



WEST OXFORDSHIRE
DISTRICT COUNCIL

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Name and date of Committee	EXECUTIVE – 19 MARCH 2025
Subject	INITIAL RESPONSE TO GOVERNMENT: STATUTORY INVITATION FOR LOCAL GOVERNMENT REORGANISATION
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 an overview of the interim plan and each of the options for local government reorganisation in Oxfordshire, prior to submission to the Government on 21 March 2025.
Annexes	Annex A – LGR Plan Annex B – Option 1 Annex C – Option 2 Annex D – Option 3
Recommendation(s)	That the Executive resolves to: <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Note the receipt of the statutory invitation received from the Minister of State for Housing, Communities & Local Government on 5 February 2025;2. Note the interim plan update as set out in Annex 1 and the emerging options for local government reorganisation set out in the Annexes 2-4;3. Note that the Leader of the Council with the support of Officers will write to the Minister of State for Local Government and English Devolution to outline the Council's commitment to working collaboratively with other Oxfordshire Partners on LGR

	and Devolution options and to set out the initial views from the Executive.
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	NO
Exempt	NO
Consultees/ Consultation	

1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- 1.1** On 16 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** Oxfordshire County Council responded to Government to request a place on the local government reorganisation fast track and a request to only postpone the elections in May 2025 if Oxfordshire could be fast tracked on the most ambitious timescales.
- 1.3** On 5 February 2025, the Government shared that Oxfordshire had not been successful in obtaining a place on the fast track and that elections would go ahead as scheduled on 1 May 2025. At the same time, the County Council and all other Councils in Oxfordshire were sent the statutory invitation in which to prepare a proposal/s to reorganise local government across Oxfordshire.
- 1.4** Since the receipt of the statutory invitation, all Councils across Oxfordshire have been working together on such emerging options accompanied by a single interim plan update for the County. That plan, and the three emerging options, are in the Annexes, which will be submitted to Government by 21 March, with a view to submitting final proposals by no later than 28 November 2025.

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** The Government has requested that Councils commence work to reorganise in two phases. The first phase is to share an update and outline options to Government by 21 March and it is understood that Government will share feedback with Councils at some point after the local elections. The second phase is to commence the development of final proposals and the Government expects all Councils to respond by no later than 28 November.

- 2.6** Onward timescales are not yet known for any statutory consultation, but the Government has confirmed that a new Council or Councils will go live in May 2028 with shadow elections to a Council or Councils in May 2027.
- 2.7** Following the agreed resolution of the proposed motion in the Full Council meeting on 26 February 2025, a cross-party working group will be set up to guide the process of working up the different options, that will then lead to Councillors making a decision on their preferred option at a future Full Council meeting.

3. EMERGING OPTIONS

- 3.1** Councils across Oxfordshire have been working together to arrive at a set of initial options in which to reorganise local government and move away from the two-tier system. In summary those options are below. The names of those Councils at (b) and (c) are descriptive at this stage:
- (a) A single unitary Council – Oxfordshire Council;
 - (b) Two unitary Councils – Oxford City, West Oxfordshire and Cherwell Councils and Ridgeway Council (derived from existing boundaries of South Oxfordshire, Vale of White Horse and West Berkshire Council);
 - (c) Three unitary Councils – Greater Oxford City Council, West Oxfordshire and Cherwell Council and Ridgeway Council (all with varying degrees of boundary changes driven by an extension of the existing boundaries of Oxford City Council).
- 3.2** The County has developed the single unitary council option, the two unitary council option has been developed by Cherwell and West Oxfordshire together with South and Vale of Vale of White Horse District Councils and Oxford City is leading on the development of the three unitary council option.
- 3.3** Currently all the options are in varying stages of preparedness owing to receiving the Devolution White Paper on 16 November 2024 clearly signalling fundamental change to local government structures and the statutory invitation being received confirming that change and commencing the reorganisation process on 5 February 2025.
- 3.4** The Government have not suggested that any of the criteria are weighted in any way, to prioritise one over the other, and therefore the ultimate decision will be the Secretary of State's based on the relative merits of each case against the criteria set and matters arising from the statutory consultation which the Secretary of State, via their department, will launch, manage and may report the findings of.
- 3.5** The Government have been clear within the Devolution White Paper that it wishes to ensure total coverage of Strategic Authorities across England. Whilst not an express policy objective, it is clear through the devolution framework that Mayors are encouraged through a significant amount of additional powers, funding and influence compared to those Strategic Authorities without a Mayor. To that end, it is in the interests of Oxfordshire residents,

businesses, institutions and investors to not just progress, but take an active role in the shaping of a future Mayoral Strategic Authority.

- 3.6** Two summits have already taken place inviting partners across Oxfordshire, Berkshire, Buckinghamshire and Swindon. A further summit is scheduled to take place at the University of Reading on 24 March. There have been several discussions within Oxfordshire, and representations received from District Council leaders and the majority of its Members of Parliament, about the geography of the Strategic Authority.

4. ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS

- 4.1** The Council may not wish to submit any options to Government in which to reorganise local government. Given Government's stated expectation that all areas should submit options by 21 March, this course of action is not recommended.

5. CONCLUSION

- 5.1** The paper and emerging options are aligned with the guidance from central Government and Members are asked to both note the receipt of the statutory invitation received from the Minister of State for Housing, Communities & Local Government on 5 February 2025, and the interim plan update as set out in Annex 1 along with the emerging options for local government reorganisation set out in the Annexes 2,3 and 4.

6. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 6.1** There are no immediate financial implications arising from the report, but resources will be required to work up the options outlined in the Appendices and ultimately to reorganise local government across Oxfordshire.
- 6.2** It should be noted that figures quoted in the options are indicative and these will need to be developed during the period following the submission of this proposal. It should also be noted that any potential changes to Local Government funding (i.e. fairer funding, business rate reset etc...) could have impacts on any future models of delivery.
- 6.3** Earmarked reserves have been made available as part of the 2025-26 budget to fund any additional resources that may be required as a result of the work needing to be done following the Devolution White Paper.

7. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

- 7.1** The legal basis for the statutory invitation having been issued is the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007.
- 7.2** This report, and the resulting decisions of Government, would signal the start of a significant legal and constitutional process.

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, which will be fully identified as part of the work involved in preparing the proposals for submission in the Autumn.

8.2 A detailed risk register will be created to monitor and manage any risks relating to the options and implementation of agreed proposal.

9. EQUALITIES IMPACT

9.1 There are no immediate equality implications arising from the report.

10. CLIMATE AND ECOLOGICAL EMERGENCIES IMPLICATIONS

10.1 There are no immediate climate and / or ecological implications arising from the report.

11. BACKGROUND PAPERS

11.1 None

(END)