



WEST OXFORDSHIRE
DISTRICT COUNCIL

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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
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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 5 th February 2025.
Annexes	Annex A- One Oxfordshire Proposal Annex B – Oxford City Council Proposal Annex C – Oxford and Shires and Ridgeway Councils
Recommendation(s)	<p>That Full Council:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none">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

	<p>Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse District Councils and West Berkshire Council, with the working title of 'Ridgeway'</p> <p>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.</p> <p>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.</p>
Corporate priorities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 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 I 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)