, strategic planning and adult social care. Carrying on as we are should not be an option, and our communities want to see local government deliver better services than those they currently receive. This was reinforced in conversations with parish councils and other stakeholders, who felt that a change in the way services are delivered, and the geography in which they are delivered, is needed.

Our communities want councils that are locally focused and responsive
A concern raised again and again was that any new council should not be so big that it would lose touch with its residents. Communities already felt that they had experienced a loss of contact with services currently delivered on an Oxfordshire-wide scale. They also wanted to see councils based on an area relevant to their communities.

Our communities have ambition around our local economy
Responses to our survey and conversations with businesses and stakeholders highlighted that we should be ambitious about economic growth, both in our big towns and in the city, as well as in our rural communities. People want to see better strategic transport planning to link the areas, more jobs created and a coherent strategy for business growth.

New councils should provide value for money
The cost of council tax and the need for councils to be efficient were other repeated themes. Not only should we look to improve services, but we should also explore how we deliver them differently to achieve savings and minimise future council tax rises.

The expansion of housing needs to be managed strategically and carefully
There is a recognition that we need more homes, but the delivery of those homes must be managed effectively, protecting the environment, creating suitable infrastructure and improving affordability. While it wasn't part of our proposal, there was a lot of concern about the growth of Oxford encroaching on the green belt.

Our conclusions
These themes all point to creating new councils that effectively balance the need for efficiency with the need to maintain local representation and responsiveness. It suggests that we should look to deliver services differently and improve what we do as councils, rather than continuing with our current approach, which people don't think is working. The main discussion that seemed to enthuse people was that of a fresh start and a positive outlook for change.

The geography is crucial to unlocking housing and economic growth in a way that benefits communities across the area, ensuring we have the right transport in place, the right community facilities and the right jobs.

These themes, along with the more detailed feedback outlined below, have all fed into the proposal. We have highlighted throughout the proposal some of the places where stakeholder comments have shaped our thinking.

There is also more specific detail on some of the feedback we received – and what we've done with it – in the "How your feedback has influenced our proposal" section below.

11.3 Our approach to engagement

Who we engaged with

In summary, we spoke with:

- **Residents**, through more than 20 community events across the entire geography, and an extensive public survey.
- **Town and parish councils**, via a wide variety of online and in-person briefings and meetings, mailings and direct conversations. This included events we arranged, and ones we were invited to, including the Oxfordshire Association of Local Councils' Talking Tables event, and a number of parish council meetings.
- **Businesses, other public services and community representatives**, through targeted webinars, written updates, briefings, meetings and letters.
- **Council staff**, both directly and through internal communication channels.
- **Other key partners**, including voluntary groups, faith groups, MPs and neighbouring authorities.

This wasn't just about meeting a requirement — it was about designing something better for our communities, and doing that with them, not to them. We made every effort to engage as far as possible to gather a wide range of views and perspectives.

What we did

Working together as five councils, we developed and delivered a coordinated programme of engagement to provide stakeholders with clear information about the proposed changes and to gather input on key topics that would shape the proposal.

Our activities included:

- A public survey, open for six weeks to ensure residents had enough time to provide a carefully considered and informed view. Over **2,100** people and organisations responded to this survey. It focused on geography, identity, service delivery and local representation—core elements of the government criteria for the LGR proposals.
- Over **20 drop-in events** across Oxfordshire and West Berkshire attended by over 300 people. These were held in libraries, markets, community centres, cafes and other everyday venues. They allowed residents to speak directly with councillors and senior officers, ask questions, and share their views.
- Dedicated websites (twocouncils.org, ridgewaycouncil.org, and oxfordandshires.org) to provide clear and accessible information, FAQs and ways to take part.
- A tailored stakeholder programme, including letters, calls, meetings and online sessions for parish councils, MPs, businesses, public sector partners and other organisations.
- Consistent communications, with branded materials, digital media and social content, posters, newsletters, press releases, media interviews, and more to raise awareness and encourage participation.

Throughout, we worked collaboratively to avoid duplication, reduce costs, and maintain consistent messaging while tailoring delivery to local contexts.

What we didn't do

This wasn't an exercise in comparing the three proposals being developed in the Oxfordshire and West Berkshire area. We were clear and upfront that three proposals were being developed and directed stakeholders to the publicly available details of the other two, but we did not invite comments on them.

The best time for stakeholders to perform their own side-by-side comparison of the different options is once the proposals are fully developed, and during the government's statutory consultation phase.

11.4 Summary of how feedback has influenced our proposal

From the outset, we were determined that our public and stakeholder engagement would not be just a box-ticking exercise; instead, it would be the activity that kicked off, inspired, and thoroughly influenced our proposal.

We circulated a detailed summary report of the early engagement findings to the numerous officers who contributed to the development and authoring of this proposal, along with our detailed public survey report – accompanied by a guide to ensure colleagues used the feedback appropriately and correctly.

In the interest of transparency – and to practice what we preach in the Future Engagement Model section of the proposal – we have outlined below some of the most significant areas where community and stakeholder feedback have influenced our proposal.

The feedback we received is reflected throughout this proposal; therefore, the table below is by no means the full picture, but it gives a flavour of the extent to which our communities have been involved in the development of this proposal.

Shaped by engagement: **seven** important ways our communities have fundamentally influenced our proposal

You told us	What we've done	Where you can find this in the proposal
1. LOCALISM Councils should be locally focused, responsive and based on areas relevant to their communities. Some 75% of respondents to our public survey said that councils should represent the local community's needs. Residents were concerned that rural areas would be left behind, with power being centralised. The community and voluntary sector called out for mechanisms to ensure a genuine local voice and accountability	Chapter 8 of our proposal sets out a new approach to locality working. The concept of locality working and community empowerment runs throughout the proposal.	Throughout, including: **Chapter 8.4** Localities working and community empowerment.

2. QUALITY 83% of public survey respondents agreed that new councils should prioritise good services and provide value for money. You told us that service delivery in roads and transport, planning and development, and adult social care needs significant improvement. Economic growth is important, but it must go hand-in-hand with strong services and support for communities.	Our proposal (Chapter 7: Service Delivery and Transformation) takes a detailed look at service delivery and transformation. In part, this focuses on aggregating and re-establishing existing services along new boundaries, but also looks at some of the areas identified during public engagement as those requiring the most improvement.	**Chapter 7** Service Delivery and Transformation **Chapter 7.7** Other services
3. TRUST 80% of respondents to our public survey felt like their input wouldn't have much – or any – impact on how councils do things. This perception turned them off from participating in local democracy.	We're building the new councils from the ground up to ensure community feedback is hardwired into the decision-making process, and that there is a robust mechanism to ensure people see how their feedback has influenced things – restoring trust and increasing participation in local democracy – this ensures robust	**Chapter 8 Future Engagement Model**
4. VOICE Town and parish councils need a more coherent and formalised way to interact with all levels of the primary authorities to have a voice.	In Chapter 8 (How the new councils will work), we set out our Future Engagement Model, which identifies a Town and Parish Liaison function that will facilitate day-to-day engagement and support for parishes. It also provides an in-depth look forward to how community and stakeholder engagement becomes hard-baked into the democratic processes of the new councils.	**Chapter 8.4** Localities working **Chapter 8 Future Engagement Model**

5. IDENTITY You want to protect rural communities and the countryside. You want a strong voice for the city of Oxford and to ensure its sense of identity and history is preserved.	Chapter 5 sets out our vision and ambition for the two new unitary authorities, and in part, this identifies where the unique characteristics of different parts of our area will be supported.	**Chapter 5.2** How we will help secure better outcomes. **Chapter 8.3** Democratic arrangements and governance
6. EMPOWERMENT Businesses want better collaboration and partnerships with the public sector, as well as a single point of contact. The voluntary and community sector demonstrated overwhelming support for locality-based working.	Our localities model sets out processes to empower all parts of our communities to contribute meaningfully to the decisions made by the future councils. The local business sector will both help to co-design aspects of this process and, once the new councils are up and running, will become active participants.	**Chapter 8.4** Localities working and community empowerment.
7. SUPPORT There was a strong desire from Town and Parish Councils and the Voluntary and Community sector to ensure that the most vulnerable members of our communities, as well as our partner organisations, retain the support they get through the transition and adapt to what follows.	A carefully phased approach to preparation, mobilisation, and implementation will ensure the new councils are safe and legal from day one. The implementation plan sets out clear steps to ensure that no one is left behind.	**Chapter 10** – Implementation Plan and Approach

You can read the full report on our public survey at twocouncils.org/get-involved

12. Conclusion

12.1 Our case for change

This proposal sets out our vision for **two unitary councils for the area that offers the best balance of scale, efficiency and local empowerment and accountability.** The two new councils would be large enough to be resilient, withstand financial shocks and deliver services efficiently, but small enough to stay close to local communities.

At the very first step in this process, the government invited Oxfordshire councils to think innovatively before submitting a proposal. We looked at the make-up of local authorities in our area with the government's criteria, objectives and ambitions in mind. It became very clear to us that by considering **Oxfordshire and West Berkshire together** we could embrace the opportunity to create something new and better for all of our residents and communities. We have all worked enthusiastically to identify the best way to achieve these joint goals.

It speaks to our rational and pragmatic approach to identifying the best option that the financial analysis has shown that this model is the one that provides the **best potential annual financial benefits** when you take transformation into account. By developing existing upper-tier authority services across more sustainable footprints, we can protect those who need it most while securing the long-term viability of local services.

This model **builds on the strong track record of community involvement** already seen across Oxfordshire and West Berkshire and writes it into the DNA of how the new councils work, while allowing each council to focus on its own distinct but complementary identities.

The new council geographies represent a bit of a departure from what local people have known for the past 50 years or so but solving difficult problems has never been possible without new ideas. We know that our new unitary councils will be **the right building blocks for the government's ambitions for devolution** – and by getting the balance right, we can provide a firm base for the Mayoral Strategic Authority, and a genuinely local link to the communities it will serve. Doing so will support the government's aim to ensure devolved powers are truly in the hands of local people.

Five out of the seven councils across Oxfordshire and West Berkshire support this proposal, and we're excited about the opportunities solving those challenges will provide, and we're excited that we can do all of this with a strong foundation in historical ties and community identity.

This proposal embraces the once in a generation opportunity to create two new councils for one better future.

13. Appendices

Current appendices:

A. **PwC Comparative Data**
B. **PwC Financial Options Appraisal**
C. **PwC Detailed Financial Case**
D. **Planning for Devolution – A 'Growth' offer from the proposed 2 new Unitary councils**
E. **PeopleToo technical social care and SEND analysis**
F. **Glossary of terms**
G. **Government criteria checklist**

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