

# Two Councils. One better future.

The two unitary Local Government  
Reorganisation proposal for  
**Oxfordshire and West Berkshire**



**Cherwell**  
DISTRICT COUNCIL  
NORTH OXFORDSHIRE



Listening Learning Leading



District Council



COUNCIL



WEST OXFORDSHIRE  
DISTRICT COUNCIL





# Oxford & Shires | Ridgeway

## Local Government Reorganisation (LGR) Proposal

## Contents

<b>1. Foreword</b>	<b>6</b>
1.1 Joint Letter from the Leaders of Cherwell, South Oxfordshire, Vale of White Horse, West Berkshire and West Oxfordshire District Councils	6
<b>2. Executive Summary</b>	<b>7</b>
2.1 A once in a generation opportunity to deliver two new unitary councils for Oxfordshire and West Berkshire	7
2.2 Our case for change	8
2.3 Two unitaries – delivering the best outcomes for our communities	8
2.4 Supporting devolution and driving growth	10
2.5 Transforming public services for a better future	11
2.6 Empowering our communities	11
2.7 Two new councils. One better future.	11
<b>3. Context and Background</b>	<b>12</b>
3.1 Oxfordshire and West Berkshire	13
3.2 The need for change	17
3.3 Making the case for creating unitary councils through LGR	18
3.4 The importance of working in partnership in LGR	19
<b>4. Options Appraisal</b>	<b>22</b>
4.1 Introduction	23
4.2 Options under consideration	24
4.3 Socio-Economic and Demographics	27
4.4 Analysis against the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) criteria	29
4.5 Financial comparison of the options	46
4.6 Overall evaluation and recommendations	50
<b>5. Vision and Ambition</b>	<b>51</b>
5.1 Our Proposed Visions	52
5.2 How we will help secure better outcomes	53



<b>6. Planning for Devolution – Our Growth Offer</b>	<b>55</b>
6.1 The importance of devolution	56
6.2 Proposal for devolution for Oxfordshire and West Berkshire within the Thames Valley	58
6.3 The benefits to devolution of two unitary councils in Oxfordshire and West Berkshire	60
6.4 Making it Happen – support required	64
<b>7. Service Delivery and Transformation</b>	<b>65</b>
7.1 Introduction	66
7.2 Adult Social Care	68
7.3 Children’s Services	70
7.4 Education and SEND	73
7.5 Homelessness	76
7.6 Public Safety and Public Health	78
7.7 Other service areas	81
• Planning and Development	81
• Housing Delivery	82
• Economic Development	83
• Transport, Highways and Public Rights of Way	84
• Waste and Environmental Services	85
• Parks and Grounds Maintenance	85
• Leisure	86
• Cultural, Arts and Communities	86
<b>8. How the new councils will work</b>	<b>87</b>
8.1 Introduction	88
8.2 Target Operating Model	88
8.3 Democratic arrangements and governance	92
8.4 Future Engagement Model	94
8.5 Localities working and community empowerment	95



<b>9. The Financial Case</b>	<b>103</b>
9.1 Introduction	104
9.2 Baseline, Approach and Assumptions	106
9.3 Cost-Benefit Analysis - Transition	109
9.4 Cost-Benefit Analysis - Transformation	111
9.5 Detailed financial case	112
9.6 Investment	116
9.7 Funding and Financial Sustainability	116
<b>10. Implementation Plan and Approach</b>	<b>117</b>
10.1 Introduction	118
10.2 Our phased approach	119
10.3 Key risks	122
<b>11. Engagement summary</b>	<b>128</b>
11.1 Introduction and response themes	129
11.2 Our key takeaways from the engagement work	131
11.3 Our approach to engagement	135
11.4 Summary of how feedback has influenced our proposal	136
<b>12. Conclusion</b>	<b>139</b>
12.1 Our case for change	139
<b>Appendices</b>	<b>140</b>
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	



# 1. Foreword

## 1.1 Joint letter from the Leaders of Cherwell, South Oxfordshire, Vale of White Horse, West Berkshire 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.



**Two new councils. One better future.**

## 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 Unitary Authority and Ridgeway Unitary Authority (UA)**

**Oxford and Shires Council**


**Ridgeway Council**

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Government criteria	
1. <b>A single tier and sensible geography</b> to improve housing supply and outcomes avoiding creating (dis/)advantaged areas	✓
2. Unitary local government must be the <b>right size</b> to achieve efficiencies, improve capacity and withstand financial shocks	✓
3. Prioritise the delivery of <b>high quality and sustainable public services</b> to citizens	✓
4. Councils work together in coming to a view that <b>meets local needs and is informed by local views</b>	✓
5. New unitary structures must support <b>devolution</b> arrangements	✓
6. Enable <b>stronger community engagement</b> and deliver genuine opportunity for neighbourhood empowerment	✓



**Oxford & Shires**  
471,716  
population



**Ridgeway**  
482,703  
population

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## 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.**

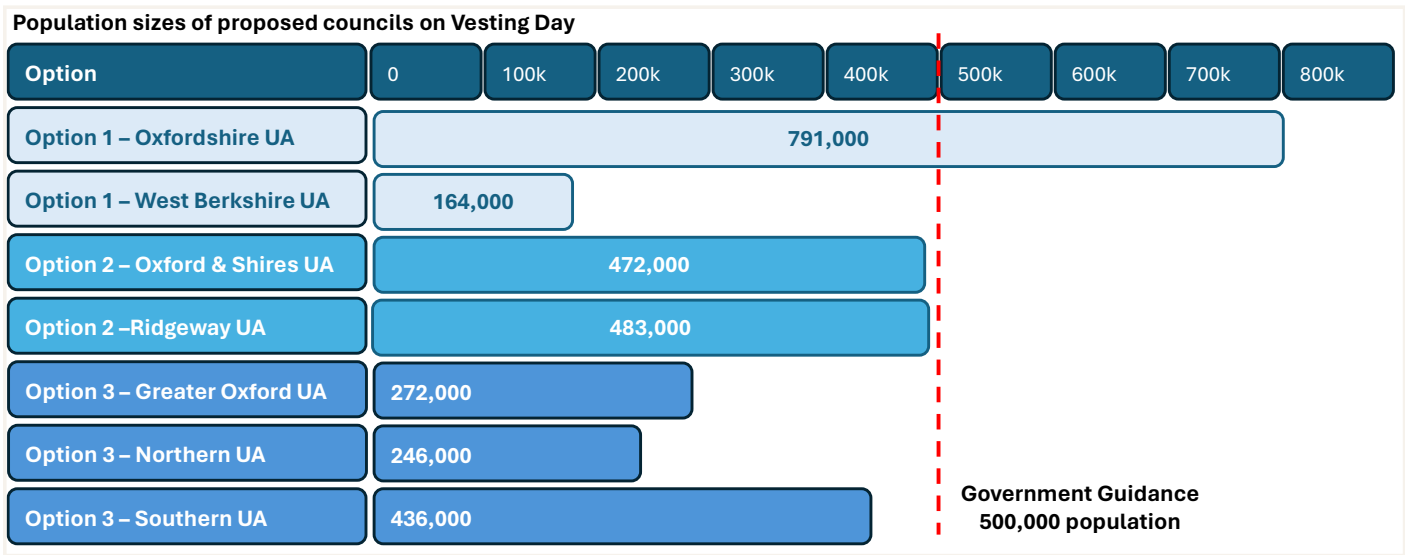
Local government across Oxfordshire and West Berkshire is under pressure. Population growth, ageing communities, and rising service demand are driving up costs and stretching services far beyond manageable

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.



Two new councils. One better future.



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 Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy (CIPFA) Financial Resilience Index, concludes that **the two unitary model represents the lowest risk option to secure financial resilience when considering the full geographical area covered by this proposal**.

**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, our agricultural sector and local job creation while protecting the very character of towns and villages that makes this area thrive.



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## 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. We will maximise the benefits of existing high-performing services and our collective expertise in delivering successfully within both rural and urban environments.

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 **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 address mental health challenges, 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 are deeply 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, town and parish councils and other partners to develop **a locality working model that works for everyone** across Oxfordshire and West Berkshire. Where it makes sense, we will explore opportunities for further devolution to town and parish councils.

## 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.”

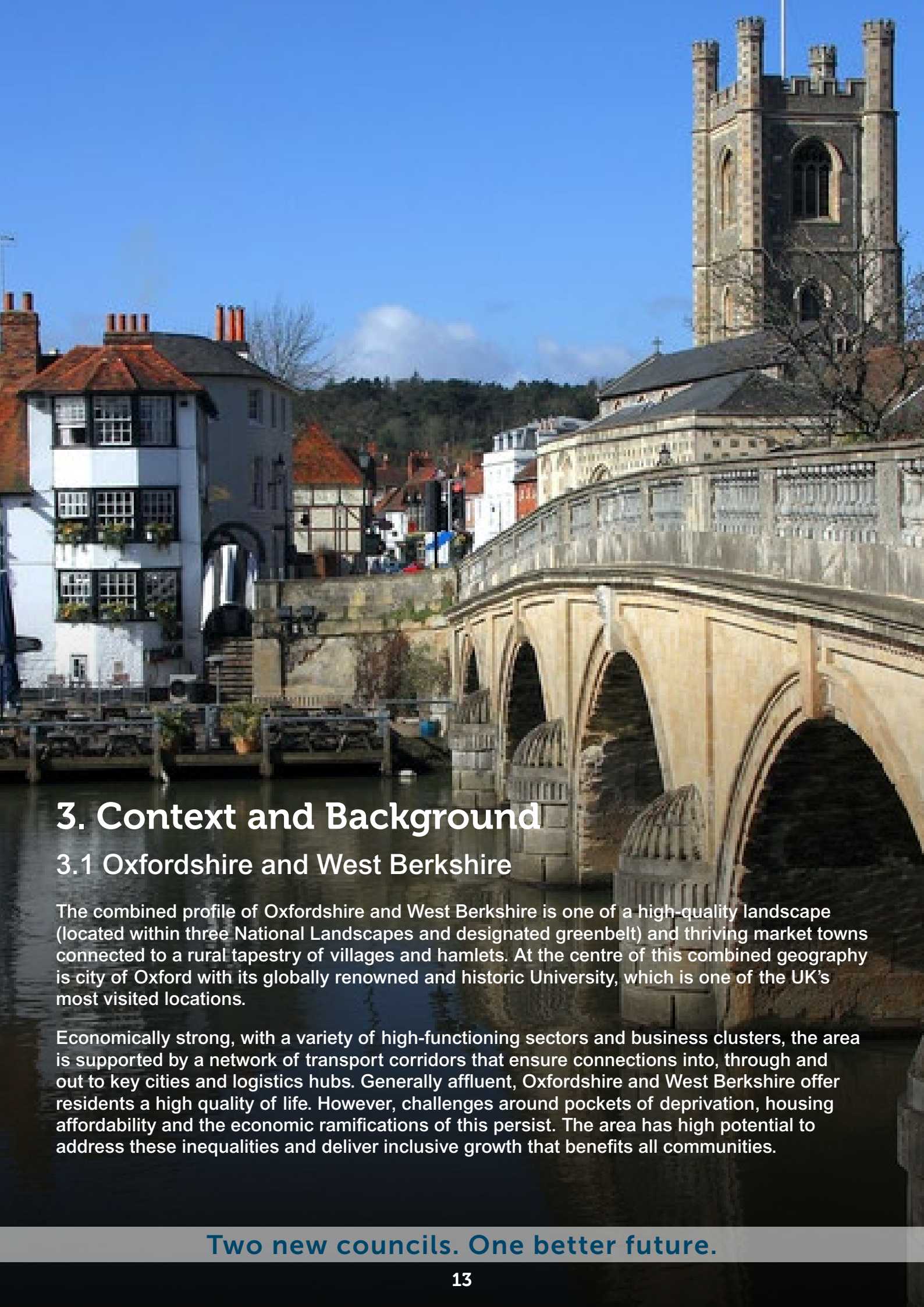
“If the geographic area covered by a council is too large, it will have more potential for conflict over priority needs from different parts of the council population and one area may feel ignored to the benefit of another.”

### 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.



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## 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 city of Oxford 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, natural 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.

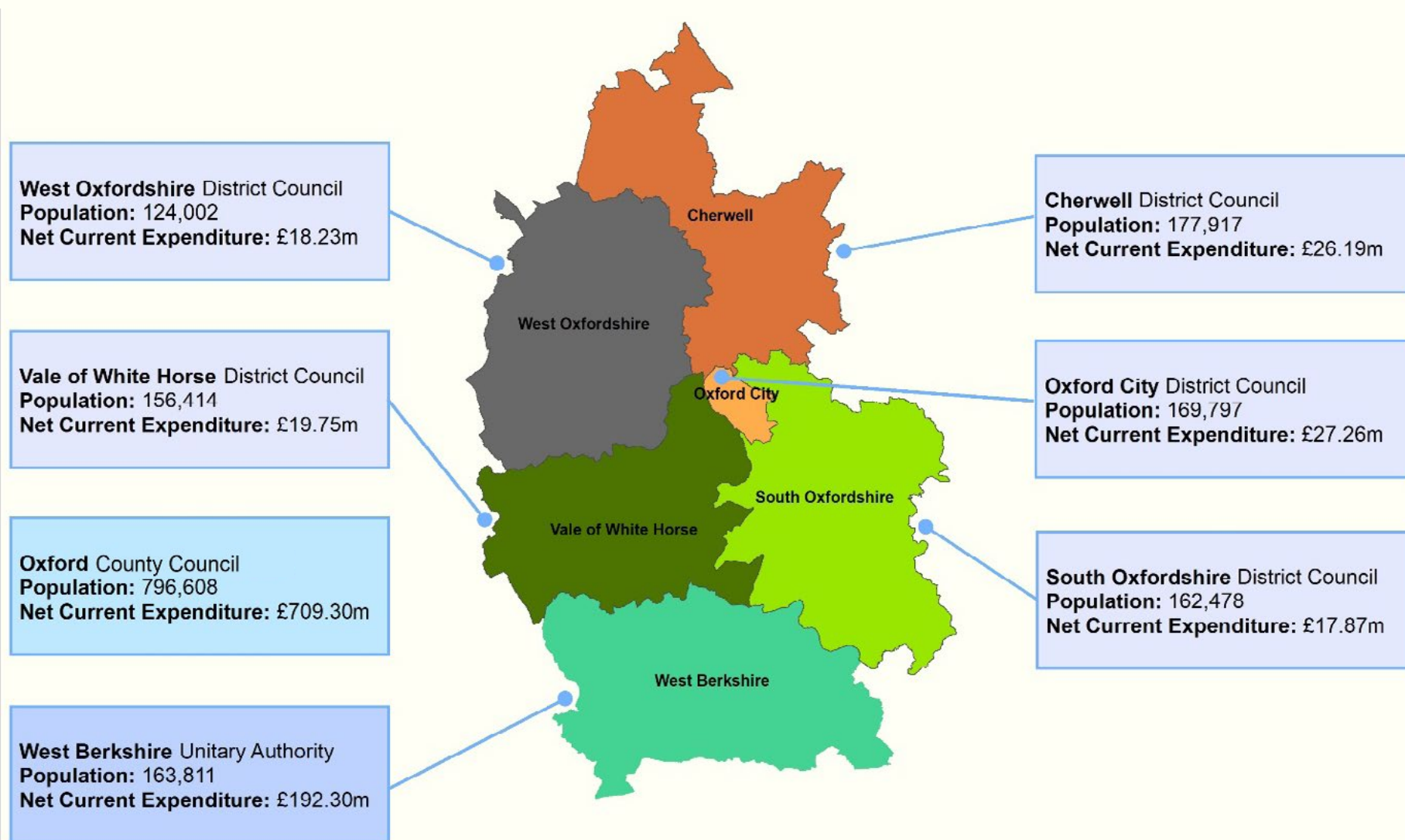
## The area at a glance

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	<a href="#">GVA per hour, ONS</a>	<a href="#">Business Demography, ONS</a>	<a href="#">Economic Activity Status, ONS</a>	<a href="#">Digital Propensity Index, ONS</a>	<a href="#">Stat-Xplore</a> (requires log in)	<a href="#">English indices of deprivation, MHCLG</a>	<a href="#">Health Index scores, England, ONS</a>	<a href="#">DWP benefits, GOV.UK</a> (requires log in)

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Oxfordshire and West Berkshire are home to over 900,000 people across their seven councils. These are comprised of one unitary authority (UA), 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.



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Source: ONS population projections for 2028,  
Net Operating Expenditure for 2025/26 from each council's MTFS/MTFP

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## 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.



## 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.



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## 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 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, Swindon and Wiltshire Integrated Care Board (BSW 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. We welcome the intention of the local ICBs to work collaboratively with local government to forge even more effective 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'. These arrangements give us a strong foundation for further devolution and 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.

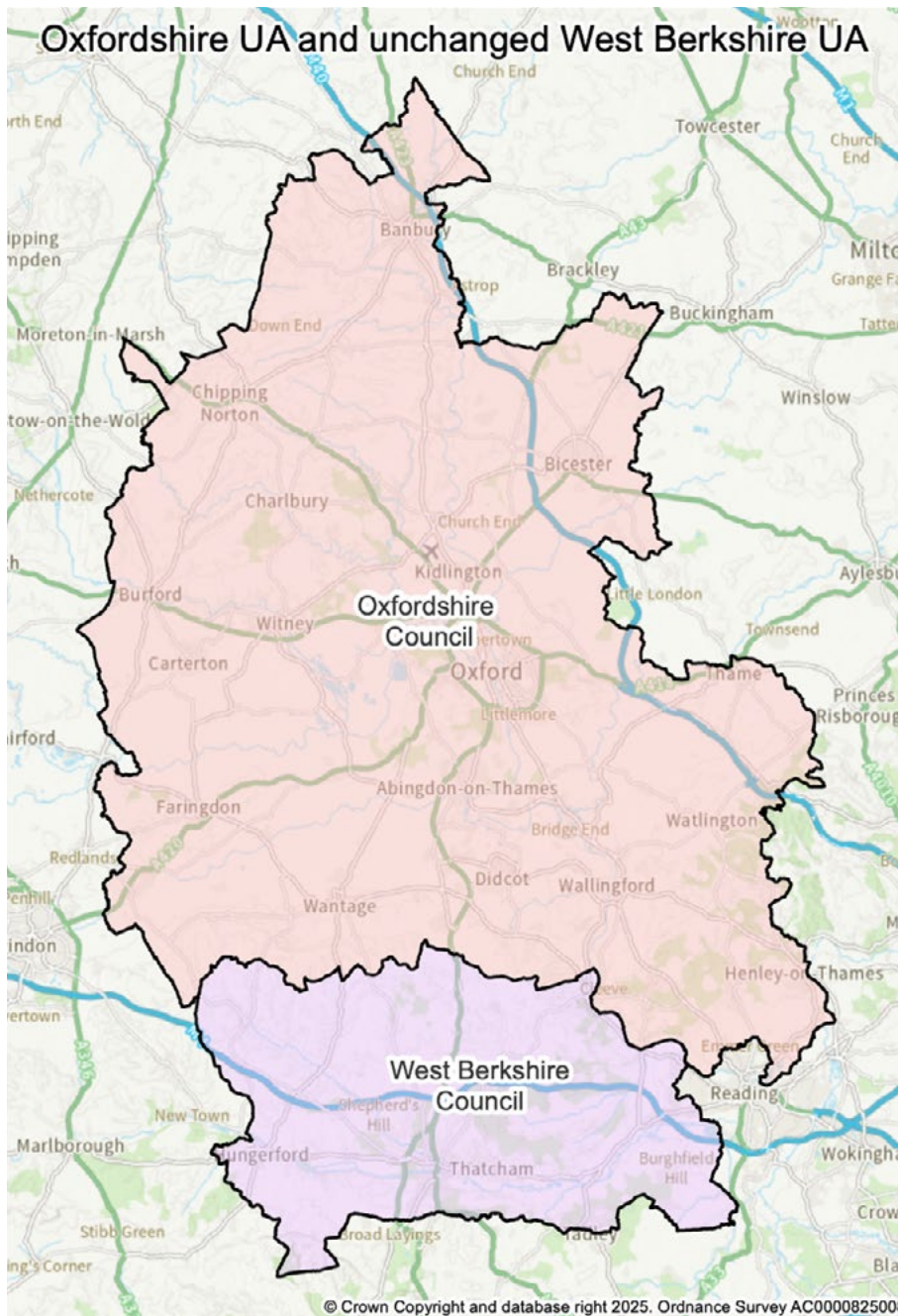


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## 4.2 Options under consideration

### Option 1 – Oxfordshire Unitary council and no change to West Berkshire Unitary council



This would create **a large unitary council** (c. 790,000 population)

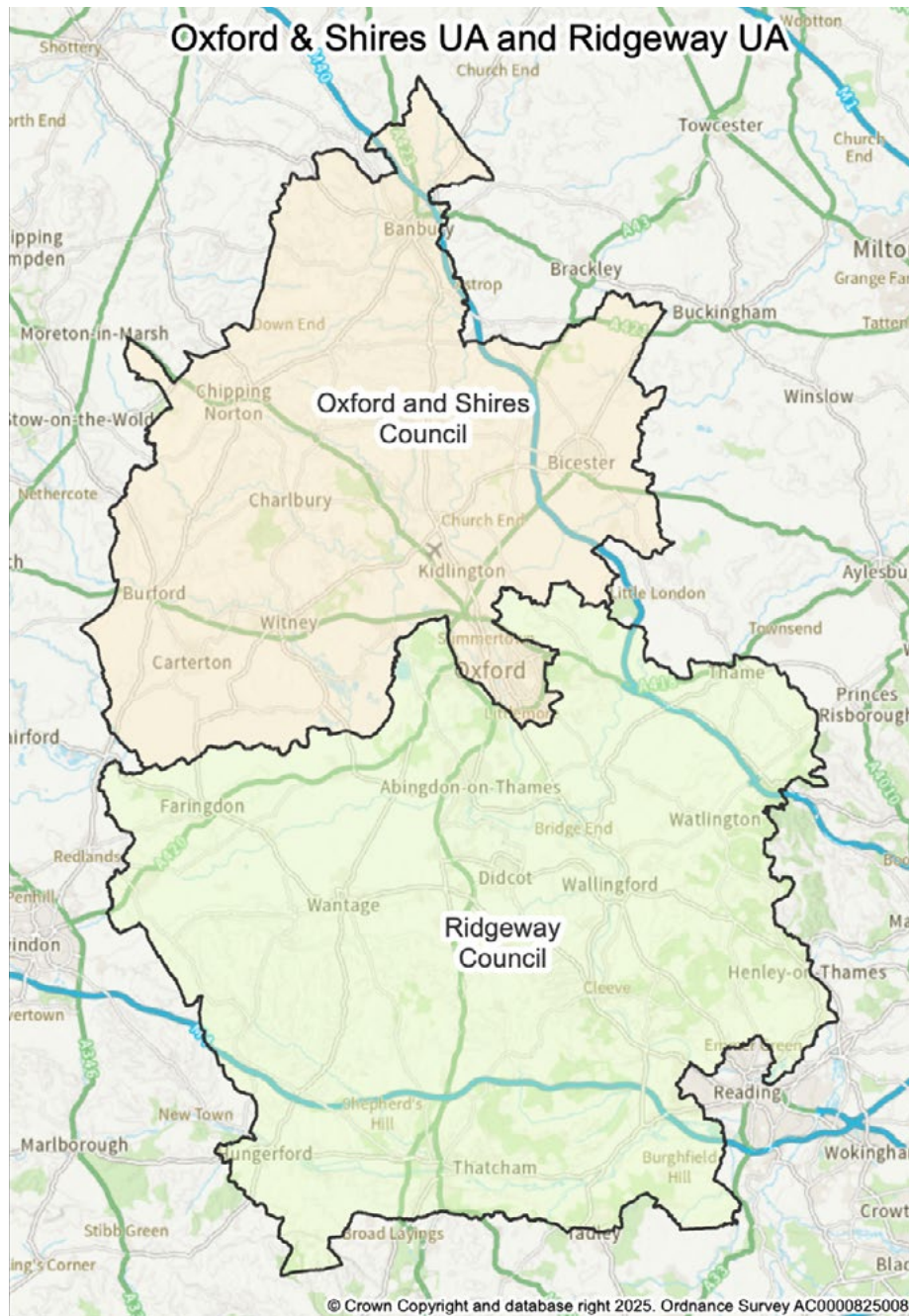
and leave **a small unitary council** (under 165,000 population)

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<sup>1</sup> population on vesting day based on ONS 2028 projections
- **West Berkshire Council** unitary would remain unchanged c. 163,811 population

<sup>1</sup> 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)

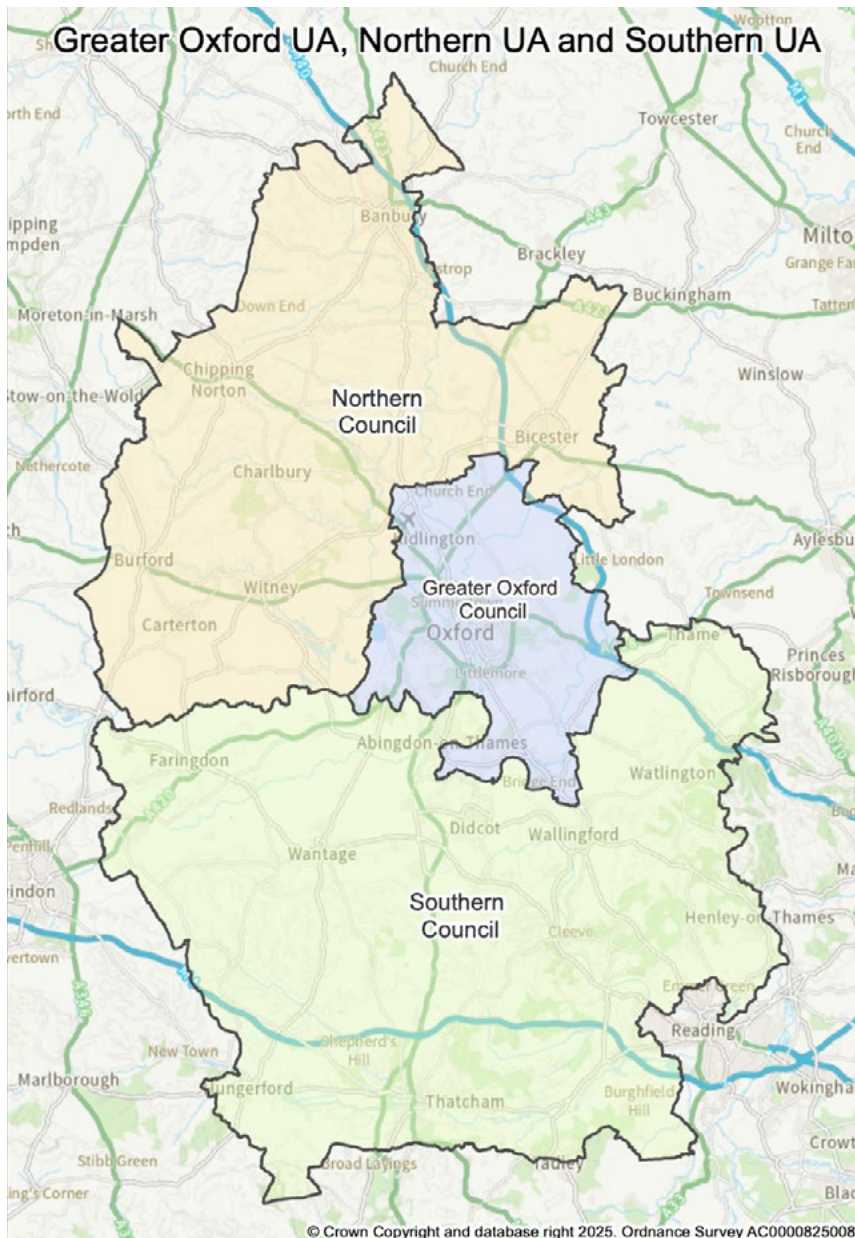
This option proposes the establishment of two new unitary councils:

- **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

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### 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.

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## 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
<b>Oxfordshire</b>	<b>766,129</b>	<b>773,131</b>	<b>778,869</b>	<b>784,525</b>	<b>790,608</b>	<b>797,209</b>	<b>803,838</b>	<b>810,363</b>	<b>816,697</b>
<b>West Berkshire</b>	<b>163,540</b>	<b>163,712</b>	<b>163,754</b>	<b>163,725</b>	<b>163,811</b>	<b>163,953</b>	<b>164,123</b>	<b>164,303</b>	<b>164,507</b>
<b>South Oxfordshire</b>	156,126	157,893	159,508	160,995	162,478	163,954	165,404	166,825	168,232
<b>Vale of White Horse</b>	148,246	150,552	152,620	154,532	156,414	158,299	160,110	161,864	163,566
<b>Ridgeway</b>	<b>467,912</b>	<b>472,157</b>	<b>475,882</b>	<b>479,252</b>	<b>482,703</b>	<b>486,206</b>	<b>489,637</b>	<b>492,992</b>	<b>496,305</b>
<b>Cherwell</b>	170,119	172,283	174,214	176,065	177,917	179,804	181,661	183,507	185,337
<b>Oxford City</b>	171,899	171,498	170,562	169,946	169,797	170,096	170,562	171,052	171,425
<b>West Oxfordshire</b>	119,739	120,905	121,965	122,987	124,002	125,056	126,101	127,115	128,137
<b>Oxford &amp; Shires</b>	<b>461,757</b>	<b>464,686</b>	<b>466,741</b>	<b>468,998</b>	<b>471,716</b>	<b>474,956</b>	<b>478,324</b>	<b>481,674</b>	<b>484,899</b>

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
<b>Oxfordshire</b>	<b>£41.30</b>	<b>0.14%</b>	<b>61.27%</b>	<b>0.10%</b>	<b>11.58</b>	<b>112.8</b>	<b>11.75%</b>
<b>West Berkshire</b>	<b>£54.10</b>	<b>-0.80%</b>	<b>63.00%</b>	<b>0.11%</b>	<b>9.89</b>	<b>114.2</b>	<b>13.87%</b>
<b>South Oxfordshire</b>	£45.70	0.00%	62.90%	0.05%	8.33	120.2	11.67%
<b>Vale of White Horse</b>	£45.70	-0.56%	63.00%	0.07%	8.38	116.4	11.33%
<b>Ridgeway</b>	<b>£49.30</b>	<b>-0.46%</b>	<b>62.98%</b>	<b>0.09%</b>	<b>8.92</b>	<b>116.9</b>	<b>11.60%</b>
<b>Cherwell</b>	£37.80	0.40%	65.10%	0.10%	14.47	106.2	11.69%
<b>Oxford City</b>	<b>£40.30</b>	<b>0.46%</b>	<b>53.60%</b>	<b>0.18%</b>	<b>16.99</b>	<b>101.4</b>	<b>12.60%</b>
<b>West Oxfordshire</b>	£38.00	0.42%	62.80%	0.10%	8.77	119.8	11.45%
<b>Oxford &amp; Shires</b>	<b>£39.00</b>	<b>0.43%</b>	<b>60.15%</b>	<b>0.12%</b>	<b>13.78</b>	<b>109.1</b>	<b>11.91%</b>
<b>England</b>	<b>£42.40</b>	<b>0.24%</b>	<b>57.39%</b>	<b>0.19%</b>	<b>21.67</b>	<b>100.8</b>	<b>21.33%</b>
<b>Units</b>	£ per hour worked, 2023	% change, 2023/2024	% employed, 2021/2022	%, 2024	IMD, 2019/2020	2021	%, 2023/2024
<b>Source</b>	<a href="#">GVA per hour, ONS</a>	<a href="#">Business Demography, ONS</a>	<a href="#">Economic Activity Status, ONS</a>	<a href="#">Statutory homelessness in England, ONS</a>	<a href="#">English indices of deprivation, MHCLG</a>	<a href="#">Health Index scores, England, ONS</a>	<a href="#">DWP benefits, GOV.UK</a> (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.

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## 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

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## 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

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## 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<sup>2</sup>. While there will be scope to collaborate across the two new authorities, the successful delivery of positive outcomes in each council will not be dependent on collaboration 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. The CIPFA Financial Resilience analysis for this option shows that it is the lowest risk overall with a good balance between Oxford & Shires (10.3) and Ridgeway (13.9).

**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.

<sup>2</sup> 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 suggests important imbalances in 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. The overall CIPFA financial resilience score for Option 3 is 35.3 which is materially higher than Option 2<sup>3</sup>.



<sup>3</sup> Individual scores have not been provided for Option 3 as they could not be verified by officers due to the proposed complexity of the boundary changes.

## 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 1	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	
“Guiding principle”, new councils should aim for a population of 500,000 or more.	R	Proposal would create the largest non-metropolitan unitary council in England (c. 790,000) and leave one unitary which is significantly below the guidance level (c. 165,000) and facing significant financial challenges	G	Proposal would create two unitary councils at the optimal scale (over 470,000 based on 2028 figures) and achieve efficiencies, avoid the risks of being too large and help to address the current financial challenges in West Berkshire	R	Proposal would create three unitary councils, two of which would be materially smaller than the guidance level (c.250,000) limiting scope to achieve efficiencies, improve capacity and withstand financial shocks
This figure may not always make sense, including on devolution, rationale to be set out in a proposal	R	The rationale for creating such a large unitary is not immediately clear beyond continuing with the current county structure. This risks losing distinct economic strengths in a large Oxfordshire and leaving imbalanced UAs in the CA context	G	The guiding principle makes sense in the context of the two unitary proposal. It supports two distinct and coherent economic geographies, to deliver effective growth and devolution aims, through sensible sized UAs	A	The rationale for creating such small unitary councils is not immediately clear beyond a desire to build a strong growth hub around city. This risks a lack of focus on the strengths of the other parts of the area
Efficiencies should be identified	A	The scale of the Oxfordshire unitary affords good scope for efficiencies if the risk of “business as usual” is avoided. This proposal does nothing to assist in creating new efficiencies in West Berkshire	A	The scale of the two unitary councils create good scope for efficiencies with the catalyst of change for all. This proposal will also assist in creating new efficiencies in West Berkshire	R	The scale of the three unitary councils materially curtails the scope for efficiencies but there will be a significant catalyst for change. This proposal could assist in creating new efficiencies in West Berkshire to a certain extent
<b>R</b> Does not meet the criterion <b>A</b> Partially meets the criterion <b>G</b> Meets the criterion						

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## 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
<div> <span>R</span> Does not meet the criterion           <span>A</span> Partially meets the criterion           <span>G</span> Meets the criterion         </div>						

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## 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.<sup>4</sup> 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.<sup>5</sup> **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).

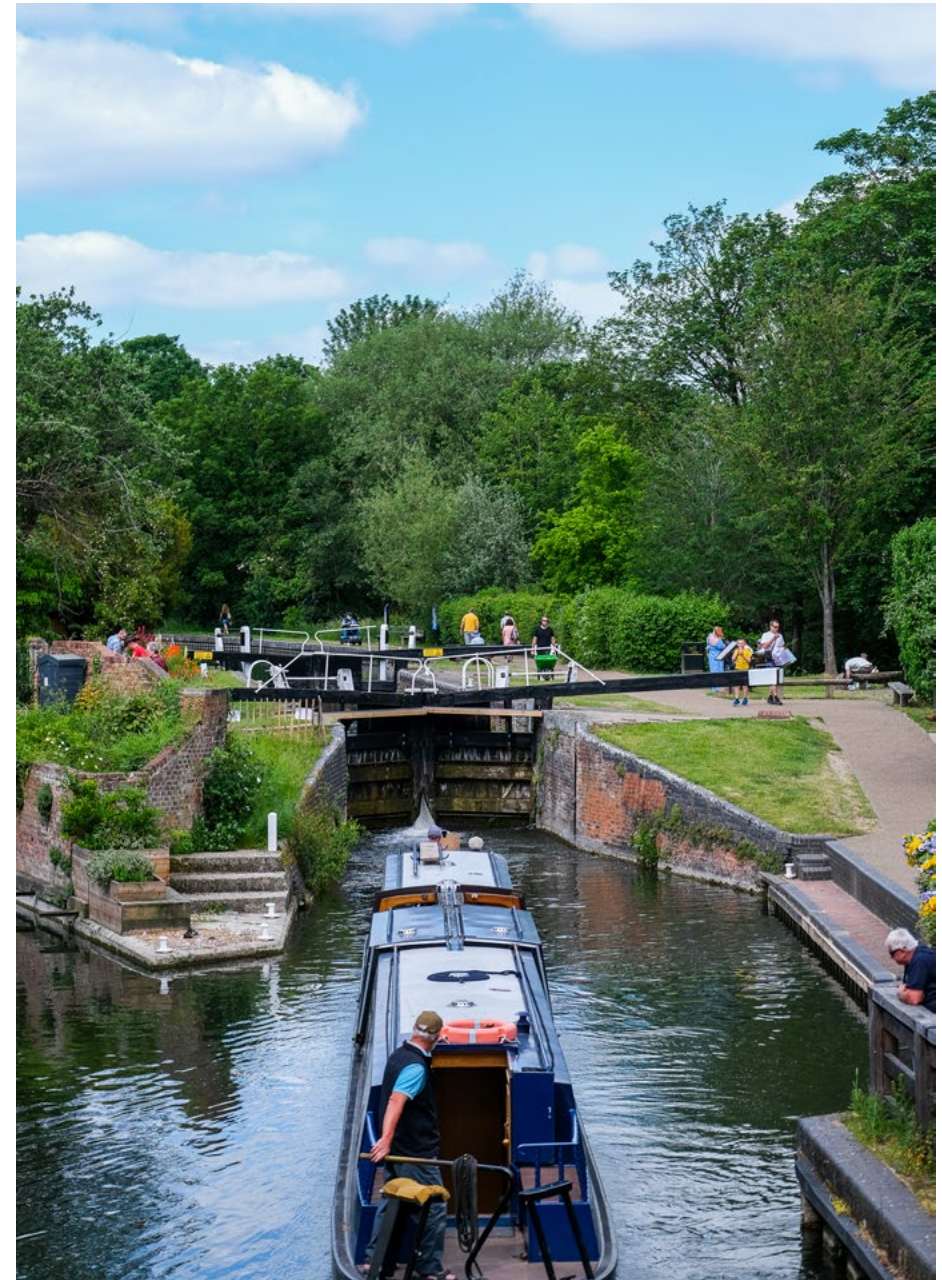
**Option 3** would create three unitary councils, with two of them being at a population level that is materially lower than the ‘guiding principle’ figure (c.260,000). The rationale for creating such small unitary councils is not immediately clear beyond a desire to expand and build a strong growth 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.<sup>6</sup> 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).

<sup>4</sup> Our approach to maximising the benefits of a fresh start is outlined in Chapter 8 (How the new councils will work)

<sup>5</sup> For more detail see Appendix B (PwC Analysis)

<sup>6</sup> 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
<div>R Does not meet the criterion</div> <div>A Partially meets the criterion</div> <div>G Meets the criterion</div>						

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### 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.<sup>7</sup> 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.<sup>8</sup> 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.

**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.

<sup>7</sup> For more detail see Appendix E (PeopleToo Analysis)

<sup>8</sup> Our approach to maximising the benefits of a fresh start is outlined in Chapter 8 (How the new councils will work)

## 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

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#### **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

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## 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	<b>A</b> <p>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</p>	<b>G</b> <p>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</p>	<b>G</b> <p>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</p>
Explain how any existing arrangements will enable strong community engagement	<b>A</b> <p>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</p>	<b>G</b> <p>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</p>	<b>G</b> <p>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</p>

**R** Does not meet the criterion  
 **A** Partially meets the criterion  
 **G** Meets the criterion

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**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
<b>Option 1</b>  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	
	<b>Transition plus Basic Transformation</b>	<b>48.2</b>	<b>38.4</b>	<b>2.8</b>	
	Ambitious Transformation (Stretch)	31.1	21.7	1.7	
	<b>Transition plus Ambitious Transformation</b>	<b>58.4</b>	<b>45.5</b>	<b>2.7</b>	
<b>Option 2</b>  Oxford & Shires and Ridgeway councils	Transition	21.9	30.4	4.2	Yes
	Basic Transformation (Base)	25.6	17.9	1.7	
	<b>Transition plus Basic Transformation</b>	<b>47.5</b>	<b>48.3</b>	<b>3.4</b>	
	Ambitious Transformation (Stretch)	37.9	26.5	1.7	
	<b>Transition plus Ambitious Transformation</b>	<b>59.8</b>	<b>56.9</b>	<b>3.2</b>	
<b>Option 3</b>  Greater Oxford, Northern and Southern councils	Transition	9.5	32.5	8.7	Partially
	Basic Transformation (Base)	25.8	18.1	1.7	
	<b>Transition plus Basic Transformation</b>	<b>35.3</b>	<b>50.6</b>	<b>4.7</b>	
	Ambitious Transformation (Stretch)	38.2	26.7	1.7	
	<b>Transition plus Ambitious Transformation</b>	<b>47.7</b>	<b>59.2</b>	<b>4.2</b>	

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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**<sup>9</sup> 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.

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<sup>9</sup>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
<b>Option 1</b>				
Oxfordshire UA	881.5	906.6	-25.1	-2.8%
West Berkshire UA	205.6	210.6	-5.0	-2.4%
<b>Option 2</b>				
Oxford & Shires UA	537.6	555.9	-18.3	-3.4%
Ridgeway UA	549.5	561.3	-11.8	-2.1%
<b>Option 3</b>				
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<sup>10</sup>

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.

<sup>10</sup> 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.



**Two new councils. One better future.**

# 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 whilst taking strong action on climate challenges and nature recovery. 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 positive solutions that meet local needs and deliver strong action on climate change and nature recovery.
- 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.



**Two new councils. One better future.**

# 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.

**Two new councils. One better future.**



# 6. Planning for Devolution – Our Growth Offer

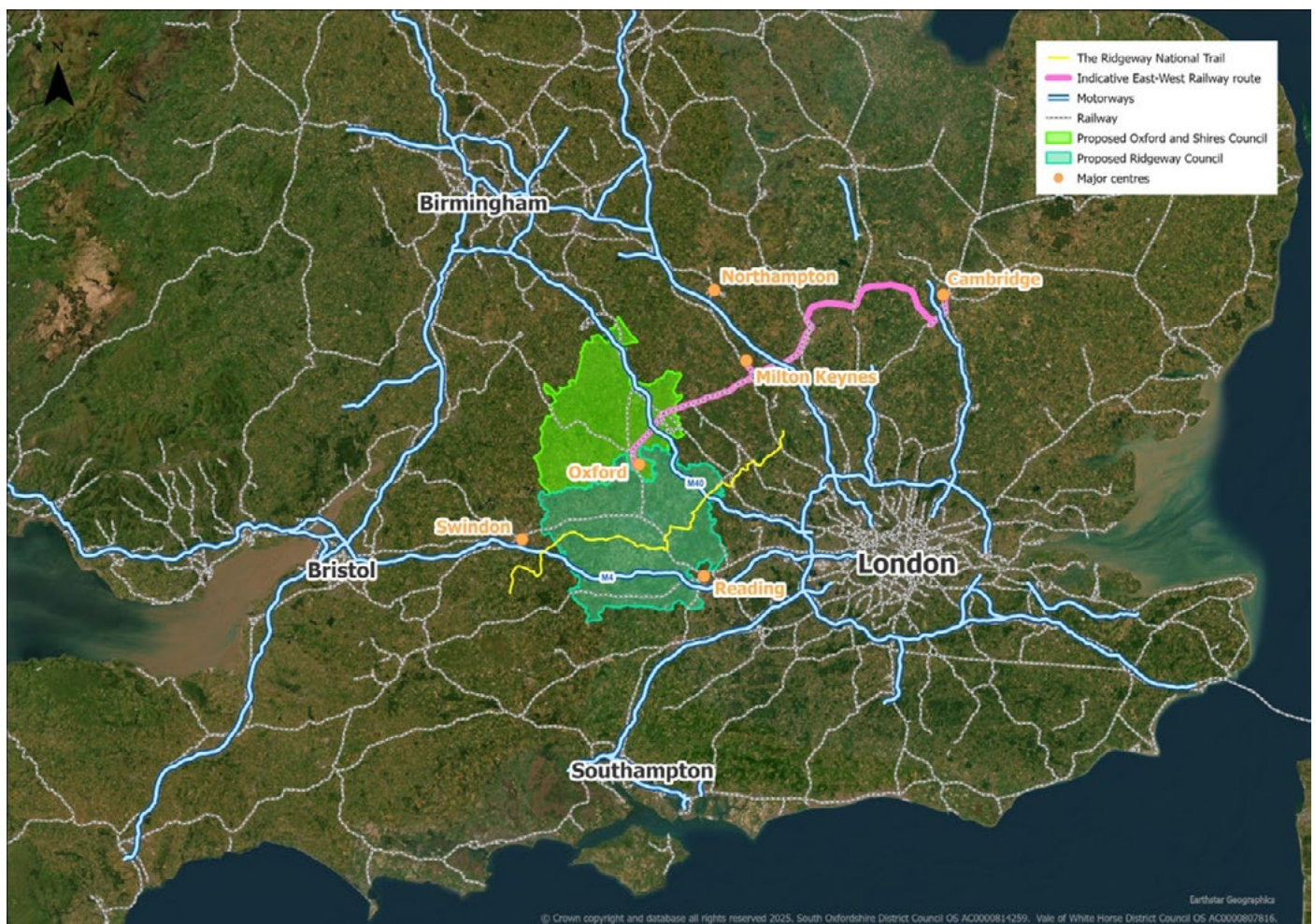
## 6.1 The importance of devolution

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



**Two new councils. One better future.**



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.



**Two new councils. One better future.**

## 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 it 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

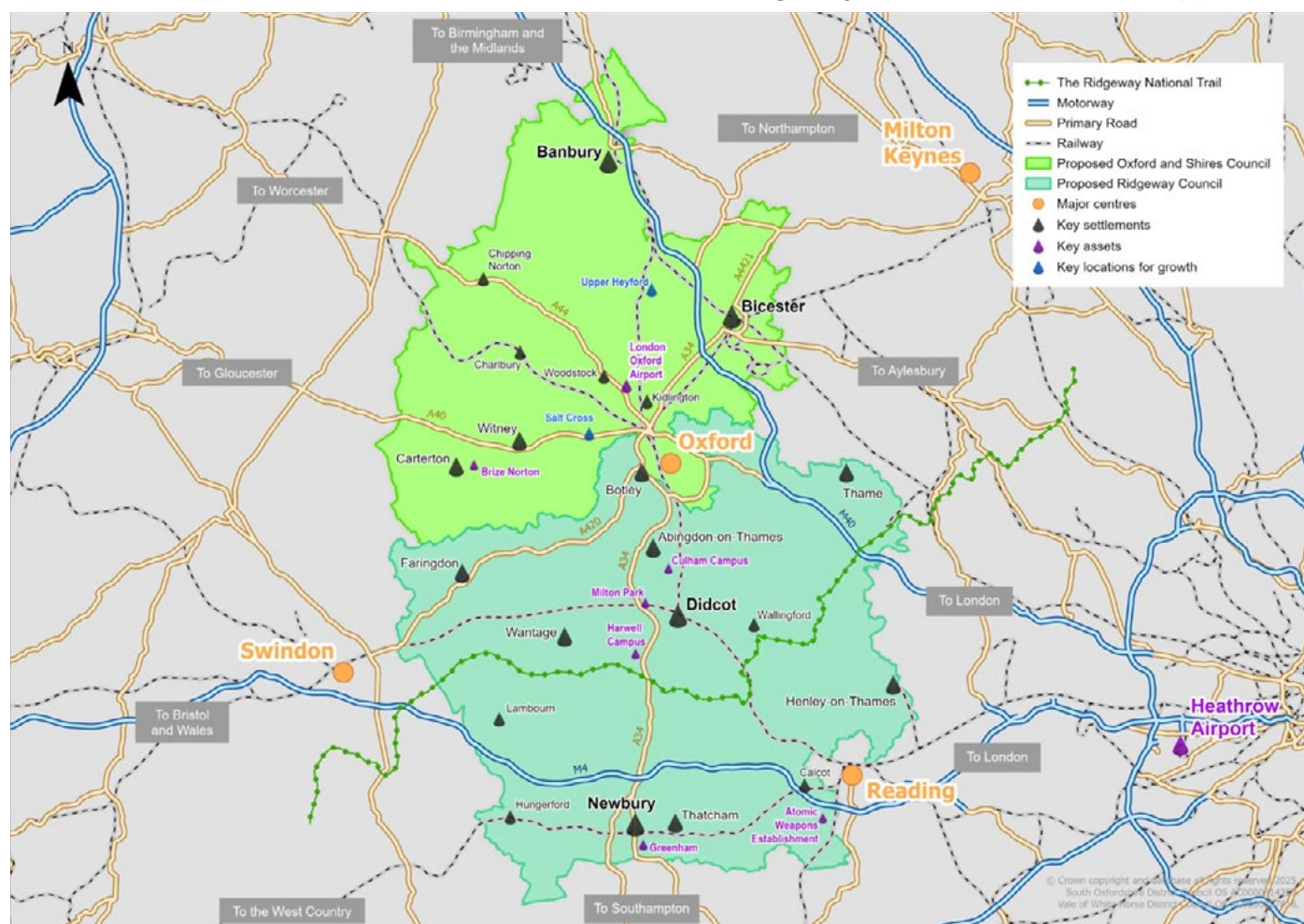
In devising the Oxford & Shires and Ridgeway Council proposals, careful consideration has been given to the strategic and geographic context, national growth priorities and local ambitions to ensure that Local Government Reorganisation in Oxfordshire and Berkshire enables the devolution benefits for 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 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 will be required, to create a Combined Fire and Rescue Authority for Oxfordshire, prior to a fully regional approach under an MSA. Management support arrangements would need to be agreed but could be provided by one of the new local authorities, Thames Valley Police or by the Royal Berkshire Fire and Rescue Service. 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.



**Two new councils. One better future.**



# 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.

**Two new councils. One better future.**



# 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 and partnership arrangements with neighbouring authorities. 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

<b>Commissioning &amp; Market Reform</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Strategic market shaping to stabilise fragile residential/nursing markets</li> <li>• Block contracts, fostering hubs, and IFA conversion to reduce volatility</li> <li>• Outcomes-based commissioning to contain costs and improve sufficiency</li> </ul>
<b>Prevention &amp; Reablement</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Home First and reablement-first approaches to reduce long-term admissions</li> <li>• Family hubs and early intervention in children's services to reduce demand escalation</li> </ul>
<b>Workforce Transformation</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Joint recruitment pipelines, retention incentives, and standardised practice models</li> <li>• Reduction in reliance on agency staff, with shared training and workforce strategies across both UAs.</li> </ul>
<b>Digital &amp; Data-Driven Services</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Digital-first models: resident care accounts, AI-enabled triage, predictive analytics</li> <li>• Improved transparency and quality monitoring (particularly in Ridgeway markets).</li> </ul>
<b>Partnership &amp; Integration</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Align with NHS/ICS footprints for joint commissioning in ASC, SEND and public health</li> <li>• Embed stronger VCSE and community partnerships for place-based delivery</li> </ul>
<b>Financial Management &amp; Risk Pooling</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Recalibration of unit costs to national benchmarks</li> <li>• Pooling risks across balanced UAs to absorb demand shocks and sustain long-term financial viability</li> </ul>

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:<sup>11</sup>

- 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.<sup>12</sup> 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.<sup>13</sup> 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.<sup>14</sup> Without reform, demographic growth (24–27% aged 65+ by 2035) will severely compromise the financial sustainability of Adult Social Care.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>11</sup> For more information on the service delivery models that we believe will provide better service delivery models, see Appendix E

<sup>12</sup> See [Oxfordshire County Council's 2025 CQC Report](#) for further information

<sup>13</sup> For future trend data, refer to Appendix E

<sup>14</sup> For further information, see Appendix E

<sup>15</sup> For future demographic trend data, see Appendix E



## 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:

Principle	Transformation opportunity
<b>Person-centred</b> – 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.
<b>Integrated</b> – 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.
<b>Preventative</b> – 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.
<b>Community-based</b> – 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.
<b>Digitally enabled</b> – 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.<sup>16</sup>

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.

<sup>16</sup> For further reference to the proposed efficiencies see Appendix E

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.

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:<sup>17</sup>

- 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

<sup>17</sup> 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).<sup>18</sup> 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.<sup>19</sup> Workforce costs are 30% above the national average, and residential costs rose 42% in one year, highlighting market uncertainty.<sup>20</sup> 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.<sup>21</sup> Crucially, national benchmarking suggests that current authorities with a population of 350–500k delivering Children's Services achieve the best performance and Ofsted outcomes.



<sup>18</sup> Costings within Oxfordshire can be further seen in Appendix E

<sup>19</sup> Costings within West Berkshire can be further seen in Appendix E

<sup>20</sup> Workforce costings for children's services can be further seen in Appendix E

<sup>21</sup> For information on our modelling, see Appendix E



## 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:

Principle	Transformation opportunity
<b>Community-centred early help</b> – 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.
<b>Tailored</b> – 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).
<b>Co-designed</b> – 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.
<b>Outcomes-focused</b> – 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.
<b>High-functioning workforce</b> – 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.
<b>Multisectoral</b> – 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.<sup>22</sup> 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.

<sup>22</sup> 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.<sup>23</sup>

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.<sup>24</sup>

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.<sup>25</sup> 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.<sup>26</sup> 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.

<sup>23</sup> For further details on the two-unitary modelling for education and SEND, refer to Appendix E

<sup>24</sup> 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

<sup>25</sup> For information on the relationship reset refer to Appendix E

<sup>26</sup> 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
<b>Inclusive</b> – 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.
<b>Preventative</b> – 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.
<b>Proportionate</b> – 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.
<b>Assembling</b> – 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.
<b>Predictive</b> – 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.
<b>Pooling</b> – 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.
<b>Scaling</b> – 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.<sup>27</sup> 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.

<sup>27</sup> To see EHCP growth in Oxfordshire and West Berkshire refer to Appendix E



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.<sup>28</sup> 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.<sup>29</sup> 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.<sup>30</sup> 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 63<sup>rd</sup> to 16<sup>th</sup> place in the national league tables.<sup>31</sup> In addition, there is limited use of data dashboards to track and respond to school outcomes, and Home to School Transport costs are high.

### 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.

<sup>28</sup> See [2023 Improvement Notice - Oxfordshire County Council](#)

<sup>29</sup> See [2023 Improvement Notice - Oxfordshire County Council](#)

<sup>30</sup> Debt projection in Education and SEND refer to Appendix E

<sup>31</sup> To see further information on school readiness refer to Appendix E PeopleToo Report

## 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
<b>Scaling</b> – 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.
<b>Addressing root causes</b> – 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.
<b>Single points of access</b> – 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.
<b>Common cause</b> – 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.

<b>Enabling</b> – 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.
<b>Evidencing</b> – 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.<sup>32</sup>

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.

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.

<sup>32</sup> For Oxfordshire Homelessness data refer to: [JSNA Report on Homelessness](#)



## 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.



**Two new councils. One better future.**

## How we will achieve this

Principle	Transformation opportunity
<b>Consistent and fair</b> – 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.
<b>Cohesive</b> – 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.
<b>Preventative</b> – 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.
<b>Systemic</b> – 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.
<b>Harmonising</b> – 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.
<b>Developmental</b> – 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.



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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, Bracknell, 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.

Pending the transfer of Fire and Rescue Services to a new Mayoral Strategic Authority, it will be necessary to create a new Combined Fire and Rescue Authority for Oxfordshire, which will continue to provide fire and rescue services across the County of Oxfordshire. This will ensure that continuity of service is maintained from day one as Fire and Rescue Services will effectively continue to operate on the basis of existing boundaries. Management support arrangements will need to be agreed but could be provided by one of the new local authorities, Thames Valley Police or by the Royal Berkshire Fire and Rescue Service as a stepping stone towards a fully regional approach under the MSA. The practicalities of this arrangement would be explored in detail during the transitional period leading up to vesting day.



## 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 social and 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 environmental 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
<b>Oxfordshire</b>	Milestone Infrastructure	2033 with a possible extension of up to 14 years
<b>West Berkshire</b>	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 Ridgeway 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.



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# 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 reimagining 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



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## 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.

<b>Current Councillor Numbers</b>	<b>Ridgeway UA Population<sup>33</sup>: 472,000</b>	<b>Oxford &amp; Shires UA Population: 464,000</b>
County Councillors	25	40
Unitary / District Councillors	117	145
<b>Totals</b>	<b>142</b>	<b>185</b>

### 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 proposal also maintains effective representation for each division within the new councils. Councillors will have the right powers to focus on delivering for residents.

<sup>33</sup> ONS 2025 projected population figures



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:

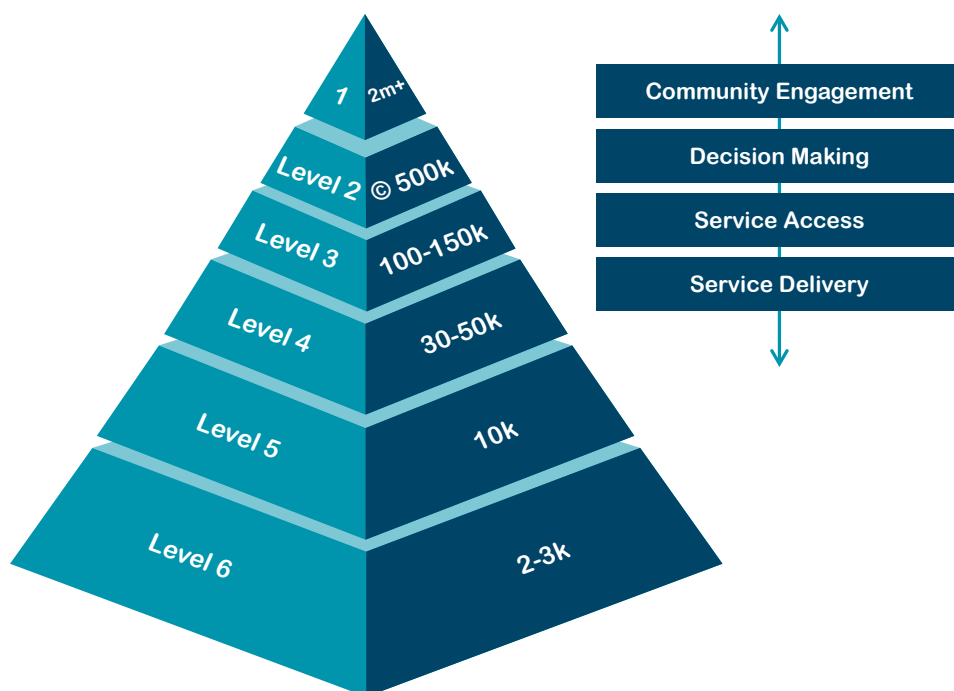
- **Place-based, not service-based:** Instead of services being simply organised by a specific function (e.g. social care or housing), they are increasingly structured around a particular geographical area or 'locality'. This allows for a deeper understanding of the characteristics of different localities 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’.

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 Berks examples include:

	Current	Likely future changes
<b>Level 1</b>	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
<b>Level 2</b>	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
<b>Level 3</b>	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
<b>Level 4</b>	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
<b>Level 5</b>	GP surgeries typically provide services for around 10,000 people	
<b>Level 6</b>	The majority of Town and Parish Councils serve populations of between 2,000 and 3,000 people, but some serve significantly larger numbers	

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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<sup>34</sup>
- **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



<sup>34</sup> <https://www.local.gov.uk/publications/earlier-action-and-support-case-prevention-adult-social-care-and-beyond>

## 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.

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, town and parish councils and other local partners to develop a locality working model for that works for everyone across Oxfordshire and West Berkshire. Where it makes sense, we will explore opportunities for further devolution to town and parish councils.

### **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, is likely to be Oxford given the importance and scale of the city. In this instance 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 for both the city of Oxford and the rest of the Oxford & Shires geography 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.



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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
<b>Community Engagement and Development</b>	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.
<b>Specific Localised Decision Making</b>	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.
<b>Local Service Access</b>	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.
<b>Footprints for Service Delivery alignment</b>	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 with town and parish councils and other local partners 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:

November 2025 -Summer 2026	Summer 2026 – May 2027	May 2027 – May 2028	May 2028 – onward
Submission to Decision Point	Decision Point to Establishment of Shadow Authority	Shadow Authority to Vesting Day	Vesting Day – Transformation
Further research into optimal neighbourhood approaches including learning from other LGR proposals			
	Discussions with Central and Local Government colleagues over optimal models plus potential Independent Expert Review		
	Deep engagement with communities and local partners		
		Design firm proposals for agreement with Shadow Authority	
			Begin Implementation of new arrangements

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.



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# 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<sup>35</sup>.

Option	Level of change	Recurring net financial benefits (£m)	One-off costs (£m)	Payback period (years)
<b>Option 1</b> 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
	<b>Transition plus Basic Transformation</b>	<b>48.2</b>	<b>38.4</b>	<b>2.8</b>
	Ambitious Transformation (Stretch)	31.1	21.7	1.7
	<b>Transition plus Ambitious Transformation</b>	<b>58.4</b>	<b>45.5</b>	<b>2.7</b>
<b>Option 2</b> Oxford & Shires and Ridgeway councils	Transition	21.9	30.4	4.2
	Basic Transformation (Base)	25.6	17.9	1.7
	<b>Transition plus Basic Transformation</b>	<b>47.5</b>	<b>48.3</b>	<b>3.4</b>
	Ambitious Transformation (Stretch)	37.9	26.5	1.7
	<b>Transition plus Ambitious Transformation</b>	<b>59.8</b>	<b>56.9</b>	<b>3.2</b>
<b>Option 3</b> Greater Oxford, Northern and Southern councils	Transition	9.5	32.5	8.7
	Basic Transformation (Base)	25.8	18.1	1.7
	<b>Transition plus Basic Transformation</b>	<b>35.3</b>	<b>50.6</b>	<b>4.7</b>
	Ambitious Transformation (Stretch)	38.2	26.7	1.7
	<b>Transition plus Ambitious Transformation</b>	<b>47.7</b>	<b>59.2</b>	<b>4.2</b>

<sup>35</sup> 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)<sup>36</sup>, 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.

<sup>36</sup> 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
<b>Income*</b>			
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
<b>Total Income</b>	<b>537.6</b>	<b>549.5</b>	
<b>Expenditure**</b>			
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
<b>Total Expenditure</b>	<b>555.9</b>	<b>561.2</b>	Total Expenditure for all authorities in Oxfordshire and West Berkshire. FY27/28
<b>Net Position</b>	<b>-18.3</b>	<b>-11.7</b>	
Total Reserve Draws	13.4	6.8	Draws from reserves for FY27/28 to cover budget deficit
<b>Final Position</b>	<b>-4.9</b>	<b>-4.9</b>	

(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 CIPFA 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*

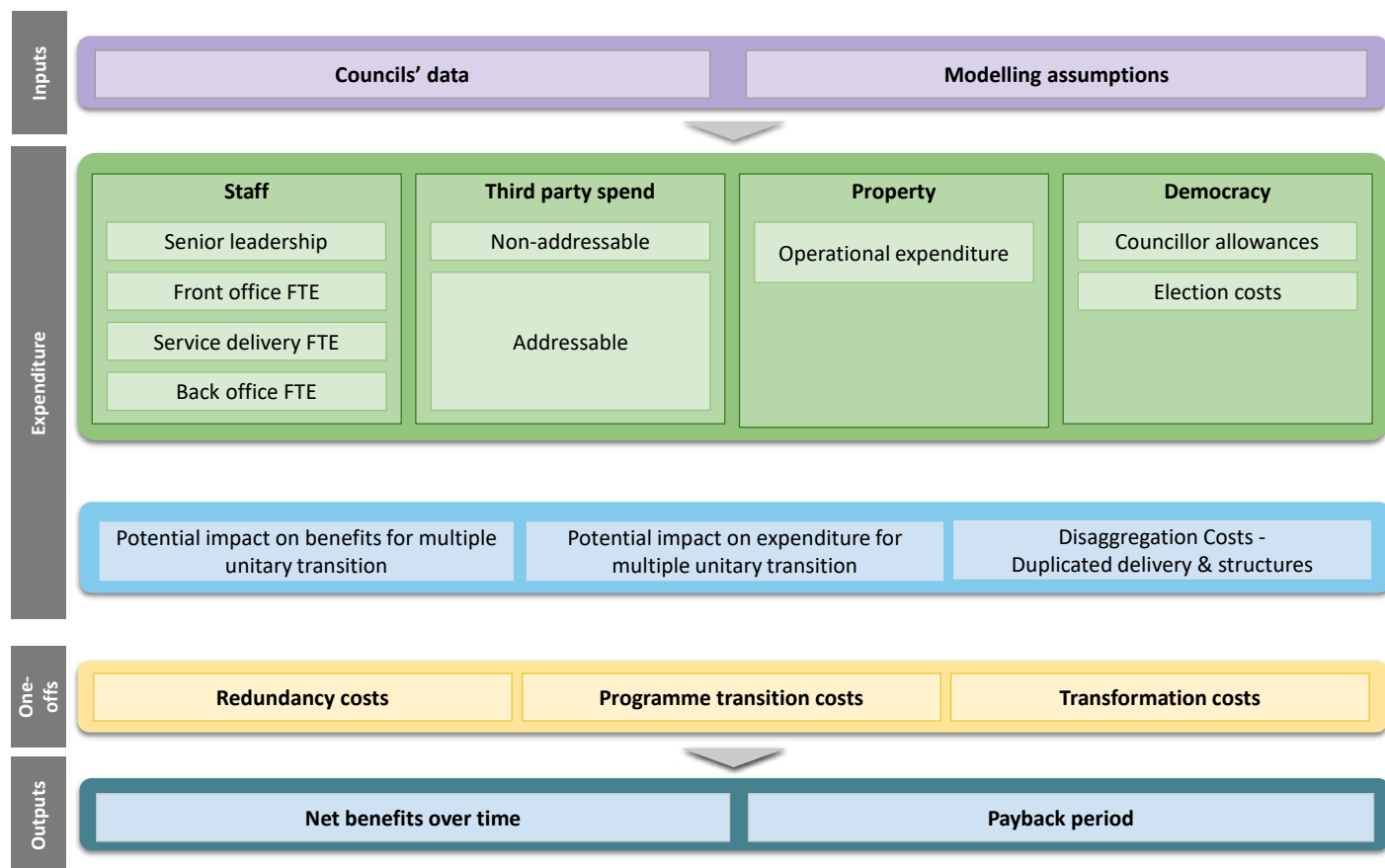
To determine the costs and benefits of transitioning to the new unitary councils and the transformation opportunities once in place, the councils have worked with their consultants to determine areas of opportunity and the likely costs to be incurred in delivering them.

### *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



### Inputs

Include data supplied by County and District councils, public data and assumptions based on prior LGR activity. This relates to General Fund only and excludes HRA.

### Benefits of Reorganisation

Weightings applied to three types of spend, with proportionate percentage reductions applied. Democracy benefits are based on the number of councils involved in the analysis, and the cost per vote cast in most recent elections.

### Benefits of Transformation

Increased leverage of the above benefits available through transformation.

### Disbenefits / Disaggregation Costs

In many LGR scenarios resulting in multiple unitaries, there are typically additional disbenefits and assumed costs of disaggregating county-level services, including children's services and adult social care. However, this options appraisal reflects the existing infrastructure available in West Berkshire for the 2UA and 3UA scenarios and addresses these costs accordingly.

### Costs of Transition

One-off costs and proportional redundancy costs incurred to transition / implement the new UAs.

### Outputs

Projected net benefits from different re-organisation scenarios.

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## 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
<b>New unitarities setup &amp; closedown costs</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• External Comms, Rebranding &amp; implementation:</li> <li>• Internal Programme Management:</li> <li>• Creating the new council</li> <li>• Organisation closedown</li> <li>• Public Consultation</li> <li>• Shadow Chief Exec Costs</li> </ul>	<b>7.5</b>	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	<b>6.9</b>	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	<b>7.7</b>	Based on other actuals from other previous LGR experience.
Redundancy costs	<b>5.1</b>	Redundancy cost as a proportion of salary (current assumption) x total FTE saving
Contingency	<b>3.2</b>	Estimated 40% of total one off transition / implementation cost (excl. ICT)
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>30.4</b>	

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.



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## 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	<b>24,941,879</b>

TRANSITION COSTS			
Category	Programme transition costs	Redundancy costs	Total transition costs (one-off)
Cost (£)	25,297,020	5,135,299	<b>30,432,319</b>

DISAGGREGATION COSTS				
Category	Additional senior leadership costs	Additional service delivery costs	Additional democratic costs	Total disaggregation costs (annual)
Cost (£)	0	3,058,000	0	<b>3,058,000</b>

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				Variance to opt app £m
	Option appraisal £m	Oxon & Shires £m	Ridgeway £m	Total £m	
<b>1) Benefits of aggregation</b>					
<b>Staffing</b>					
Front office	5.0	2.4	2.3	<b>4.7</b>	(0.3)
Service delivery	1.9	0.9	0.9	<b>1.8</b>	(0.1)
Back office	2.8	1.4	1.3	<b>2.7</b>	(0.1)
Management	7.5	5.6	1.9	<b>7.5</b>	(0.0)
<b>Total staffing</b>	<b>17.2</b>	<b>10.3</b>	<b>6.4</b>	<b>16.7</b>	<b>(0.5)</b>
<b>Third party spend</b>	3.0	1.0	0.9	<b>1.9</b>	(1.1)
<b>Property</b>	2.2	1.4	1.4	<b>2.8</b>	0.6
<b>Democracy</b>	2.5	0.8	0.9	<b>1.7</b>	(0.8)
<b>Total benefits</b>	<b>24.9</b>	<b>13.5</b>	<b>9.6</b>	<b>23.1</b>	<b>(1.8)</b>
<b>Additional service costs</b>	(3.1)	0.0	(3.1)	<b>(3.1)</b>	(0.0)
<b>Net benefits</b>	<b>21.9</b>	<b>13.5</b>	<b>6.5</b>	<b>20.0</b>	<b>(1.9)</b>

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)
<b>Programme transition costs</b>	<b>External Comms, Rebranding &amp; implementation</b> <i>Examples include: Staff Advertising, Venue/Room Hire, Subscriptions</i>	659
	<b>External transition, design and implementation support costs</b> <i>Examples include: Other Hired &amp; Contracted Services &amp; Consultants Fees</i>	7,686
	<b>Internal programme management</b> <i>Examples include: Staff Admin Recharge</i>	3,426
	<b>Creating the new council:</b> <i>Examples include: Training, Vehicle Parts/Maintenance and Contents Insurance</i>	1,464
	<b>Contingency</b> <i>Examples include: Other Expenses General &amp; Miscellaneous Small Projects</i>	3,228
	<b>Organisation closedown</b> <i>Costs involved with legally and financially closing down councils and create sound budgetary control systems</i>	732
	<b>Public consultation</b> <i>Examples include: Survey Professional and Other Fees, General Materials, Entertainment and Refreshments</i>	494
	<b>ICT costs</b> <i>Examples include: IT Hardware, IT Repair Installation Maintenance and Training, IT Software &amp; IT Licences</i>	6,862
	<b>Shadow Chief Exec / member costs</b> <i>Examples include: Electing the shadow cabinet, training costs</i>	747
	<b>Total Programme Transition Costs</b>	25,297
<b>Redundancy Cost - Examples include: Redundancy payments (does not fully factor in pension strain)</b>		5,135
<b>Total One-off transition costs</b>		30,432

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## 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%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Assets:</b> Examine opportunities to repurpose existing assets to support the provision of community-based services.</li> <li>• <b>FTE:</b> 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.</li> <li>• <b>TPS:</b> Improved strategic commissioning across housing, mental health, and care homes to reduce duplication and improve provider rate.</li> </ul>
Childrens	1-5%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Assets:</b> Potential reduction in administrative buildings and integration of co-located services (e.g. care with housing, co-locating Family centres).</li> <li>• <b>FTE:</b> 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.</li> <li>• <b>TPS:</b> Review the care cycle, enhance preventative approach to care provisions and aim to reduce the rate of escalation for high-cost placements.</li> </ul>
Place	6-10%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Assets:</b> 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).</li> <li>• <b>FTE:</b> 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.</li> <li>• <b>TPS:</b> Improved long-term contract management, commissioning and procurement capabilities to support greater grip over long-term management.</li> </ul>
Corporate Services	6-15%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>FTE:</b> 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.</li> <li>• <b>TPS:</b> 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.</li> </ul>

*\*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
<b>Front office FTE</b>	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.
<b>Service delivery FTE</b>	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.
<b>Back office FTE</b>	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.
<b>TPS</b>	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.
<b>Income</b>	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).
<b>Assets</b>	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 MTFs.

### 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 comprehensive risk management will help to ensure the programme stays on track.

## 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. Legislation will also be required to create a new Combined Fire and Rescue Authority for the County of Oxfordshire.

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 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 in May 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.

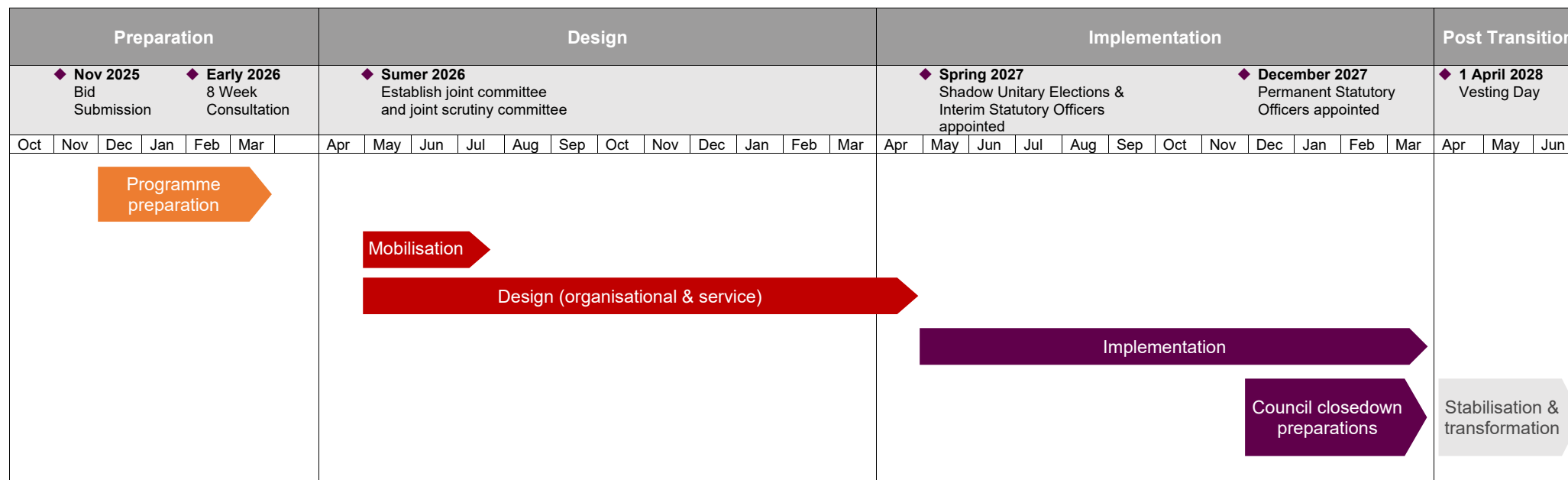
**Table 1: Key Risks and Mitigations**

Risk	Mitigation
<b>1. Scale, complexity and pace of change</b>	
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.	<p>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.</p> <p>The constituent authorities have a successful track record on previous transformation and service improvement programmes that have delivered significant efficiency savings.</p> <p>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.</p>
<b>2. Stakeholder support</b>	
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).	<p>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.</p> <p>A communications strategy will be developed to further support clear and consistent messaging throughout the transition process and beyond.</p>



<b>3. Decision making and governance</b>	
<p>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.</p>	<p>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.</p> <p>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.</p>
<b>4. Staffing</b>	
<p>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.</p>	<p>All staff across the affected councils will need to be involved in planning for the new unitary authorities.</p> <p>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.</p> <p>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.</p>
<b>5. Finance</b>	
<p>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.</p>	<p>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.</p>

**Figure 1 - Implementation Timeline and Phasing**

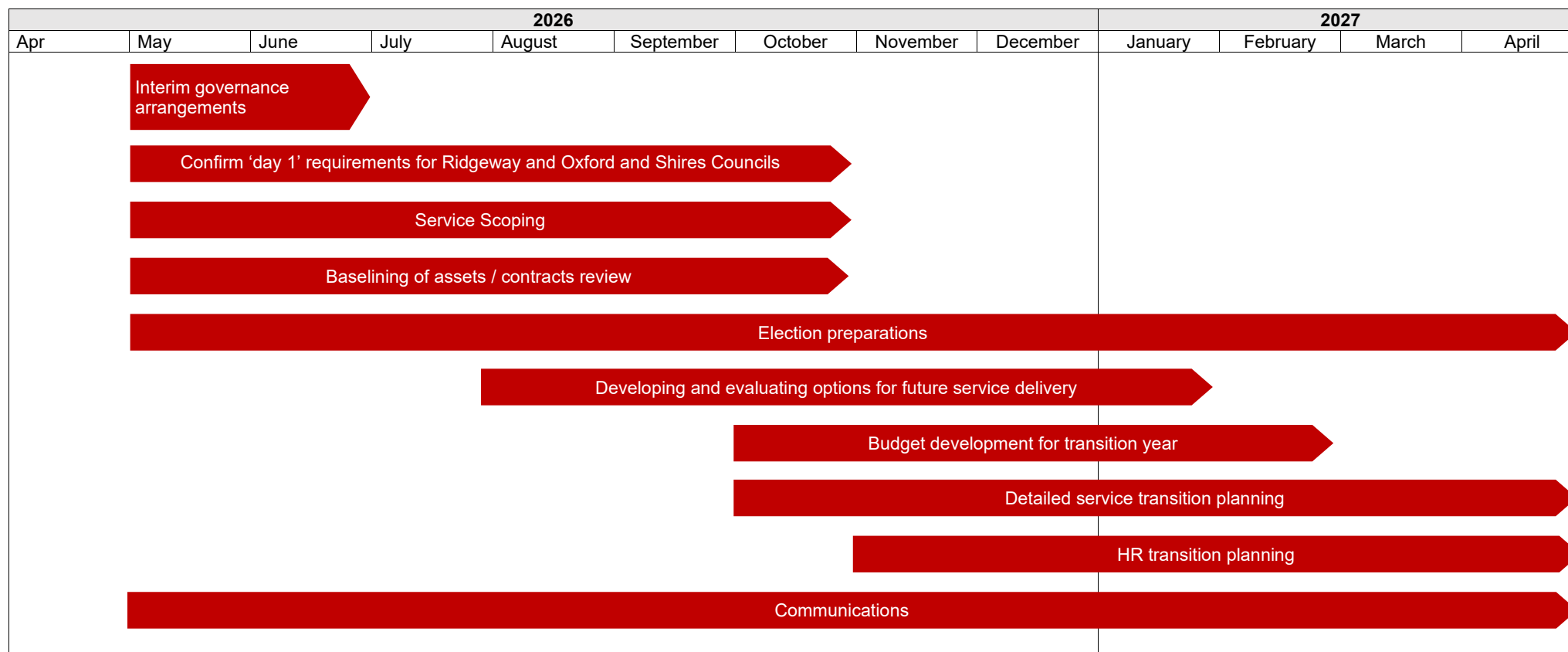


**Figure 2: Programme Management Structure**

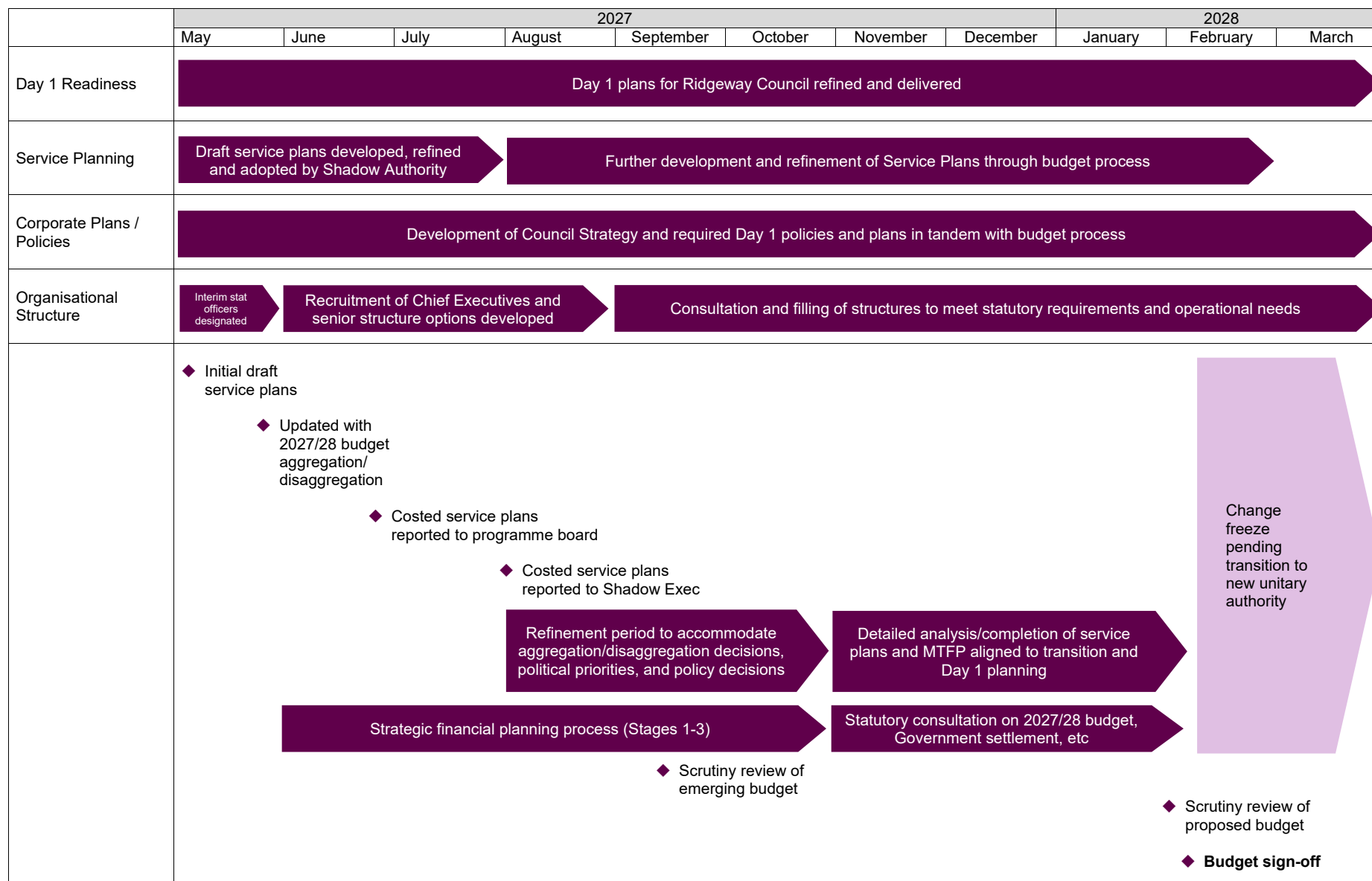
LOCAL GOVERNMENT REORGANISATION PROGRAMME BOARD						
PEOPLE	PLACE	FINANCE	ICT	CUSTOMER and DIGITAL	CORPORATE	HR
Children and Family Services / Education	Development and Regulation / Emergency Planning /	Procurement / Revenues and Benefits / Budget Disaggregation and Integration / Balance Sheets / Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS)	ICT Infrastructure / ICT Equipment / Security / Service Continuity	Customer Services / Digital Services / Council Website / External Communications	Governance / Boundary Changes / Elections / Data Management	TUPE / Payroll / Pensions / Union Engagement / Cultural Change / Staff Communications
Adult Social Care / Public Health	Environment					
	Community Services (Community Safety, Culture & Leisure)					
Workstreams	Workstreams	Workstreams	Workstreams	Workstreams	Workstreams	Workstreams
PROGRAMME MANAGEMENT OFFICE						



**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 cafés, 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.



**Two new councils. One better future.**



# 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.

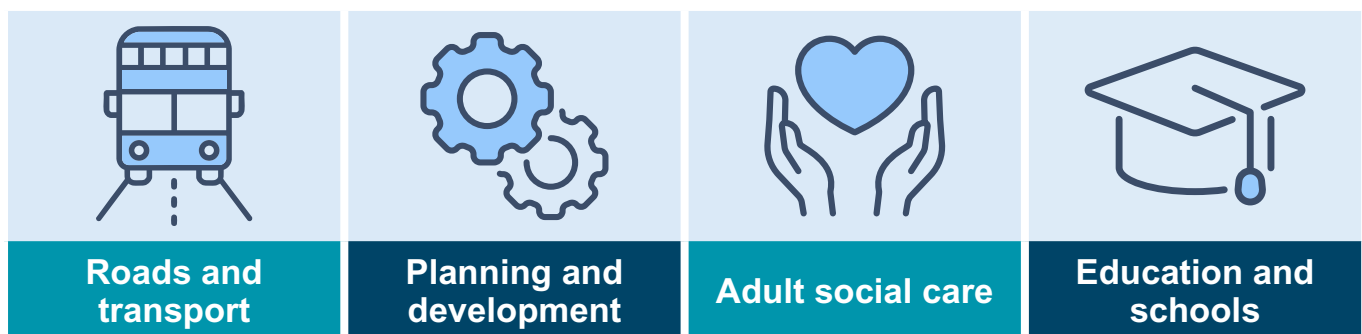
And so, we ran a thorough and inclusive engagement process that informed people about what was happening but crucially also gave them a meaningful say in shaping the two-unitary proposal. The process was built around the simple principles of being open, local and collaborative. This chapter sets out how we did that, what we heard, and how it shaped the Oxford & Shires and Ridgeway proposals.



## Top 3 most important council services



## Top services that need improving



## Most important economic priorities



Should decisions be made locally to help support economic growth and encourage new investment?	<b>Yes 85%</b>
It is important that the council represents my local community's needs	<b>Yes 75%</b>
It is important for the council to be based around an area that has a shared history and culture	<b>Agree and strongly agree 75%</b>
It is important my council provides good quality services and value for money	<b>Strongly agree 83%</b>

**Two new councils. One better future.**

## 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
<b>Residents</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Most important services are education/schools, roads and transport and adult social care.</li><li>• A lot of services need improvement, mainly roads and transport, planning and development, adult social care and education.</li><li>• 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.</li><li>• Economy is a big priority, especially improving transport, revitalising high streets, supporting local business and providing affordable homes.</li><li>• Councils need to represent local needs.</li><li>• Councils need to provide good quality services and value for money.</li><li>• 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.</li><li>• 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.</li></ul>



<b>Town and parish councils</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Real concerns and cautious optimism about what's to come, whichever proposal goes forward - but they need support to play their role.</li> <li>• 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.</li> <li>• 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.</li> <li>• 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.</li> <li>• 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.</li> <li>• 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.</li> </ul>
<b>Businesses</b>	<p>SME feedback:</p> <p>Strategic growth and business development:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• They would value better collaboration and partnership programmes with the public sector.</li> <li>• Accessing support across all levels and departments of local government is a challenge, and a single point of contact would be beneficial.</li> <li>• They would value local government providing them with a doorway to networking opportunities and idea creation.</li> <li>• They wanted clearer pathways to selling their services to local and national government.</li> <li>• Business rate support, particularly in town centres where bricks and mortar businesses rely on each other for footfall.</li> </ul> <p>On a day-to-day business operation basis:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Better direct communication to businesses on service delivery updates and disruptions.</li> </ul>

<b>Community and voluntary sector</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Overwhelming support for locality-based working.</li> <li>• Questions raised about the continuity of care and maintaining safeguarding links.</li> <li>• Need mechanisms in place to ensure genuine local voice and accountability.</li> <li>• Concerns raised about potential overlap, competition, and closures due to boundary changes.</li> <li>• There is a strong call for scenario planning and transitional support to help community and voluntary sector organisations to adapt.</li> <li>• Protections need to remain in place for vulnerable individuals, especially those supported by non-commissioned services such as some domestic violence charities.</li> </ul>
<b>Developers</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 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.</li> </ul>
<b>Schools</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 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</li> <li>• 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.</li> </ul>

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.
- 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 750 people. These were held in libraries, markets, community centres, cafés 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](https://twocouncils.org), [ridgewaycouncil.org](https://ridgewaycouncil.org), and [oxfordandshires.org](https://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.

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.

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
<p><b>1. LOCALISM</b></p> <p>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.</p> <p>Residents were concerned that rural areas would be left behind, with power being centralised.</p> <p>The community and voluntary sector called out for mechanisms to ensure a genuine local voice and accountability</p>	<p>Chapter 8 of our proposal sets out a new approach to locality working.</p> <p>The concept of locality working and community empowerment runs throughout the proposal.</p>	<p>Throughout, including:</p> <p><b>Chapter 8.4</b> Localities working and community empowerment.</p>

<p><b>2. QUALITY</b> 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.</p> <p>Economic growth is important, but it must go hand-in-hand with strong services and support for communities.</p>	<p>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.</p>	<p><b>Chapter 7</b> Service Delivery and Transformation</p> <p><b>Chapter 7.7</b> Other services</p>
<p><b>3. TRUST</b> 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.</p>	<p>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</p>	<p><b>Chapter 8 Future Engagement Model</b></p>
<p><b>4. VOICE</b> Town and parish councils need a more coherent and formalised way to interact with all levels of the primary authorities to have a voice.</p>	<p>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.</p>	<p><b>Chapter 8.4</b> Localities working</p> <p><b>Chapter 8 Future Engagement Model</b></p>
<p><b>5. IDENTITY</b> You want to protect rural communities and the countryside.</p> <p>You want a strong voice for the city of Oxford and to ensure its sense of identity and history is preserved.</p>	<p>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.</p>	<p><b>Chapter 5.2</b> How we will help secure better outcomes.</p> <p><b>Chapter 8.3</b> Democratic arrangements and governance</p>

<p><b>6. EMPOWERMENT</b> Businesses want better collaboration and partnerships with the public sector, as well as a single point of contact.</p> <p>The voluntary and community sector demonstrated overwhelming support for locality-based working.</p>	<p>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.</p>	<p><b>Chapter 8.4</b> Localities working and community empowerment.</p>
<p><b>7. SUPPORT</b> 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.</p>	<p>A carefully phased approach to preparation, mobilisation, and implementation will ensure the new councils are safe and legal from day one.</p> <p>The implementation plan sets out clear steps to ensure that no one is left behind.</p>	<p><b>Chapter 10</b> – Implementation Plan and Approach</p>

You can read the full report on our public survey at [twocouncils.org/get-involved](https://twocouncils.org/get-involved)



**Two new councils. One better future.**



# 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



Two new councils. One better future.