

**Oxford City Council:
The case for unitary status**

**DRAFT submission
(version: 18 January 2007)**

Oxford City Council: The case for unitary status

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Oxford City Council: The case for unitary status

Message from Oxford City Council’s Party Leaders and Chief Executive

The Government’s invitation to bid for unitary status provides a unique opportunity for councils across England to manage their own affairs.

As the leaders of the three largest political parties on Oxford City Council and its Chief Executive, we have welcomed the Government’s commitment to devolving power to local communities through the unitary bid process.

We believe that Oxford City Council, and the other districts within Oxfordshire, are in an ideal position to deliver greater democratic accountability, strategic leadership and neighbourhood empowerment within a financially viable system, as requested by the Government in its invitation.

We feel that the economic future of Oxfordshire is highly dependent on Oxford City, as a key regional centre and growth point, continuing to develop. To do so however, it needs to take control of its own destiny while allowing the surrounding rural districts to focus on the different needs of their citizens.

As an urban area that is significantly different from any other population centre in Oxfordshire, we also believe that local democracy is at stake. Oxford is economically dynamic, culturally and ethnically mixed, with a youthful population. It has all the advantages and some of the disadvantages that being a city brings. This means that the priorities of Oxford citizens are different from much of the surrounding rural county, creating an overwhelming democratic deficit for the people of our city.

Oxford City Council has worked hard to make the two-tier system function in the best interests of both the city and the Oxfordshire sub-region. It has however, been our long-standing view that the system is failing.

The two-tier system is distorting planning and transport infrastructure in Oxford while at the same time constraining the economic development essential for the whole

county. It prevents effective strategic leadership through an in-built cultural conflict between a broadly rural county and a wholly urban ‘district’ and constrains the ability of an internationally renowned city to determine its own future. It also prevents the efficient and effective delivery of a range of policies such as affordable housing and community safety – vital areas of policy for both Oxford and the Government. In short, the current system lacks focus on the city of Oxford.

Yet giving Oxford City Council unitary status should not be seen as part of a sterile argument about whether the county or city should be blamed for past or present failings. Nor is it about the current City Council “taking over” County Council services.

It is about building an entirely new authority with the organisational capacity and flexibility to deliver the full range of services required by a dynamic, modern, urban community so that it can fulfil its potential as a key regional city.

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It is about creating new equitable partnerships with surrounding authorities that will deliver both value for money and create the environment for strong, accountable strategic leadership.

Above all else, it is about giving the people of Oxford the right to take charge of their city's destiny.

John Goddard

Leader of Oxford City Council and Liberal Democrat Group Leader

Bob Price

Leader of the Labour Group, Oxford City Council

Craig Simmons

Leader of the Green Group, Oxford City Council

Brian Dinsdale

Chief Executive, Oxford City Council

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Executive Summary

The Government has invited local authorities in England to make proposals for future unitary structures.

This bid for unitary status by Oxford City Council is about renewing local democracy and creating a cohesive system of governance for Oxfordshire that provides the opportunity for strategic leadership and delivers community empowerment.

The City Council's vision is for a brand new, fit-for-purpose, council that is solely accountable to the people of the city and which can provide effective and efficient service delivery. It will also be affordable by providing opportunities for cost savings and long-term value for money.

Since the last restructuring of local government in the mid-1990s, the City Council has sought to make the current two-tier system within Oxfordshire function. However, with Oxford's potential to become a major economic hub constrained by a County Council that has a wider geographic remit and does not always share the same progressive agenda as the City Council, the current system is failing the people of Oxford.

To address this, the City Council believes it is crucial that its citizens are able to take control of their own destiny and through a brand new council develop a radical place shaping agenda for the future benefit of the whole area.

The Oxford Story

Oxford is an urban, youthful and genuinely cosmopolitan city that is very different from the surrounding rural county that currently controls many of its services.

Oxford is also a global brand – an economic hub with a world-class knowledge economy delivering growth for the whole of the UK. It is a major tourist destination, an important shopping area and the cultural centre of the region.

While being an urban centre brings opportunities, it also creates many disadvantages, including:

- Severe pressure on housing stocks, with large concentrations of homes in multiple occupation
- Neighbourhoods that suffer from significant levels of deprivation
- Neighbourhoods with poor educational achievement and high crime rates
- Significant numbers of homeless and other vulnerable groups
- Traffic congestion and pollution
- A need for business development and growth within constrained boundaries.

However, Oxford - the only major urban centre in Oxfordshire – is dominated by County Council and rural members who have different priorities from the City Council. This creates a democratic deficit for the people of Oxford and a lack of focus on city priorities. It causes conflicts between the councils across a range of policy issues, from education and social services to health and transport, which often works against the city's interests.

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Oxford City Council has tried to tackle many of these issues through the development of community engagement and empowerment strategies. This has included establishing Area Committees to improve accountability and consultation, along with innovative methods of engaging with ethnic minorities. It has also involved developing close relationships with the Police and the Primary Healthcare Trust to improve services.

Oxford's prosperity and vitality bring many costs that are largely beyond the City Council's control and the current City Council has to deliver the needs of a city on the budget of a district. However, there are also inefficiencies in some of the current City Council's processes and its record on value for money is relatively poor. A radical restructure will enable a new council with greater capacity to challenge and change old procedures and review service provision across the board. The partnership with Vanguard, the leading systems thinking practitioners, will be a key building block for the new council of improved efficiency and quality.

The City Council therefore believes a new system of governance is required to deliver a new council that is fit for the city's purposes.

Vision and Aims

Oxford City Council has a vision of a socially cohesive community, where people from different backgrounds have similar life opportunities. To enable this to happen, Oxford requires economic growth and the ability to manage and develop policies on crime, education, health and deprivation that will work with, and in the interests of, neighbourhoods and communities across the city.

To make this happen, a new unitary authority is essential.

This new unitary Oxford City Council will seek to:

- improve accountability
- provide the conditions for strategic leadership
- increase the influence of Oxford in the economic development of the region
- respond effectively to meaningful communities
- be oriented to a sense of place
- empower citizens and neighbourhoods
- develop partnerships of equals
- deliver value for money and high quality services

By creating an environment for strong, strategic leadership, the City Council will be able to deliver co-ordinated service provision and policies that are responsive to the needs of local people. It will also enable equitable partnerships to be formed that can work in the interests of the people of Oxford as well as the surrounding rural area.

This will all be achieved through affordable systems that will attract the support of citizens, partners and other stakeholders.

A Unitary Oxford City Council

Unitary status for Oxford will see the creation of a new council with fit for purpose systems and infrastructure. This will be orientated to the city's future and its leadership will seek to facilitate a radical 'place shaping' agenda for the city and its communities.

To achieve this, the county and district tiers of government will be removed, replaced by brand new dynamic unitary councils to improve democratic accountability and transparency along with enabling strong and effective leadership.

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The new unitary council for Oxford will retain the current ward and leadership models, but with a single cadre of empowered and well supported councillors responsible for all the city's affairs, the new council administration will be able to translate voting intentions into policies and during 2008 will further review its electoral and executive arrangements to ensure they continue to reflect its intentions. This will renew local democracy.

This will also enable the new authority to deliver on a number of strategic policy objectives:

- improve the educational and social well-being of Oxford's children and young people
- support vulnerable adults and elderly members of the community
- provide an efficient and effective housing service
- enhance the city's economic and social vitality and its international reputation
- make Oxford an exemplar in environmental management and climate change
- empower citizens to reduce inequality and promote social cohesion

This will be delivered through a new management structure and policy framework based around five corporate directors led by a Chief Executive.

The new authority will also seek to establish improved partnership working with other public agencies, businesses and third sector organisations to ensure effective delivery of services.

Building on the existing networks of Area Committees, tenants' forums and citizens panels that the City Council has been leading the way in delivering, the new unitary will further strengthen the devolution of power to the lowest possible level by supporting and encouraging the establishment of neighbourhood forums.

These forums will provide a powerful vehicle for place shaping, drawing in tenants' and residents' associations, community associations and faith, youth and school based organisations into areas people identify with to prioritise and influence the allocation and use of resources locally.

The unitary council will also seek to strengthen the role of Area Committees by co-opting non-voting community organisational representatives for short, non-renewable terms to continuously renew their membership.

The unitary council will also seek to build on existing relationships with 'user' bodies to ensure they have a clear and defined role in policy development.

To improve service delivery, Oxford City Council will continue to develop its strategic partnership with Vanguard to deliver improved services, empower front-line staff and improve cost efficiency. It will also seek to formalise the involvement of stakeholders in the shaping of service planning and delivery.

New local service charters will ensure that services are monitored against the expectations of the people of Oxford rather than arbitrarily imposed from above.

A new unitary council will ensure continued value for money, supported through integrated service structures and shared back office functions with neighbouring unitary councils and other public agencies.

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It will also focus on exploiting economic growth possibilities to ensure that it is managed in ways that will practically benefit the city and its people.

New Local Government Arrangements for Oxfordshire

Oxford City Council's submission for unitary status is not made in isolation from the other districts in Oxfordshire. A 'Three Unitary' model is proposed that will see the creation of two other new unitary councils within the county, and lead to the coupling of West Oxfordshire with Cherwell, and Vale of White Horse with South Oxfordshire.

This will give each of the new unitary councils greater management of their own affairs, allowing them to respond to the needs of their citizens and enabling them to shape their futures for the benefit of their people.

With the County Council and District Councils abolished, a partnership of three equals will be formed across the county, allowing for greater accountability and local empowerment to citizens across the Oxfordshire sub-region.

The City Council is proposing the creation of a Joint Strategy Committee to co-ordinate the strategic requirements of the sub-region. It is also proposing joint service delivery arrangements - where these make sense operationally, financially and politically - as a way of delivering greater efficiencies.

These arrangements will avoid many expensive disaggregation costs, while delivering significant ongoing savings. However, these unitary councils will not be constrained by the county boundaries as each will have the freedom to form other partnerships – geographically close or otherwise.

With a new focus on the local communities they represent, the political representatives of the new unitary authorities will be able to devolve power away from the remote County Council to the people whose lives are affected by the decisions local councils make. They will be free to devolve more power to neighbourhoods and parish councils, thus increasing localism and accountability across the county area.

Affordability and value for money

Unitary status will enable the new unitary Council to deliver improved services with greater efficiency and value for money.

The City Council has appointed IPF, Rita Hale Associates and Vanguard Consulting to independently assess the financial case for the bid, and has utilised the Department of Communities and Local Government approved spreadsheets for the calculations.

Utilising the "Three Unitary" model, substantial cost savings can be achieved by abolishing overlapping services and simplifying management structures that are part of the current six council model of governance.

The three equal partners will then be able to establish shared service arrangements, including areas that are currently done individually by the existing districts, to improve efficiency and cost effectiveness. These could include:

- Shared back office services
- Shared internal auditing
- Treasury management
- Debt collection and recovery systems
- Some integrated legal services

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- Focused, joint procurement
- Shared information technology systems
- Some shared front line services, e.g. waste collection and disposal

In addition, there are many areas - such as car parking management and community facilities - where single management systems will bring simplified, more cost effective, systems

The City Council's strategic partnership with Vanguard will mean that the new council will be able to develop improved delivery across all its services and formalise the involvement of citizens and make services more responsive to their needs.

In other areas Oxford will be able to integrate services, such as the housing and social services functions, to improve both speed of delivery and outcomes.

It will also enable budgets and decision making to be devolved to the lowest possible level to ensure that neighbourhoods are empowered where it is cost effective to do so.

To establish the three new unitary councils IPF has calculated that this will cost £27.1m. After a full assessment of ongoing savings, IPF has concluded that these costs will be repaid from savings arising from the change in less than 4 years. Thereafter combined annual savings of £7.2m will accrue to the three unitary councils

Conclusion

The opportunity for democratic renewal in Oxfordshire is a once-in-a-generation chance to create new effective and efficient methods of governance.

It will also transform the lives of the people of Oxford.

By combining disparate functions and providing "one stop shops" and single contacts for major policy areas, the citizens of Oxford will find interacting with their local council a simpler process, while co-ordinated service provision will allow for quicker and improved decision making.

A unitary Oxford City Council will provide services in a cost effective manner that offers value for money, while being responsive to local needs. After transition costs are repaid savings of more than £7m will be made each year for the benefit of Oxfordshire citizens.

Oxford City Council believes that this opportunity should not be wasted and that the consequences of failure will be to irrevocably harm the city's economic future and perpetuate poor service delivery to the detriment of all stakeholders across the Oxfordshire sub-region.

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1 About Oxford City Council’s submission

Principles of the Local Government White Paper

The Local Government White Paper, ‘Strong and Prosperous Communities’ heralded a new era for local government in England. Oxford City Council warmly welcomes the White Paper and its emphasis on giving local people and local communities more influence and power to improve their lives,

In presenting the White Paper to Parliament, Rt Hon Ruth Kelly MP the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government made the following statement:

“We recognise the gains that unitary status can offer in accountable, strategic leadership and improved efficiency. There will be a short window of opportunity for councils in shire areas to seek unitary status. We expect a small number of proposals to meet the value-for-money and other criteria set out in the invitation that we have issued today.”

Oxford City Council agrees that the creation of a new unitary council for Oxford will enable the delivery of greater efficiencies, improved accountability, and the benefits of meeting the localism agenda.

For Oxford City Council’s submission to be acceptable to the Government, it needs to be in accordance with the clear set of principles outlined by the Secretary of State, through which future success can be both guaranteed and measured.

Oxford’s submission needs to demonstrate how strong, effective and accountable local leadership will be delivered, with defined objectives and a clear management focus, while at the same time delivering opportunities for neighbourhood empowerment.

It must also offer long-term value for money and the prospect of an early recovery of set-up costs, within a strategic framework for the progress of the Oxfordshire sub-region within the South East economy.

Background to Oxford’s submission

The last restructure of local government took place in the mid-1990s, resulting in unitary government in Scotland and Wales and a mixture of two-tier and unitary councils across England.

The outcome in England was not the result of careful analysis of the needs of different communities by the then Government. Nor was it related to the size of councils, as unitaries created in that process had populations of between 30,000 and 250,000. It was simply an inconsistent process that led to unfinished business, with no clear rationale as to why places such as Blackburn, Darlington, Reading, Southend, Swindon and York were given unitary status while Oxford and others were not.

Almost a decade later, in December 2005, the then Minister for Communities and Local Government, David Miliband made it apparent that the issue of unitarisation was back on the agenda and likely to figure within the much trailed Local Government White Paper.

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Consequently, local politicians, officers, businesses and residents across England considered which governance arrangements would allow for the best delivery of economic, environmental and social outcomes in their communities. Soon after, the process came to be described by Sir Michael Lyons - one of the chief advisers to the Government on local government reform - as 'place shaping'.

In response to what Oxford viewed as a positive shift in the policy agenda, and to put any future submission in a broader context, the City Council – together with local authority colleagues from Exeter, Ipswich and Norwich – commissioned a report from the Institute of Local Government Studies (Inlogov) at Birmingham University.

Published in 2006, the Inlogov report debunked the myth that only large organisations are capable of delivering efficient services – a criticism that supporters of two-tier arrangements have often made.

However, the Inlogov report also placed the key policy issues relating to the unitary debate within the wider context of emerging Government thinking on the future role and performance of English cities – something set out in 2006 in the Treasury-led report, *Devolving Decision Making: meeting the regional economic challenge: the importance of cities to regional growth*.

Given Oxford's clear potential to become a major hub of economic activity within the South East region, the City Council believes that it crucial that the city can design its own destiny. In short, place-shaping needs to occur free from the priorities of a county that does not share the same vision or provide sufficient focus on the special needs of the city.

Structure of Oxford's submission

Our submission begins (**in Part I**) by telling the 'Oxford Story', providing factual detail about issues that are often dismissed as 'context'. This is because issues such as ethnic difference and the quality of housing are not abstract statistics but the actual reality of people's lives. While Oxford is attempting to deliver policy objectives that it shares with the Government, the ability to do so is restricted by the two-tier administrative framework through which it is presently governed.

In relating Oxford's story to the case for unitary status, the differences between the city and the wider county area are demonstrated. This difference is reflected in the strength of the local economy, the diversity of population, and the needs that are generated by urban communities as opposed to their rural counterparts. Oxford offers a community of place and interest that is starkly different from the rest of the County Council area, the extent of which is a strong argument for self-governance.

Having offered a clear picture of the current situation, this submission then addresses (**in Part II**) the way forward for Oxford. This is done by providing an overview of strategic aims, highlighting how a new unitary authority would enable the city to deliver, among other factors, greater democratic accountability, proper strategic leadership, deeper community engagement, long-term economic development and more cost-effective and efficient services.

Proposals are outlined for a new management structure, executive and electoral arrangements, and neighbourhood devolution beyond the existing city councils successful Area Committee model.

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Following this overview of the structure and development of new Oxford unitary, the submission proposes a new framework of local government that would see the existing two-tier arrangements replaced by a new 'Three Unitary' structure geared towards delivering greater localism, improved partnership working and the opportunity for greater efficiency.

The financial case for unitary status for Oxford, and indeed the wider 'Three Unitary' structure is then outlined. Based on an independent financial analysis, the submission sets out detailed statements on the improvements that unitary status is likely to deliver, the expected transitional expense and how these costs can be recouped as part of the broader intent to deliver more efficient local and county-wide services.

The submission concludes with a summary of key benefits of Oxford achieving unitary status and the proposed timetable for the transition period.

Part I: Oxford Today

2 The Oxford Story

Myth and reality

Oxford is one of the most photographed, filmed, and written-about cities in the world. The enduring images – in lavish celebrations such as *Brideshead Revisited* or even quirky mysteries such as *Inspector Morse* – are those of historic Oxford. The city is depicted as a place of shimmering architectural beauty, braided through by the Isis and other watercourses, and surrounded by seductive green spaces.

These representations are vital to a flourishing tourist industry because it is historic Oxford that tourists visit in their millions. It is, however, only one part of the story.

By the beginning of the 20th century, Oxford had already moved beyond its traditional image. It had expanded and industrialised, with printing and publishing industries firmly established. In the 1920s the English industrial magnate William Morris, later Lord Nuffield, set up a motor-car industry at Cowley, just outside the city, which subsequently became the headquarters of the Austin-Rover group.

Oxford at the beginning of the 21st century still has its historic core and green spaces, but is a far cry from its media stereotype. Contemporary Oxford is a densely-packed urban space. Our district covers 17.6 sq miles and is home to around 150,000 people. Our population has grown 10% in the five years 2000-05 – the fastest growth of any local authority district in the South East.

The urban nature of the city is reflected in the levels of housing density. Government guidance on housing density seeks 30-40 dwellings per hectare. The 2006 Regional Housing Strategy seeks a minimum of 40 dph in this region. Oxford currently achieves around 90 dph.

Population and Diversity

The population of Oxfordshire is approximately 615,400, which, if considered as a unitary authority in its own right, would be one of the largest local authorities in the country.

Within its existing boundaries, Oxford City Council has a population of approximately 142,400, accounting for around 23.9% of the county area. This is significantly more than some existing unitary authorities, some of which occupy the highest reaches of local government efficiency measured under the comprehensive performance assessment carried out by the Audit Commission.

Oxford, in marked contrast to other parts of Oxfordshire, is also ethnically and culturally diverse. It has:

- a minority ethnic population of 12.9% compared with 4.9% in the rest of the county, and 8.7% in England and Wales. This is the third highest minority ethnic population in the South East
- a lower percentage of residents from white ethnic groups than the rest of Oxfordshire and has almost twice the proportion of people from a mixed ethnic background
- the second highest proportion of people born outside the UK in the South East
- around three times the proportion of Chinese people and people from other ethnic groups as Oxfordshire. Our southern Asian community is the 15th largest in the country. Our Chinese community is the 9th largest.

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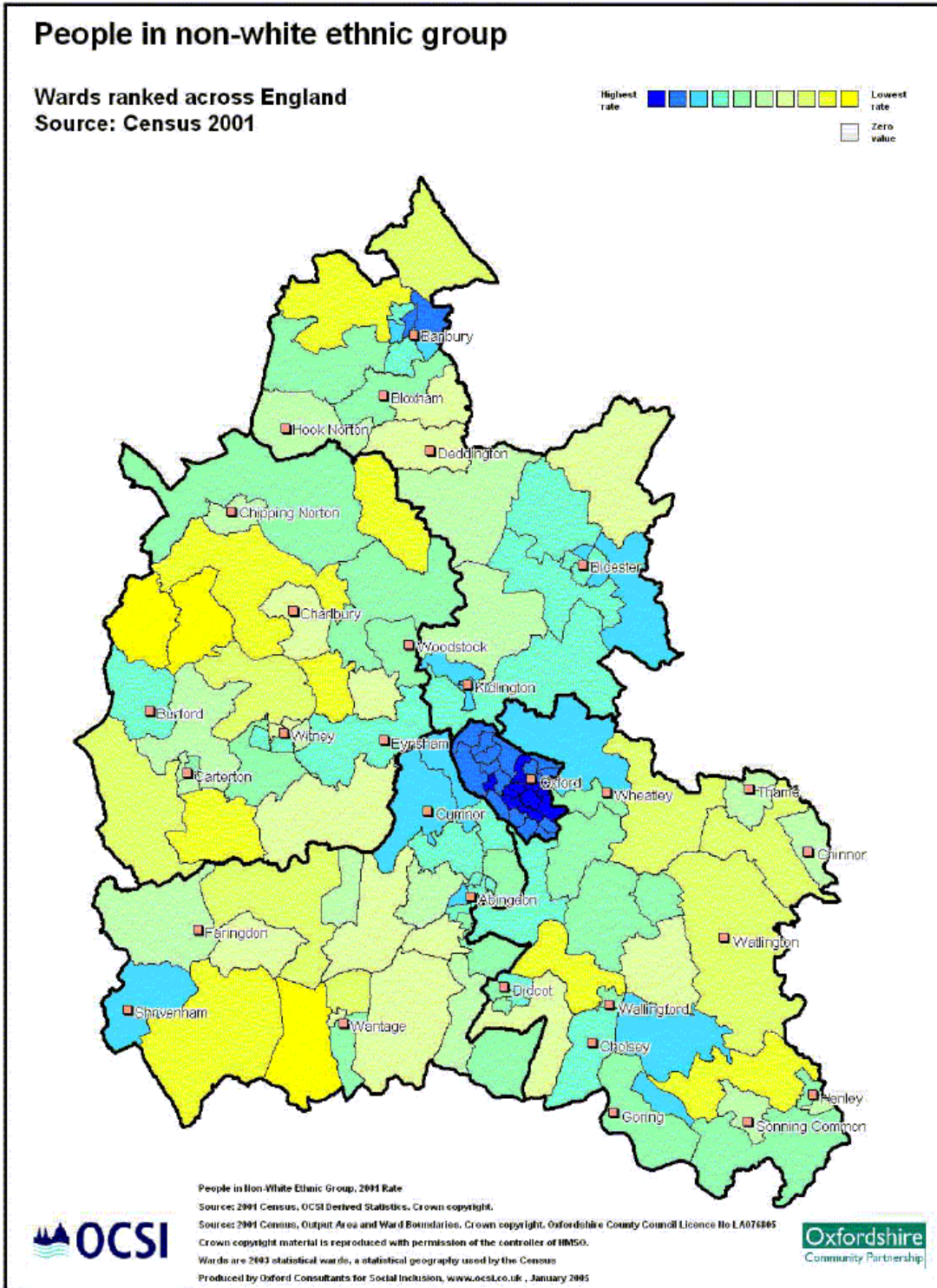
This rich mix makes Oxford a genuinely cosmopolitan city. This is apparent not just in the varied dress and styles of the people but also in the output of the service industries. A walk along Cowley Road in East Oxford will leave hungry diners spoiled for choice. There are restaurants offering modern British, Spanish, Japanese, Lebanese, Chinese, Bangladeshi, Jamaican, and Thai reflecting the rich cultural mix of the city.

Oxford is not only a diverse city. It is also, because of its large student population, youthful and mobile, with:

- the highest proportion of 20-24 year olds in the county (16% of Oxford's total population compared to approximately 5% for the other districts)
- a larger number of 16-24 year olds than anywhere else in Britain
- the largest concentration of students in England and Wales – 26% of the working age population.

The annual student intake reinforces the diversity of the city as well as bringing continual renewal. This combination of diversity, youth, and freshness means that

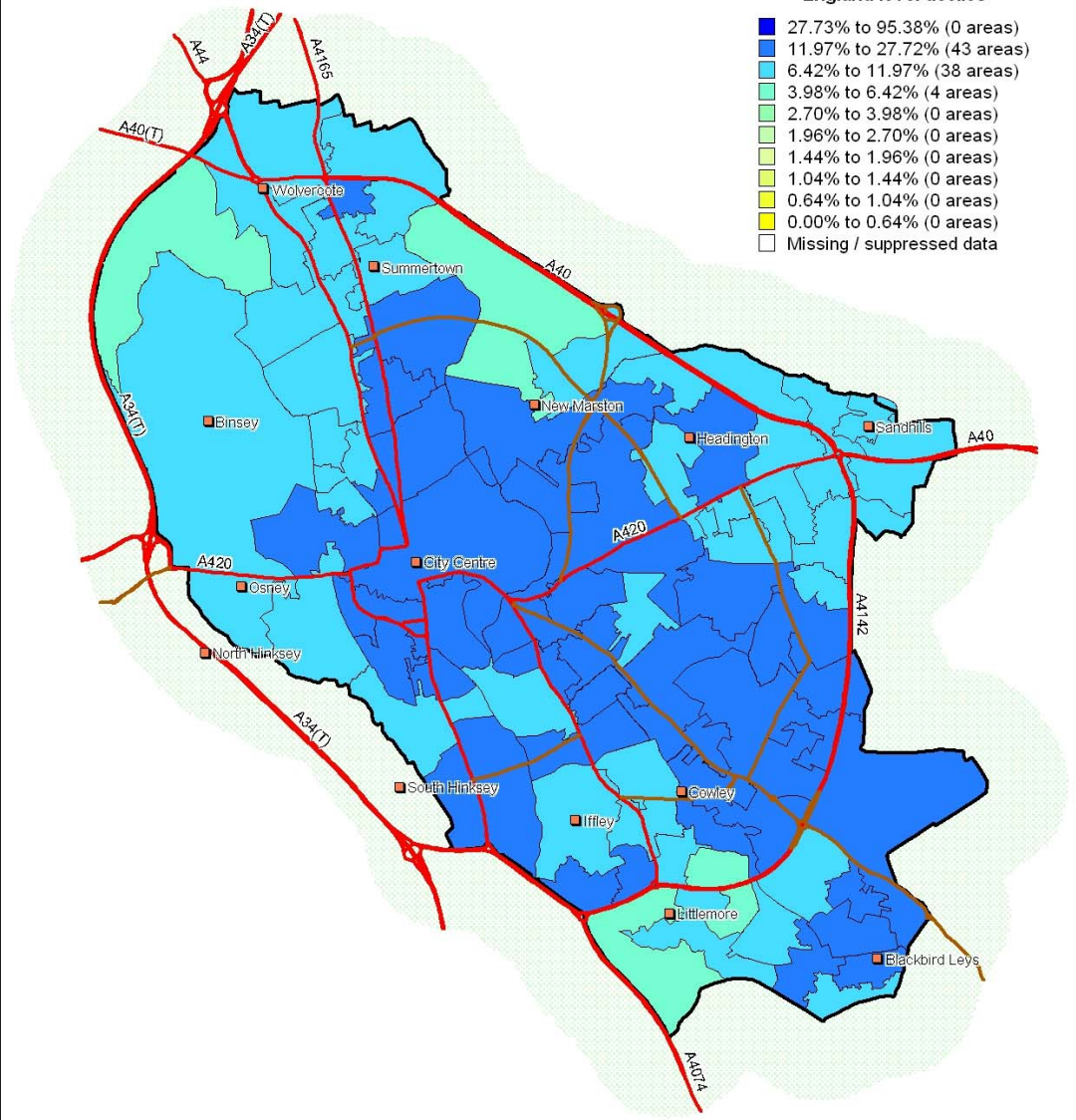
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People in Non-White Ethnic Group, 2001 Rate

SOAs ranked across England
Source: Census 2001



England level deciles

27.73% to 95.38% (0 areas)
11.97% to 27.72% (43 areas)
6.42% to 11.97% (38 areas)
3.98% to 6.42% (4 areas)
2.70% to 3.98% (0 areas)
1.96% to 2.70% (0 areas)
1.44% to 1.96% (0 areas)
1.04% to 1.44% (0 areas)
0.64% to 1.04% (0 areas)
0.00% to 0.64% (0 areas)
Missing / suppressed data

SOAs are Super Output Areas, a statistical geography developed for the Census
Source: 2001 Census: Crown Copyright.
Source: 2001 Census, Output Area and Ward Boundaries: Oxfordshire County Council Licence No LA076805
Crown copyright material is reproduced with permission of the controller of HMSO.
The colours on this map show 'England level deciles', based on the ranking of areas across England
Produced by Oxford Consultants for Social Inclusion, www.ocsii.co.uk, July 2005



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Oxford is in a continual state of flux and development. In this sense, it is utterly unlike anywhere else in the county, and often falls outside the established priorities of the county council.

Having a youthful population also brings its own problems. Oxford's status as a national tourist and student destination creates a booming night-time economy placing heavy burdens on services throughout the Council from Environmental Health to Street Cleaning.

Economy

Oxford is a global brand for a diverse range of industries - education, health, bioscience, information technology, publishing, the motor industry and tourism. The city is home to around 3,300 businesses providing 108,000 jobs. Seven of the ten largest employers in the Oxfordshire sub-region are within Oxford.

The local economy is flexible. There has been little change in the total number of jobs in Oxford over the last 30 years. However, as manufacturing has declined, these jobs have been replaced by employment in the health, education and the service sectors. 88% of employees now work in services, including 19% in retail, hotel and catering. A successful level of business competitiveness has kept unemployment at low levels.

Gross Value Added (GVA) per capita measures the value of goods and services produced in a city region relative to its population. It is a good measure of the material standard of living that a city region is delivering to its residents. In a study of over 50 city regions in England, Oxford was identified as the seventh highest performer. In a study of growth rates across the same city regions, Oxford is the eighth highest performer.

The knowledge economy is the key to Oxford's reputation and prosperity. The two universities – Oxford and Oxford Brookes:

- provide educational services of international standard
- are the driving forces behind the emerging research and development industries
- are leading the way in the creation of hi-tech spin-off companies. Staff from Oxford University have formed 80% of the 114 technology-based spin-off companies in Oxfordshire. Spin-offs employ around 3% of the county's workforce.

At the same time, the hi-tech sector:

- has stimulated cluster development and business networking
- has been the key driver for the Oxford Science Park which provides a home to over fifty hi-tech businesses, most with an R&D focus
- includes not just newly emerging areas, such as ICT, bioscience, and pharmaceutical companies but also traditional businesses which have successfully embraced technological advances, such as BMW and the publishing houses.

The car industry continues to play a key role in the life of the city. BMW's 200,000th Mini has long since rolled off the assembly lines. Demand for the product is so high that production had temporarily to cease recently so that the plant could be expanded to meet demand. BMW play heavily on the Oxford connection when marketing the Mini abroad, particularly in the United States.

Tourism is another significant part of the economy. Oxford is the sixth most visited city in the UK (excluding London) by international visitors and is the tourism gateway to the rest of Oxfordshire. More than 7.8 million visitors spend over £410 million annually.

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The city is also an important sub-regional shopping centre. The existing city council is expanding capacity by redeveloping both the central Westgate Shopping Centre and the West End area of the city centre. The latter redevelopment is part of a major urban renaissance package that a new unitary council would be better placed to drive forward to completion.

The recently introduced Local Authority Business Growth Incentives (LABGI) initiative shows that round £860,000 of extra revenue was generated through business rate income in Oxford in the first year of the scheme. Very little extra revenue was generated elsewhere in Oxfordshire.

Local small to medium sized businesses are also key to the prosperity of Oxford and the wider sub-region Oxford is working hard to improve levels of engagement with this sector of the community.

Culture

Oxford is the only Centre of Culture in the South East region and its rich cultural life reflects both its history and its contemporary diversity. The city has exceptional museums, two of which - the Ashmolean and Pitt Rivers - are undergoing multimillion pound refurbishments. It has a thriving performance art sector, with popular products as diverse as Shakespeare and Julian Clary drawing appreciative audiences.

There is a rich festival culture. Last year's Evolving City festival consisted of 36 individual projects involving 1400 artists, 30,000 participants, and more than 100,000 spectators. Among its highlights, the festival featured: story-telling across cultures; Arts on Estates programmes on four housing estates; Onam and Diwali celebrations led by the local Malayalee Club; Multiplicity, led by the local Race Equality Council; Synergy, the Disability Arts Showcase; Science in the City; and a Bernstein mass performed by children from Oxford's twinning cities. Oxford is a driving force behind the *1,000 years of Oxfordshire Festival* in 2007.

The city's large numbers of young people drive demand not only for sports facilities – including the only ice rink in the region - but also for high-quality clubs and music venues. People come from across the region and beyond to see the bands playing The Zodiac on Cowley Road. The creative local music scene has produced several high profile acts in recent years, including internationally famous bands such as *Supergrass* and *Radiohead*, and the local pubs are a rich source of musical experiment.

Oxford Inspires, now established as a cultural development agency for the city, is well placed to ensure that the recent growth in the scope and quality of Oxford's cultural scene is sustained.

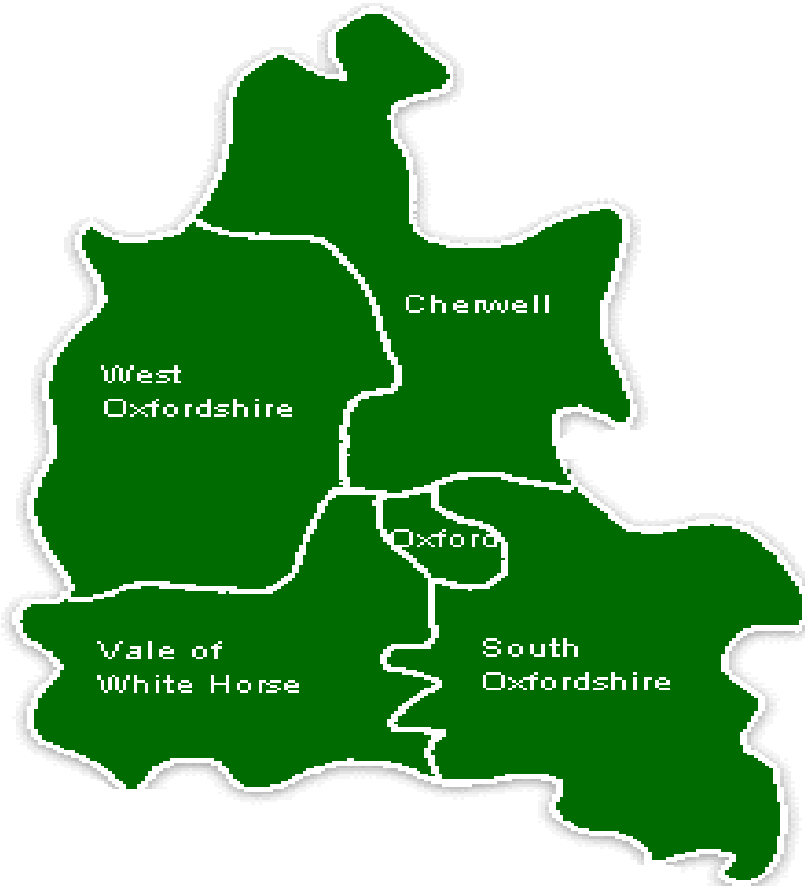
Delivering for a dynamic Oxford

Oxford is a vibrant, economically dynamic and diverse community with a strong sense of its own identity that is separate from Oxfordshire. It also has a distinct demographic and economic profile from the rest of the sub-region, and pressures on resources and the priorities for service delivery are very different in the urban city from the rural county. As a result, there are frequently conflicts between the County Council and Oxford City Council over policy priorities along with a democratic deficit for the people of Oxford that is impossible to overcome within the current system.

3 Oxford City Council Today

Accountability

Oxford City Council sits within Oxfordshire, and is one of five district councils within the administrative boundaries of Oxfordshire County Council along with West Oxfordshire, Cherwell, Vale of White Horse, South Oxfordshire and Oxford City. The map below illustrates the county and district boundaries.



With Oxford being the only major urban centre in Oxfordshire, rural members dominate the County Council, with different priorities to the city councillors. Currently, no members of the County Council Cabinet are elected in from Oxford

The City Council, as the collector of local taxation and provider of many of the services that citizens interact with on a day-to-day basis, is often assumed to be in charge of its future by the electorate. However, this is not the case, and the result is disengagement of citizens from the institutions of governance and low-voter turnout.

Policy development

Economically vibrant cities bring their own challenges and Oxford is no exception. In many areas of policy, Oxford has priorities that are different from Oxfordshire.

Housing

The city is facing an affordable housing crisis. Oxford has a large service economy and restricted land supply due to tight boundaries, the risk of flooding in many areas and the need to protect and enhance the natural and historic environments.

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This results in high demand and extremely high house prices. The housing market rose sharply between 1998 and 2002 while average earnings did not. The average Oxford house now costs £276,309, or roughly ten times average income. As a result, housing choices are limited. The percentage of owner occupiers is relatively low in the city – 56.1% compared with the South East (75.6 %) and England (69.9%). The percentage of private rented accommodation, on the other hand, is high – 22.1% in Oxford compared with 10.9% in the South East, and 10.4% in England.

The high cost of housing also means that local businesses and services, and indeed Oxford City Council itself, struggle to recruit and retain high quality people.

The private rented sector also causes deep concern. There are large concentrations of houses in multiple occupation, often in a poor state of repair, particularly in the east of the city. Two Super Output Areas in Oxford – in the St. Mary's and Holywell wards, where the majority of properties are privately rented – are among the poorest 10% of Super Output Areas in England for living environment. The whole of St. Mary's ward is in the top ten most deprived Super Output Areas in this category. Oxford has the highest proportion of households without a bath, shower, or toilet in the South East, and the fifth highest in England and Wales.

The most significant consequence of housing need is homelessness. In 2005, 16.2 in every 1000 households were in temporary accommodation, more than double that of any other district in Oxfordshire sub-region and compared to a regional average of 3.8. Those waiting for social housing increased by nearly a third from 3,121 in March 2000 to 3,991 in March 2004. Currently around 750 households live in temporary accommodation.

The number of people accepted as homeless is extremely high in Oxford compared to other centres across the county. In 2003-04, Oxford accepted 382 homeless individuals, Cherwell 226, Vale of White Horse 163, South Oxfordshire 149, and 83 in West Oxfordshire. The annual cost of homelessness to Oxford City Council is over £4 million and we face high demands for housing benefit and resources to tackle deprivation on housing estates.

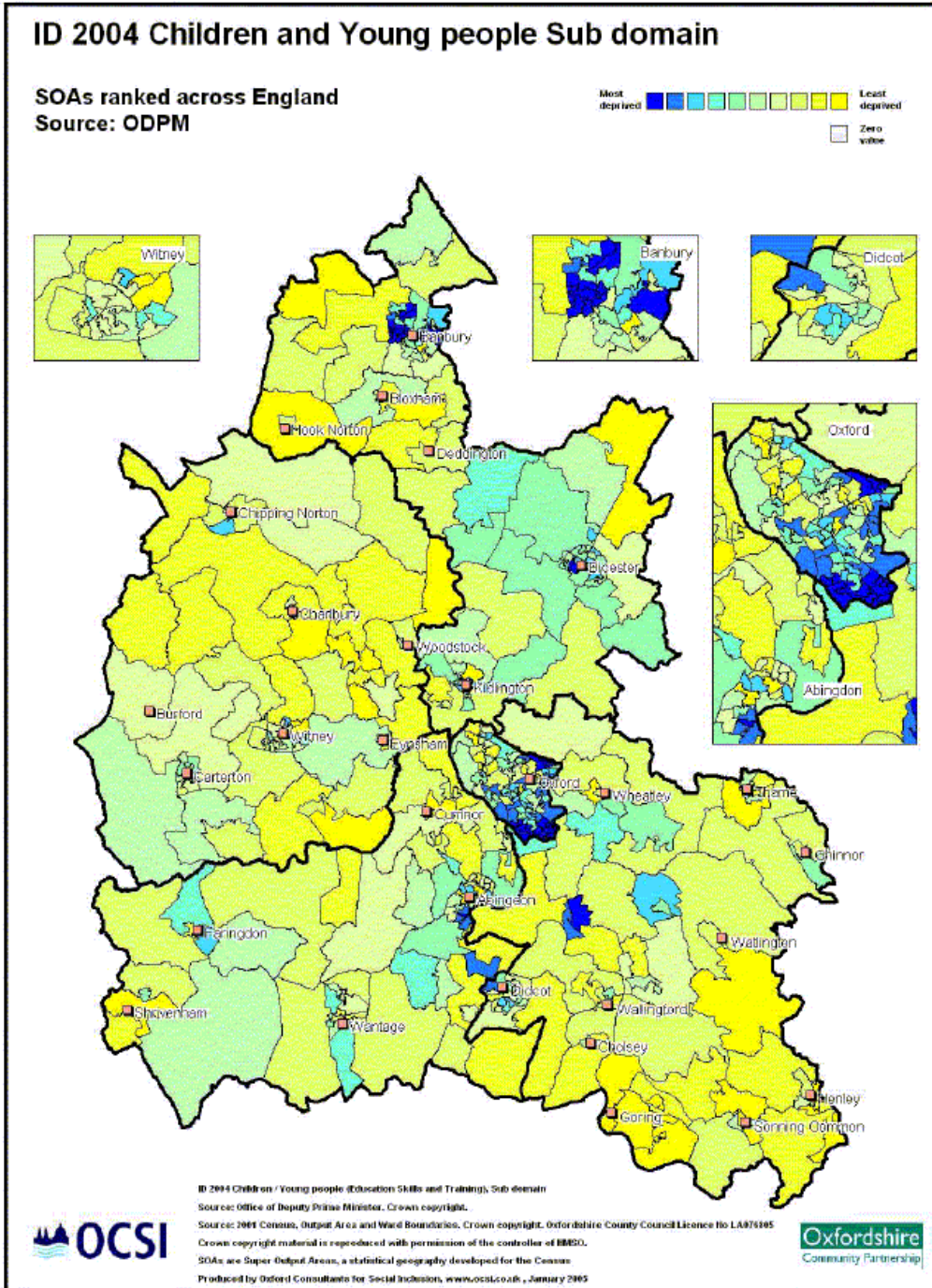
Education

Oxford is, in general, a well educated city with 35% of the population qualified to NVQ Level 4 or equivalent compared to a UK average of 26.5%. Yet, 12 of our Super Output Areas are among the 10% of most deprived SOAs in England, in terms of education and skills. The entire Blackbird Leys ward is in this decile, with the highest rate of people with no qualifications in Oxford. At 45.5%, this greatly exceeds the England average of 28.9%. Other wards whose rates exceed those for England are Barton and Sandhills, Rose Hill and Iffley, Northfield Brook, Littlemore and Cowley.

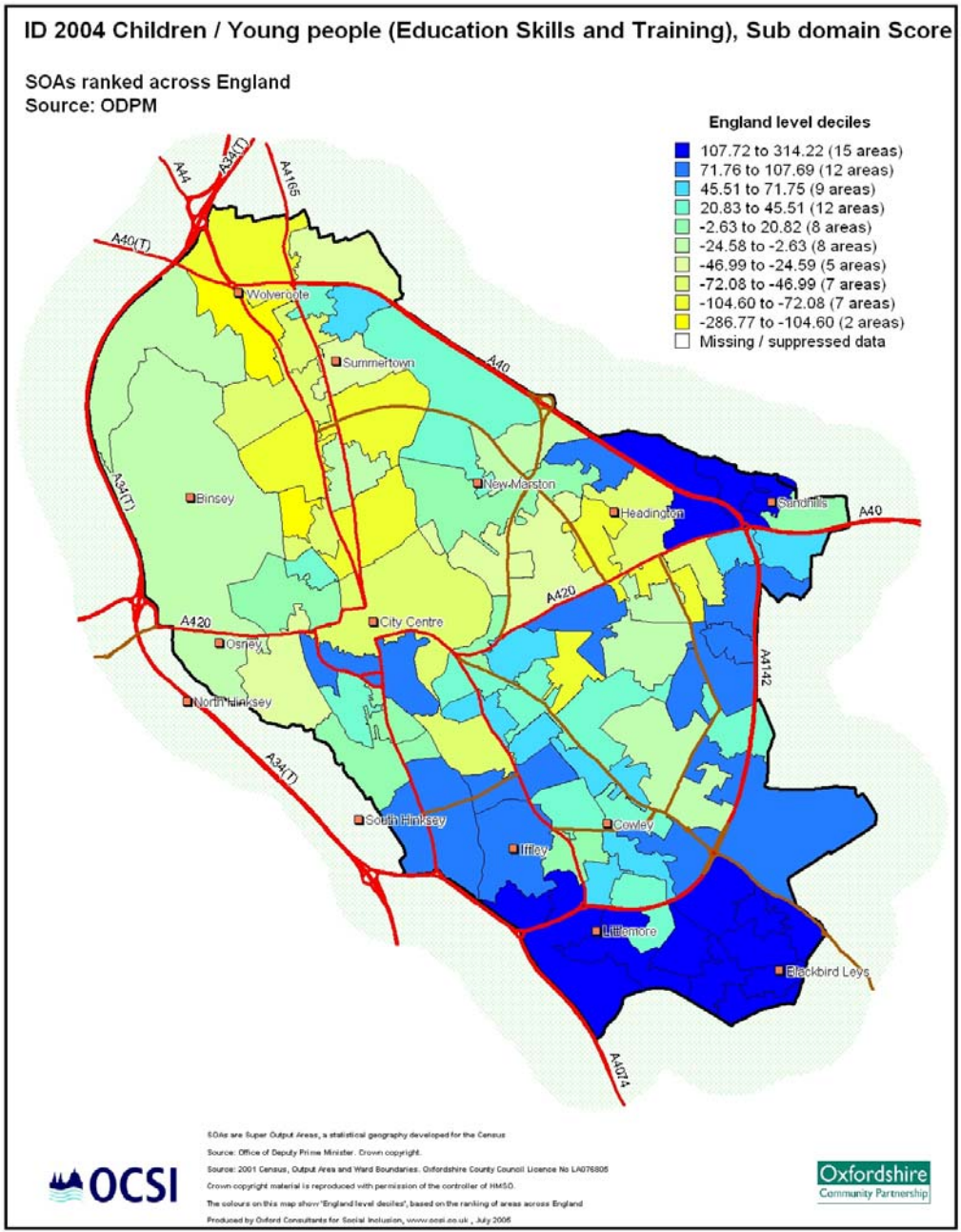
Results in Oxfordshire for Key Stages 2 and 3 exceed those for England, and GCSE results are very similar to those for England as a whole. Results for the city of Oxford however, show a wide range in attainment between schools, in all age groups.

Pupils at schools in Oxford have consistently attained lower results at GCSE than their counterparts who attend schools in Oxfordshire. In 2005, 40.9% of Oxford pupils gained 5 A*-C grades at GCSE – the rate in other districts varied from 49.5% to 63.4%. In addition, while the trend for our neighbours is that attainment is improving, in Oxford it is heading downward. This pattern is also shown at the bottom end of the attainment scale. In 2004, 7.5% of pupils at Oxford schools left with no GCSE passes. The rate in all other Oxfordshire districts is between 2.5% and 3.1%.

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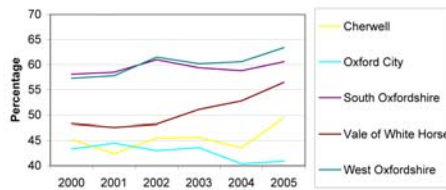


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	5+ GCSE A*-C (%)					
	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005
England (maintained schools)	46.9	47.8	49.1	50.8	51.3	54.2
Oxfordshire LEA	50.9	49.8	51.7	51.5	50.6	54.3
Cherwell	45.2	42.4	45.5	45.6	43.6	49.5
Oxford City	43.3	44.5	43	43.6	40.4	40.9
South Oxfordshire	58.1	58.5	61	59.4	58.8	60.6
Vale of White Horse	48.3	47.6	48.2	51.1	52.8	56.5
West Oxfordshire	57.3	57.8	61.5	60.2	60.6	63.4

Percentage of pupils gaining 5 A*-C GCSE grades



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Deprivation

Relative to the rest of Oxfordshire, Oxford has high levels of deprivation. The Indices of Deprivation 2004 rank Oxford 144th out of 354, placing it amongst the 40% most deprived local authorities in England. Of the 85 Super Output Areas in Oxford, ten are among the 20% most deprived in England, with one of these among the most deprived 10%.

While the average of 3.3% unemployment is comparably low, there are geographic and demographic pockets of high unemployment (including young Black Caribbean men). Oxford has just under 10,000 residents claiming benefits – the highest percentage among the county's districts. 30% of our under-16 year-olds are living in low-income households.

Community Safety

Oxford has significantly higher crime rates than in the rest of the county. In 2005-06 nearly half of all the 2,326 reported domestic burglaries in Oxfordshire took place in the city. Nearly three quarters of all robberies in the county were committed in Oxford and rates of violent crime are the higher than any other part of the county. The areas of highest crime are located in the city centre and parts of East Oxford.

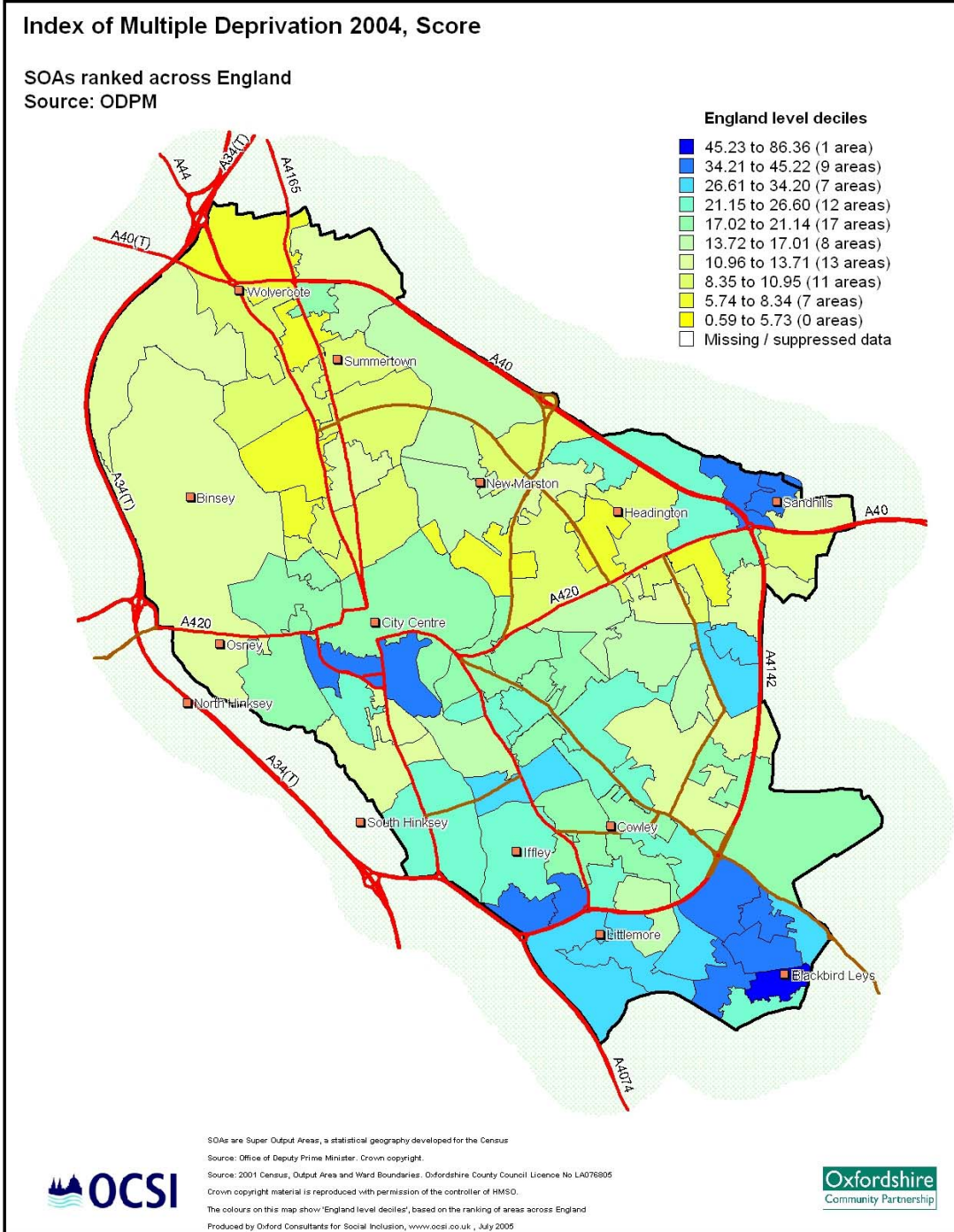
Health

Generally, health provision in Oxfordshire is good. However life expectancy in Oxford city, the most frequently quoted method of assessing the health of a district, is lower at 78.7 years than any of the other districts in Oxfordshire. Oxford is also the only district in Oxfordshire with an average life expectancy lower than that of the South East Region.

Transport

Oxford City Council wants to reduce congestion and pollution through discouraging people from driving their cars into the city and promoting the use of Park & Ride, while at the same time imposing parking charges in the city centre. The County Council, on the other hand, wants to encourage people from rural Oxfordshire to use their cars to visit the city. At the same time, they want to abolish parking charges in the evenings and weekends so that rural voters do not have to use public transport to get to the city.

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Ensuring that the city's transport policy is appropriate to an urban area is essential to the future of Oxford, both economically and environmentally. Under the current two-tier system, the City Council cannot make the difficult decisions that will protect our future as both a vibrant and dynamic place but also one that is clean and green – something we think is ultimately to the benefit of everyone in the area.

Planning

As the local planning authority, Oxford City Council has consistently sought to ensure that development is appropriate for the needs of a historic city that has a growing economy and population.

Under the current arrangements, the City Council can make decisions on individual planning applications, but many areas from land-use planning to highways decisions are in the hands of the County Council. This creates tensions in the future development of the City, which is essential to Oxford's continued prosperity.

On economic development, the County Council's main focus has tended to be on the rural towns and villages rather than the city and we have often been involved in initiatives that are of little benefit to an urban area. At a strategic level, the county has effectively endorsed a South East Spatial Planning Strategy that will block expanded economic growth possibilities for our city. Oxford, as the key driver of growth in the sub-region, should be entitled to manage growth in ways that practically benefit the city and its people.

Meeting the challenges

As a major urban centre Oxford faces many of the challenges that are common to cities in England. While Oxford is a thriving city, many of its residents suffer from deprivation, poor housing, and fear of crime, particularly in the city centre. Levels of educational attainment are below national average and transport infrastructure is not set up to meet the needs of a busy but compact city.

None of these challenges are insurmountable. However, the current two-tier arrangement vastly limits the scope for Oxford City Council to improve the quality of life for the residents of the City.

Oxfordshire County Council inevitably focuses on the requirements of the majority of the county. These needs - primarily rural and suburban, and mostly affluent - are very different from those of the city of Oxford.

4 Delivering for Citizens

Service delivery

Improving the quality of life of the citizens of Oxford is what drives the existing City Council. As outlined above, Oxford is in many areas constrained in its scope to deliver results and experiences lack of engagement and support from Oxfordshire County Council.

Oxford has entered into partnership with Vanguard, the leading systems thinking practitioners, to improve cost efficiency and service provision. This is an example of how the City Council is seeking innovative solutions to making the lives of our citizens better.

Although Oxford is committed to this process, there are limitations to what the Vanguard methodology can deliver within the two-tier system. As a district within a County Council, the city council is also limited in the ways that it is able to formalise the direct involvement of customers and stakeholders in shaping service planning and delivery.

Empowering neighbourhoods

Community engagement and empowerment is one area where Oxford has been able to lead the way. With a diverse and youthful population, the City Council has had to look at innovative methods of engagement, particularly to ensure that 'hard-to-reach' groups, such as ethnic minorities, are included in consultation processes.

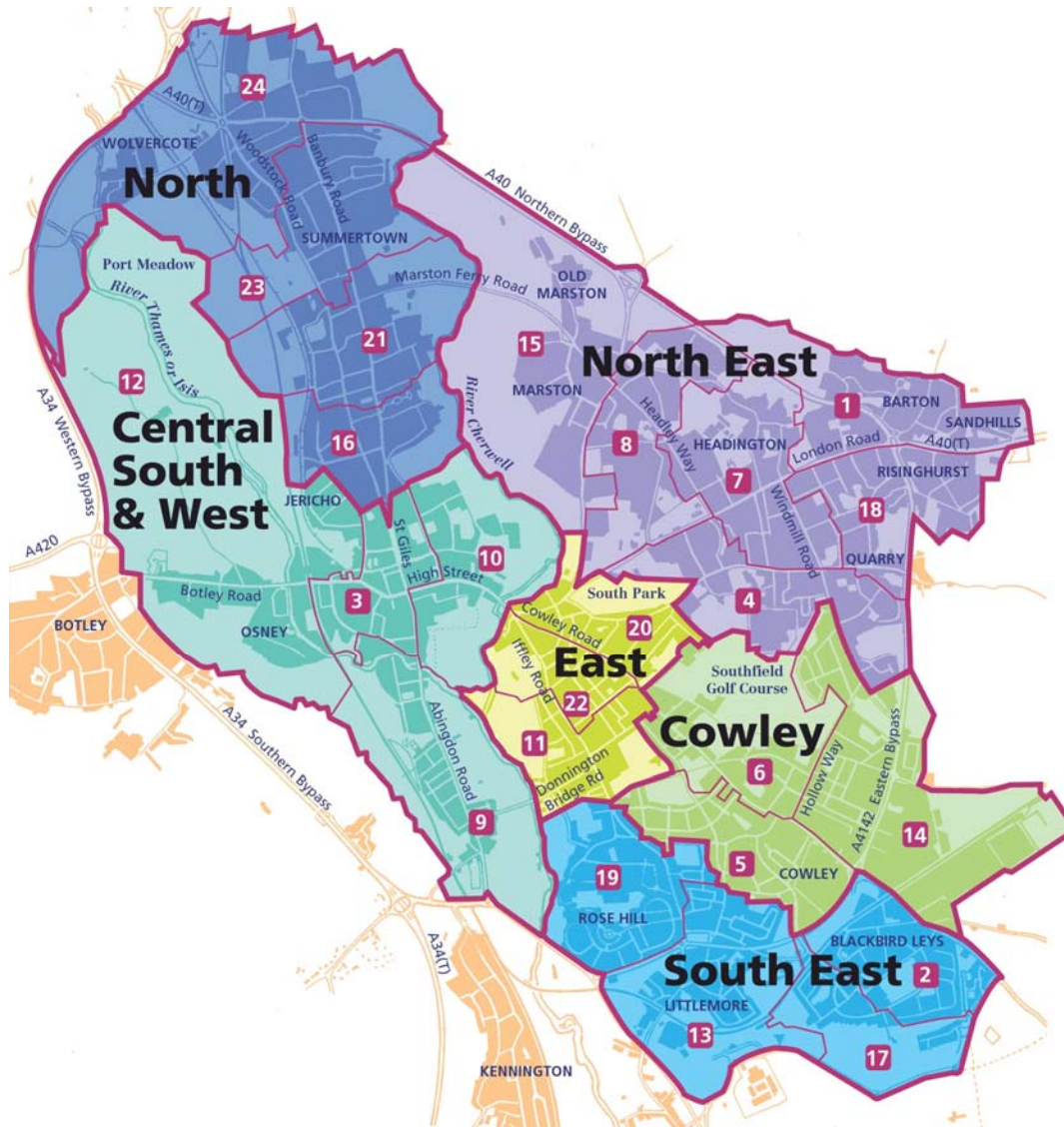
Oxford City Council has a strong record on devolving power to local communities. In 2001, the council introduced Area Committees and there are now six of these across the city.

The council is increasingly aligning its services to area-level delivery, with area based contacts for services. In 2004, the council began to explore the possibilities offered by neighbourhood working in smaller areas. As a result of a pilot project in Blackbird Leys a Neighbourhood Action Team has been established to take this forward.

Although some County Councillors contribute to these initiatives constructively, the organisation they represent is large and remote and its delivery mechanisms are not aligned with local urban needs.

Oxford also has an excellent record in involving council housing tenants in the management of the service through tenants' forums. Tenants' decision to

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retain the City Council as their landlord in part reflects satisfaction with their level of involvement. The council has set up a new Tenants' Resource Centre so that tenant representatives can do their jobs more effectively and have recently restructured the management of the service to better respond to tenants' requirements.

Oxford City Council has also developed consultation strategies, such as a citizens' panel, which are jointly funded and managed by the police and the Primary Care Trust (PCT). These ensure that all citizens, including black and ethnic minority communities, are involved in key consultations relating to how we deliver local services.

Value for money

Oxford City Council's costs in many areas are high, in relation to other councils.

Oxford's prosperity and vitality bring their own costs and the council is trying to deliver the needs of a city on the budget of a district council.

- The current annual cost of homelessness to the Council is over £4 million
- Oxford faces high demands for housing benefit and resources to tackle deprivation on the housing estates
- Oxford's status as a national tourist and student destination brings with it a booming night-time economy. This places a heavy burden on Environmental Health to enforce public health standards in hotels, bars and restaurants and on our street cleaning and recycling services. It also has implications for community safety costs. The night-time economy means there are 19,000 vertical drinking spaces in the city centre alone.
- Oxford pays South East wage rates in order to deliver these services.

Oxford has also tended toward generous leisure provision. The council believes that people should have access to high quality leisure facilities without having to pay exorbitant membership fees. Leisure activities promote healthy living and also contribute to our community safety objectives by providing diversionary activities for young people. Leisure provision, as a result, is extensive for a city of Oxford's size – seven major leisure centres and a significant range of other facilities.

The council accepts that there are also inefficiencies in some processes. The current City Council is dealing with the problem of high costs, where they are within its control, by applying the options appraisal framework set out in a Procurement Strategy

Conclusion

Oxford today is a place of opportunities but one that faces many of the problems common to an urban centre. The City Council has made progress in many areas, particularly in empowering communities at a neighbourhood level. However, under the current two-tier system, there is no strategic leadership, service provision is fragmented, and there is a major democratic deficit – all of which lead to poor delivery and value for money.

It is clear however, that Oxford is very different from the other districts in Oxfordshire, and has priorities that cannot be addressed under the current arrangements.

The city council believes that a new system of governance for the people of Oxfordshire is required.

Part II: A New Future for Oxford

5 Vision & Aims

So far, this submission has set out the challenges faced by Oxford and how the current City Council is attempting to deal with these challenges within the present two-tier local government arrangements. The chapters that follow address what a new unitary Oxford would aim to deliver for its citizens and the broader Oxfordshire sub-region.

Oxford has a strong local economy but with some areas suffering from multiple levels of deprivation, it is in the interests of everybody who lives and works in the city that the economy continues to grow.

Yet, it is not merely about new businesses and new employment opportunities.

As part of Oxford's growth, it will need to be a socially cohesive community where people from different backgrounds have similar life chances. At present, the City Council has a wide range of initiatives in place to promote social inclusion and to deal with issues of crime, education, health and deprivation. It is vital going forward, however, that Oxford is better able to manage and develop these initiatives in the interests of, and in partnership with neighbourhoods and communities across the city.

A new unitary authority is essential to ensuring Oxford's future success. Granted such status, the new unitary council will aim to:

- Improve accountability through a single cadre of empowered well supported locally elected councillors who are responsible for all local government services within the city
- Provide clear and unambiguous strategic leadership for the functional urban area of the city of Oxford
- Increase the influence of the city in the economic development of the sub- region and region
- Enable local government in the whole of Oxfordshire to be centred as far as possible on meaningful communities of a sufficient size to provide effective corporate capacity, and sufficiently local to take account of geographic and demographic differences
- Be orientated to a sense of place, and facilitate a radical 'place shaping' agenda for the city
- Empower citizens and neighbourhood groups within the city to engage with, and participate in, the shaping and delivery of responsive council services
- Deliver service improvement through true partnership working with other public agencies, businesses and third sector organisations within the city.
- Provide and/or commission a range of efficient, affordable and value for money services that local people want, supported through integrated service structures and shared back office functions with neighbouring unitary councils and other public agencies
- Be supported by citizens, partners and other stakeholders
- Be self-financing.

Little of this can be achieved within Oxford City Council's present local government arrangements. A new unitary council is therefore, the only way forward.

6 An Oxford Unitary Council

In a new 'Three Unitary' arrangement for Oxfordshire, it will be for 'North Oxfordshire' and 'South Oxfordshire' to determine their own vision, aims and structure. That will be their prerogative, but what about the finer details of how a new Oxford unitary will work?

Unlike the current two-tier arrangement, a unitary Oxford will aim to provide clear and unambiguous strategic leadership for the city. Orientated towards a sense of how Oxford currently functions as a city and what purpose it should have in future, the leadership of a unitary Oxford will primarily seek to facilitate a radical 'place shaping' agenda for the city and its communities.

Unitary status is essential to ensuring Oxford's ability to deliver the economic growth, efficient services, and cohesive communities that will improve the life chances of all within the city, based on the strategic aims referred to previously. A new unitary Oxford will do so through the following key areas:

- Accountability
- Policy development
- Service delivery
- Citizen empowerment
- Value for money.

Accountability

At present, confusion reigns with many people in Oxford over who is actually responsible for managing the city's affairs. Removing the county tier of government would allow Oxford to improve democratic accountability and transparency. Through a single cadre of empowered, well-supported locally elected councillors with clear responsibilities for all local government services within the city, a new unitary council will reflect more directly the voting wishes of the city's people. Oxford's electorate will know that their vote counts – a vital and important step toward reinvigorating local democracy.

The Department of Communities and Local Government has requested that all unitary bids make proposals for future electoral and executive arrangements. The White Paper sets out three executive models – the key aspects of which are described in Table B below.

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Table B – Alternative Executive Leadership Models

Directly Elected Mayor	Directly Elected Executive	Indirectly Elected Leader	
		Whole council elections	Elections by halves or thirds
Councillors elected by whole council elections every 4 years, or otherwise by halves or thirds. Direct elections of Mayor every 4 years.	Councillors elected by whole council elections every 4 years, or otherwise by halves or thirds Direct election of a slate of the Leader and Executive every 4 years.	Councillors elected by whole council elections every 4 years. The council elects a Leader by simple majority for a 4-year term. No confidence vote could end Leader's appointment.	Councillors elected by halves or thirds. The council elects a leader by simple majority for a 4-year term but Leader would stand down if his/her term as a councillor ends. No confidence vote could end Leader's appointment.
Cabinet of 2-9 appointed by Mayor from councillors.	Cabinet of 2-9 directly elected.	Cabinet of 2-9 appointed by Leader from councillors.	Cabinet of 2-9 appointed by Leader from councillors.

Oxford's current City Council has chosen to adopt the indirectly elected leader model. A referendum on the issue of the elected mayor was held in Oxford in May 2002. The people of Oxford voted decisively against the elected mayor model then. There has been no subsequent public campaign to revisit the issue of direct election.

Oxford was re-warded in 2002 and it is likely that the new unitary council will maintain these relatively recent arrangements, although the new council will be encouraged to review its arrangements following its shadow elections in 2008. The city moved from election by thirds to election by halves in 2002 – a system that the new unitary council will also review.

The Local Government White Paper expresses a clear preference for all-out elections on the grounds that this provides strong, stable local government. Based on recent experience, Oxford's current council has decided that election by halves is compatible with strong, stable government and an important way of renewing its democratic mandate. Once again the new council, following its election in 2008, will review this arrangement.

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Apart from two years of Labour majority from 2002 to 2004, Oxford has had a hung council since May 2000. During this time, its core strategic priorities have developed consistently, with no major policy reversals and members effectively negotiating the issues posed by a hung council. Members are attuned to the needs of their constituents, and consequently there has been a wide area of fundamental agreement about what matters for the city. As a result, members have been able to work across parties to move things forward. For example, the concept of the massive recycling initiative currently being rolled out across the city was developed under a minority Labour administration. It is now being delivered, with operational amendments, by a minority Liberal Democrat administration.

The Local Government White Paper expresses a preference for single member wards. These are common in other countries, for example Australia where local government is professionalised and being a councillor is a full time job. Oxford's current council believes this would not work well under the voluntarist arrangements in place in the UK, believing two members per ward as necessary to provide appropriate levels of representation and advocacy. It also believes this will be even more important under unitary status, where city councillors will be taking on responsibilities currently carried out by county councillors.

As indicated above, the new unitary authority may choose to review and amend these electoral arrangements.

Policy development

In a unitary Oxford, co-ordinated strategic planning will focus on currently dispersed functions around transport, housing, education and employment, social and health care, and community safety and enable more joined up policy-making appropriate the needs of the city.

Effective policy development will be at the heart of a new unitary council. At all levels, the Council will work collaboratively with stakeholders, council employees and the people of Oxford, to bring about a new and successful authority based on six strategic objectives:

- to lead, in conjunction with its partners, in the improvement of the educational and social well-being of Oxford's children and young people. The services provide will aim to equip them for life in a rapidly changing and complex world, and protect and nurture those who are vulnerable
- to support and provide care for vulnerable adults and elderly members of the community, in partnership with other Oxford agencies, and provide an efficient and effective housing service
- to drive forward the economic and social vitality of the city and enhance its international reputation
- to make Oxford an exemplar in environmental management and climate change
- to enhance community provision, through a radical programme of citizen empowerment and engagement, reducing inequality, promoting social cohesion and engaging with hard to reach groups wherever they exist.
- to commission a range of high quality and value for money services, supported by efficient and cost effective back office services provided in conjunction with partners

To meet these objectives a new unitary Oxford will require a renewed management structure and policy framework to meet the strategic aims of the city. It will need to be forward looking, dynamic and responsive, delivering strategic leadership while providing greater transparency and accountability. The policy framework and management structure for the new authority will be a direct response to the demands of a dynamic, modern, urban community.

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To ensure the delivery of the strategic objectives, the new management structure is likely to be based around the creation of a team of five corporate directors led by a Chief Executive:

The **Director of Children's Services** will carry out the statutory role and manage a department focused on developing and protecting children and young people. The directorate will provide strong links with the universities to develop educational provision, and promote greater links between the youth service and neighbourhood governance arrangements.

The **Director of Social Care and Housing** will lead an innovative department joining social care and housing services 'at the head and the hip'. This directorate will link with the PCT to provide integrated city-wide services. It will, for example, build on the successful LIFT programme that has already delivered additional medical facilities in some of the most deprived areas of the city.

The **Director of Development** will give strategic focus to the place-shaping agenda. This directorate will include land use planning and economic functions, strategic housing, transportation and tourism. It will also drive forward Oxford's case in the region and beyond. Working in partnership with the universities, it will become a major driver of economic and cultural change with strong links to the new Joint Strategy Committee and the Regional Development Agency. It will deliver the city's aspirations to become a major economic location, building on the Diamonds for Growth initiative, the West End Partnership, and New Growth Points.

The **Director of Environmental and Community Services** will lead the clean, green and safe communities agenda, including local transport. The directorate will also work with local communities through the Area Committees, neighbourhood forums and parish councils to enhance community provision and develop the community empowerment agenda. It will ensure that the needs of local communities are directly reflected in the work of the Local Strategic Partnership and the Local Area Agreement.

The **Director of Corporate Business Support** will commission support services from the shared services arrangement, support the unitary structure generally, and facilitate the statutory roles of s151 and monitoring officer.

The **Chief Executive** will be supported by a small strategic team providing both cross-cutting policy direction and internal challenge to performance. The Chief Executive's role will be to:

- ensure the delivery of efficient and effective services to customers, aligned to members' priorities and budgets as set out in their corporate plan
- ensure the Council fulfils its role as a leader (place shaper) of the local Oxford community through partnership working with other agencies and economic regeneration
- ensure that a range of high quality value for money professional services are available to Oxford City Council to support front line services, and to ensure sound governance
- provide a robust challenge to service performance and cross-cutting policies; promote continuous improvement and innovation through positive organisational and cultural development.

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Service delivery

Within Oxford's present two-tier administrative framework, policy conflicts lead to confusion and duplication in service delivery. Supported housing provision is a clear example, with the City Council currently administering the housing function while the County Council administers social and healthcare functions. When people or information slip between the two, Oxford city council tends to take the blame. Being called "the city council" and collecting the Council Tax leads local people to assume that the City Council is responsible for the delivery of all local services.

In a new unitary Oxford, clear identification of responsibility for service delivery will be reinforced by effective branding campaigns. People will know when to praise or blame the unitary council for the quality of the services they receive.

The ultimate aim however, will be to use the freedom of purpose that will come with unitary status to deliver service improvement through true partnership working with other public agencies, businesses and third sector organisations within the city. Local Strategic Partnerships and Local Area Agreements were put in place, at least in part, to overcome some of the service delivery problems, but they have been flawed as the County Council had been the lead local authority partner. A unitary Oxford will give the elected council an equal standing with other organisations at the table, ensuring the delivery of a much stronger result for Oxford.

Citizen empowerment

Constrained as Oxford has been within the current two-tier arrangement, the City Council has to date made great headway in attempting to empower citizens and devolve power to neighbourhood groups within the city. As the evidence presented earlier reveals, Area Committees, tenants' forums, and our citizens' consultation panel contributes directly to the health of local democracy beyond the council chamber.

The Local Government White Paper requires that unitary proposals should:

- establish a strong citizen focus, including how the authority will discharge the duty, proposed in the white paper, to inform, consult, involve and devolve
- empower local people so that they have the power to influence the decisions that affect their lives including the ability to shape service provision
- engage all sections of the community and increase the attractiveness of engagement to widen participation to all
- deliver clear and accountable community governance arrangements which empower the frontline councillor to champion their community.

With unitary status, the new council will build on existing strengths by further engaging with local citizens, businesses, community groups and stakeholders, enabling and encouraging their participation in the shaping and delivery of locally responsive council services.

The current Area Committees incorporate separate and distinct communities. The new unitary authority will encourage the creation of numerous neighbourhood forums within each Area Committee boundary to allow genuine local engagement that prioritises and influences the allocation and use of resources. The new authority will actively encourage and support local residents who wish to establish neighbourhood forums and parish councils, with a remit to:

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- determine a local neighbourhood/parish agenda
- develop a neighbourhood/parish plan
- develop community projects
- influence the Area Committee Plan
- establish a relationship with neighbourhood policy.

These neighbourhood forums will provide another powerful vehicle for place shaping, drawing in tenants and residents associations, community associations and faith, youth and school based organisations. They will be able to range across all aspects of life in the community and provide a method of delivering cohesive, locally focused communities.

The new authority will also:

- encourage the co-option of neighbourhood/parish representatives on to Area Committees, and place a greater emphasis on existing open sessions to encourage public engagement
- extend the powers of Area Committees by delegating more functions, powers, and budgets, including a 'community chest' for local projects. The Area Committees would work with distinct area-based budgeting for some services, and through cross-functional teams incorporating all services within the particular area.
- enable more participation by Area Committees in deciding the allocation of mainstream funds, in consultation with neighbourhood forums/ parishes
- give more emphasis to Area Committee plans as an integral part of the Council's place-shaping initiatives
- enable participation of residents on the City Local Strategic Partnership through a selection from resident co-optees on Area Committees
- encourage tenant forums (including RSLs) to participate in the neighbourhood agenda.

The neighbourhood empowerment arrangements set out above will contribute to ensuring effective, responsive services that meet the needs and preferences of local communities.

The new unitary authority will seek to strengthen these arrangements further by introducing mechanisms to actively involve communities and other stakeholders in influencing and shaping both planning and delivery of services.

As stated earlier, the City Council has entered into a strategic partnership with Vanguard, the leading systems thinking practitioners. The Vanguard methodology has been proven elsewhere to deliver many benefits; improved services, empowered front-line staff, and improved cost efficiency. For a new Oxford authority it will also bring another important benefit – it will formalize the direct involvement of customers and stakeholders in the shaping of service planning and delivery.

The Vanguard method is designed to ensure that the 'what and why' of current organisational performance is anchored in a true understanding of the purpose of the service under analysis, from the citizens' point of view. This leads to the establishment of a baseline of current performance from the point of view of the people whom the new authority is there to serve. The service review then redesigns the systems in response to the nature of customer demand. The customer becomes an active participant in the process rather than the passive recipient of the product.

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A key difference between manufacturing – where systems thinking developed – and the service sector is that services must respond to a range of variable factors. In service, each demand is unique. The customer sets the requirement, which means that the system must be able to cope with a wide variety of demand and be designed to meet the diverse needs of different customer groups.

In addition to the direct involvement of customers in service reviews the new council will also carry out reality checks in other ways (e.g. satisfaction calls, informal feedback and consultation through panels) to ensure that citizens' requirements have been correctly identified. This will complement existing community engagement and consultation mechanisms and will give the new council a comprehensive understanding of citizens' views.

Oxford's new authority will work through the community engagement mechanisms to develop charters based on local service measures. Services will be measured against achievement of purpose from the citizens' point of view, using measures developed with citizens rather than arbitrary standards imposed from above.

The new unitary council would continue to develop on existing relationships with 'user' bodies such as tenants associations, the park and pool/sports centre user groups and organisations representing retailers, the tourism industry and industry/commerce so that they have a clear role in the policy making functions of the new council, freed from the constraints of the two tier system.

Value for money

Value for money is about understanding customer need and organising our resources to meet that need in the most economic, efficient, and effective way possible. The current City Council, as set out earlier in this report, has a poor record in this regard.

As the invitation to apply for unitary status makes clear, restructuring allows councils to challenge current procedures and review their service provision across the board.

The radical restructuring proposals contained in this report have the potential to deliver improved value for money not just within the new unitary authority in Oxford but across the rest of Oxfordshire as well.

The new authority's strategy for improving service delivery across all services will be drawn from Vanguard's customer focused approach to business process re-engineering. The Vanguard method is designed to ensure that the 'what and why' of current organisational performance is anchored in a true understanding of the purpose of the service under analysis, from the citizens' point of view. This leads to the establishment of a baseline of current performance from the point of view of the people whom the new authority is there to serve. The service review then redesigns the systems in response to the nature of customer demand. The customer becomes an active participant in the process rather than the passive recipient of the product. By designing against demand, waste is eliminated from the system. The customer gets the service they want at a lower cost.

The Unitary council will prioritise lean thinking interventions in:

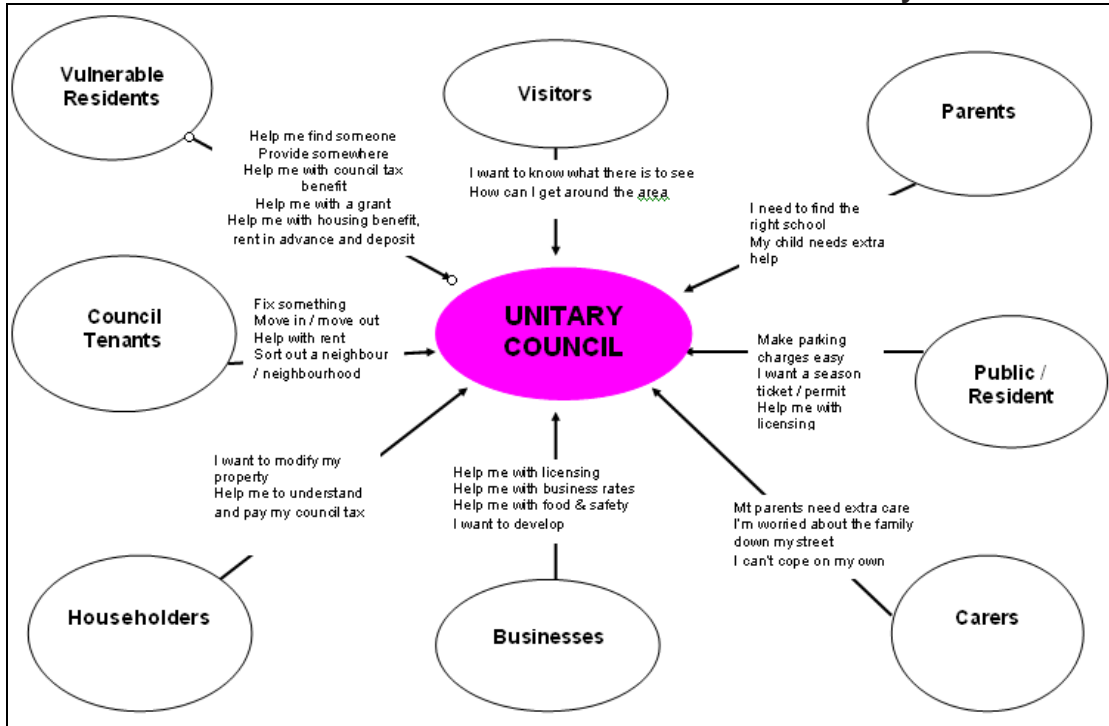
- Benefit and grant giving
- Managing housing repairs
- Refuse collection and recycling
- Dealing with street scene.

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The following graph illustrates the customer-focused outside-in approach to service improvement that the new authority will adopt.

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Table D: Sources of Demand: Outside / Inside the Local Authority



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Unitary status will not only increase capacity but also enable:

- Integrated service delivery
- Shared services.

Integrated service delivery

The unitary council will join up services in ways that make sense to residents of our city. The council will deal with housing benefit applications in local offices – on the front desk and not in a distant call centre. This will allow us to use the same staff to:

- assess whether a package of social services support would help
- see if any aids or adaptations would allow people to remain independent
- check if child support is needed.

Similarly we will link housing and social services functions at both the head and hip, so a vulnerable client needing housing and intensive social services support (a common occurrence) does not have to go between distant bureaucracies.

Other areas for integration include:

- refuse collection and disposal
- car parking management
- leisure and community facilities
- adult day centres and schools.

Shared services

The current Oxford City Council has been, for the most part, a resolutely in-house provider. The new authority will change this culture dramatically and put in place arrangements for sharing:

- Internal Audit
- Treasury Management
- Debt collection and recovery systems
- Legal services
- Procurement
- Information technology.

7 New Local Government Arrangements for Oxfordshire

In the invitation to local authorities to make proposals for unitary structures, the Government also indicated that a strategic view of the future of the whole affected area should be taken. Oxford City Council is therefore, proposing a completely new arrangement for the County of Oxfordshire, designed not only to benefit the people who live and work in the city of Oxford but also the citizens of the other four district councils.

This submission for unitary status is not about removing Oxford from the county of Oxfordshire. It is instead based around a 'Three Unitary' arrangement that would deliver unitary local government across the existing county area, with all existing councils being abolished.

West Oxfordshire and Cherwell, with a joint population of 229,000, would have a new 'North Oxfordshire' unitary council. Meanwhile Vale of White Horse and South Oxfordshire, with a joint population of 244,000, would have a new 'South Oxfordshire' unitary council.

With Oxford's own population continuing its long term increase, now rapidly approaching 150,000, the number of people living within each of the new unitary authorities would be well within the population range of unitary councils that have received 'excellent' CPA scores. The new council will also be of sufficient size to support the corporate capacity required by modern local government geared towards delivering democratic accountability to recognisable communities.

The new 'Three Unitary' arrangement would of course, require the formal abolition of Oxfordshire County Council and the five District Councils, and in doing so rightly raise questions about the ability of the new unitary councils to efficiently deliver some of public services. However, Oxford and its neighbouring districts believe the new arrangement would deliver greater localism as well as genuine efficiency in service delivery and real value for money.

Each of the new unitary councils would have greater management of its own affairs, allowing for more direct and appropriate responses to meet the needs of communities within their area. The new arrangements would also allow each authority to be at the forefront of local 'place shaping', not constrained by the vision of a county council with priorities that span the county area.

The 'Three Unitary' arrangement would also create the opportunity for a partnership of equals across Oxfordshire, allowing for the delivery of shared services in areas where the case can be made for the joining up of back office functions to deliver more cost effective and efficient services.

Such collaboration would not mean that the three new authorities became constrained by a new county-wide arrangement, as each would have the freedom to explore separate partnership arrangements with other authorities – geographically close or otherwise.

As with Oxford's need to define its own future, the new unitary councils in North Oxfordshire and South Oxfordshire would be able to determine the economic, environmental and social outcomes of their own areas.

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A strategic solution

The straightforward creation of three new unitary councils covering the county area will not in itself satisfy all of the principles set out by the Government in inviting local authorities to bid for unitary status. Disaggregation of county services for example, would incur transitional costs – especially in terms of ICT provision and the redeployment of existing staff.

Oxford's aim is to deliver both the opportunity for more efficiency and greater localism, while in doing so establishing the best process for recovering transitional costs and also making additional savings. To do so, requires a strategic solution for the Oxfordshire economic sub-region that protects the capacity of each new unitary to deliver the benefits of unitary local government.

Table A below illustrates a new local government arrangement for Oxfordshire. Here, strategic capacity would be generated through a joint committee led by members from each of the new unitary authorities. The purpose of this joint committee would be to drive forward the Oxfordshire sub-regional agenda within the South East region, dealing for example with issues of land use, waste disposal and transport planning.

While each of the new unitary councils will bring democratic accountability, focus and vision to the local communities they represent, the opportunity to deliver greater efficiency across (and beyond) Oxfordshire would be facilitated by a shared services arrangement. Using the current County Council's existing corporate services network but supplemented by district facilities, this would deliver a range of back office services to each new unitary.

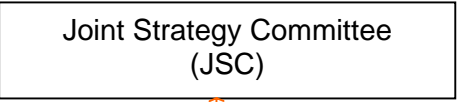
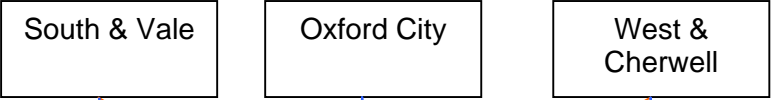
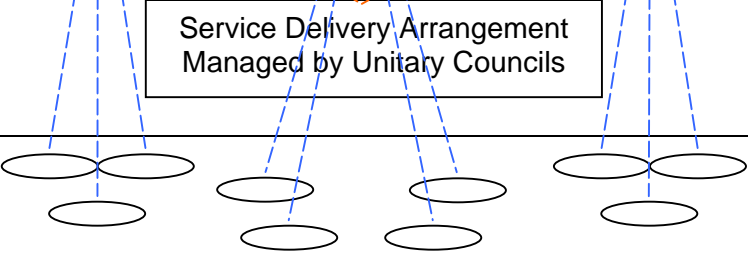
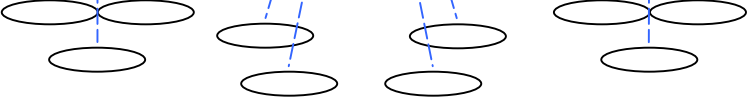
In the initial period following the establishment of the three new unitary councils, the shared services arrangement would avoid expensive disaggregation costs while seeking also to produce significant ongoing overhead savings. At the same time, it would deliver the procurement expertise necessary to explore the joint provision of services where this makes sense operationally; financially and politically.

In parallel with these developments, Oxford will ensure that the new unitary council is served by a patchwork of community and parish bodies able to influence, manage and deliver local services at the neighbourhood level, with budgets to match.

The other unitary councils will in turn create appropriate arrangements for their areas.

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A NEW LOCAL GOVERNMENT ARRANGEMENT FOR OXFORDSHIRE

Aim	Structure	Roles
Sub regional strategic voice – Development of sub-regional strategies	Joint Strategy Committee – 12 members (politically balanced) (Supported by a small Joint Strategy Unit) <div style="text-align: center; margin-top: 20px;">  <p>Joint Strategy Committee (JSC)</p> </div>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strategic Planning <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - County-wide land use plans - Waste and mineral issues - Contributing to regional planning • Transport Planning <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Traffic impacts/modelling - major pan unitary schemes • European Issues • County-wide research
Local democracy and representation of communities	Three unitary councils based on existing communities <div style="text-align: center; margin-top: 20px;">  <p>South & Vale Oxford City West & Cherwell</p> </div>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Providing democratic legitimacy and representation (champion residents) • Leading the (JSC) and the Service Delivery Arrangement • Place shaping – focus on place – single set of councillors • Commissioning services – single customer centres • Providing locally responsive services either together or individually • Setting priorities and tax levels • Allocating budgets to neighbourhood forums
Provision of efficient and economic services to Oxfordshire citizens	<div style="text-align: center; margin-top: 20px;">  <p>Service Delivery Arrangement Managed by Unitary Councils</p> </div>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Providing a service for (back office) services for unitary councils – and other public agencies if requested (Finance, HR, ICT, Procurement, Legal Services) • Providing assistance in dual contracts for other services • Providing support for neighbourhood forums
Neighbourhood management	<div style="text-align: center; margin-top: 20px;">  <p>Neighbourhood forums/parish councils</p> </div>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Neighbourhood management • Participatory budgeting – i.e. influence on priorities • Establishing local charters • Deploying budgets • Influencing operational practice

8 Next Steps

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9 Affordability

The financial case in support of Oxford City Council's bid to achieve the benefits of Unitary Status has been prepared by IPF Consulting, supported by Rita Hale consulting. Whilst this work has been carried out on a commissioned basis, IPF has acted in an independent capacity and its findings have not been influenced or amended by the City Council other than to provide evidence of how the new unitary structure is envisaged to operate in Oxfordshire.

The focus has been on:

- Assessing the transitional costs of change
- Identifying potential for savings in the new arrangements
- Assessing whether the savings allow 'payback' of the transitional costs within the 5 year period required by DCLG
- Assessing whether the transitional costs can be funded from appropriate resources until 'payback' is achieved
- Producing a suggested council tax equalisation model

The IPF findings on each of these aspects are summarised below, with a fuller explanation in the appendices to this submission.

Assessing Transitional Costs

The results of the work by IPF indicate that the costs for the three unitary Oxford would be £27m. The breakdown is shown below:

a. Planning the Change	£3.6m.
b. Closedown of old authorities	£2.4m.
c. Redundancy & Pensions Costs	£5.4m.
d. IT implementation of new systems	£9.9m.
e. Training for new staff	£0.7m.
f. Democratic Costs	£1.0m.
g. Accommodation	£1.1m.
h. Relocation costs	£0.4m.
i. Recruitment etc.	£0.4m.
j. Contract costs - loss of economies of scale	£0.6m.
k. Other Contract Costs from change	£0.6m.
l. Publicity for change	£0.1m.
m. Signing etc.	£0.3m.
n. Legal, consultant's fees & other	£0.6m.
TOTAL	£27.1m

IPF is confident that the model provides a reasonable estimate of the transitional costs.

The key test for DCLG is that the costs of Transition will be 'paid back' within 5 years. Based on IPF findings, and as demonstrated by the following table, this is achieved with 'payback' taking just under 4 years.

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	Lead up Year 2	Lead up Year 1	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Year 4
	£m.	£m.	£m.	£m.	£m.	£m.
Transition Costs	0.5	16.9	9.2	0.4	0.1	0
Savings	0	0	6.3	7.2	7.2	7.2
Payback Position	0.5	17.4	20.3	13.5	6.4	(0.8)
Savings						
Senior Officers			1.6	1.6	1.6	1.6
Other CDC			2.6	2.6	2.6	2.6
Shared Services Facility			1.1	1.6	1.6	1.6
Joint Working Savings			1.0	1.4	1.4	1.4
Total			6.3	7.2	7.2	7.2

In addition to achieving payback within 5 years, the DCLG guidance also requires that these costs be met from the existing resources of authorities. These resources may include capital and HRA where appropriate, and in accordance with the DCLG criteria and existing accounting practice, including prudential borrowing.

IPF has reviewed the transitional costs in this light and considers that very few would be legitimate charges to the Housing Revenue Account, particularly given the housing position in the districts except Oxford. As regards capitalisation, subject to satisfying Prudential Issues, it considers that it would be legitimate to capitalise some £7m. of the IT costs together with the accommodation costs.

The following table summarises the funding the Transitional Costs:

	Lead up Year 2	Lead up Year 1	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Year 4
	£m.	£m.	£m.	£m.	£m.	£m.
Transition Costs						
Capital	0	8.1	0	0	0	0
Revenue	0.5	8.8	9.2	0.4	0.1	0
Total Transitional Costs	0.5	16.9	9.2	0.4	0.1	0
Borrowing Costs	0	0.5	0.5	0.4	0.4	0.4
Savings	0	0	6.4	6.9	6.9	6.9
Annual Revenue Funding Needed	0.5	9.8	13.1	7.0	0.6	-5.9

IPF has also reviewed the reserves available of each of the existing authorities and concludes that there are sufficient funds available for the period to fund the costs of transition until 'payback'. Whilst not evenly distributed across the new authorities, nevertheless there appears sufficient for each to progress the new structure.

The final issue to be covered in the submission to DCLG is the proposed scheme whereby the new unitary Authorities can equalise council tax across their areas. Based on our disaggregation of the County's budget across the new unitary council's and with the analysis by Rita Hale Associates of the RSG position, the following table sets out the IPF forecast of the position after restructuring.

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	Oxford	West Cherwell	Vale South
	£'000	£'000	£'000
District Spend	26,309	23,645	24,786
County Spend	80,614	122,401	126,472
Total Spend	106,923	146,046	151,238
District RSG	15,720	15,032	13,494
County RSG	34,875	33,460	23,644
Total RSG	50,595	48,492	37,138
Council Tax	56,328	97,554	114,120
Band D Equivalent	£1,242-12	£1,103-75	£1,116-86
TVPA	£132-58		
TOTAL BDE	£1,374-70	£1,236-33	£1,249-44

Changes from the present level of Council Tax to the new levels are

	Oxford	West Oxford	Cherwell	Vale of White Horse	South Oxford
Present BDE	£1,374-83	£1,209-33	£1,256-33	£1,238-55	£1,257-50
Future	£1,374-70	£1,236-33	£1,236-33	£1,249-44	£1,249-44
Difference	-£0-13	+£27-00	-£20-00	+£10-89	-£8-06
% Change	-0.01%	+2.51%	-1.78%	+0.98%	-0.72%

The above table indicates that there is a need for an equalisation scheme to ensure that the move to 3 unitary authorities does result in a major swing in council tax payments. IPF propose that the scheme need only apply within each of the unitary councils where two existing district areas are combining. The following table sets out the proposal. From this it can be seen that the impact on the 'bottom' line of each of the new unitary councils is not significant and does not need any form of scheme that involves all of the new authorities jointly. IPF has set the maximum increase (or decrease in Council Tax Band D Equivalents at 0.66% per annum - a rate it considers reasonable in addition to any changes which take place in the coming years. It considers that the equalisation scheme could be implemented by establishing effectively Special Area Expenses Accounting arrangements, as appropriate, within each of the 2 unitary councils.

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	Oxford	West	Cherwell	Vale	South
Total Change in BDE in move to Unitary	-0.01%	+2.51%	-1.78%	+0.98%	-0.72%
Year 1 Change	-0.01%	+0.66%	-0.66%	+0.66%	-0.66%
Year 2 Change	Nil	+0.66%	-0.66%	+0.32%	-0.06%
Year 3 Change	Nil	+0.66%	-0.46%	Nil	Nil
Year 4 Change	Nil	+0.53%	Nil	Nil	Nil

10 Summary of benefits

The invitation to bid for unitary status provides a once-in-a-generation opportunity to create new methods of governance that will empower neighbourhoods, create the conditions for effective strategic leadership and renew democratic accountability throughout Oxfordshire.

This submission has set out the problems with the current system and provides a new solution that will deliver on the objectives set out in the Government's White Paper. If Oxford City Council's bid for unitary status is approved, it will:

- enable strong, accountable and effective strategic leadership
- empower neighbourhoods and communities
- improve democratic accountability
- protect and enhance the economic future of the region
- produce fit-for-purpose modes of governance
- deliver value for money
- create a coherent system of governance for the whole of Oxfordshire.

It will also transform the lives of the people of Oxford.

Unitary status is not just about structures and processes for the City Council. It is also about making a real difference to the lives of the people in Oxford.

A key aspect of the proposals for unitary status will be the combination of disparate functions that would be more effectively and efficiently delivered through a unitary council.

The citizens of Oxford will find interacting with their local council a simpler process, while internally, the City Council will be able to co-ordinate service provision better, leading to quicker and improved decision making.

New "one stop shops" will provide the a single point of access for the range of council services, while in many areas single points of contact will be established to bring together a range of policy areas from food safety and trading standards, through waste and recycling services to licencing matters. This will help people in their interaction with local government, providing clear and accountable systems that will be focused on their needs

In particular, social service provision for the most vulnerable citizens will be improved. For example there is currently an 18 month wait for disabled people to see a county run occupational therapist to assess them for Disabled Facilities Grants. By co-ordinating this service with our existing role in delivering the grants, the City Council will be able to prioritise a service that currently fails disabled people.

Enabling our Housing Needs team to work more closely with Social Services will also help us respond better to complex homelessness cases that are not a priority for the county.

These are some of the issues where the different priorities of a rural County Council and an urban City Council are most visible and create the greatest problems for people who interact with local government in Oxfordshire.

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But it is also important that the delivery of these services is accountable.

The people of Oxford pay Council Tax for services, but are often not sure who to praise or blame for how they are delivered. Over a range of areas, the County and the City have interlocking responsibilities, which can impede strategic planning and be difficult to understand.

Under the current system for example, the City Council is responsible for maintaining minor roads in the district, while the County maintains major roads. The City Council provides licences for taxis, but the County decides on taxi ranks. This confusing patchwork is replicated throughout local government service provision in Oxfordshire.

Integrating these responsibilities, along with other areas like planning and highway decisions and creating co-ordinated policies that can bring together related issues such as air quality and the broader transport strategy, may seem like technical points for the everyday lives of citizens. But these have major impacts in the long-term health, quality of life and prosperity of people in Oxford, so it is vital that everyone has the opportunity to understand and contribute to these decisions.

Oxford City Council also believes that if people are paying for a service, they should know who is delivering it. This can only be achieved in a unitary system.

Oxford City Council has already led the way in devolving power and responsibilities to communities through the Area Committees, tenants' forums and citizens' panel.

To provide more local accountability and involvement in policymaking and service delivery, the new unitary council neighbourhood forums will ensure that all citizens have the opportunity to help shape the future of their communities.

Within a unitary system, everyone, including ethnic minorities and hard-to-reach groups, will be included through their neighbourhood forums, which will help the new council involve communities in decisions that affect them and ensure that all services are responsive to local needs.

Council tax payers are rightly concerned about the costs of unitary status. This document has demonstrated that services can be provided in a cost effective manner that offers value for money, while at the same time being responsive to the needs of citizens.

The two-tier system, which sees six organisations run a mixture of services, has its own costs. This bid proposes removing a layer of bureaucracy, to create a leaner and more responsive local government, focused on the needs of citizens. The savings created will help us ensure that unitary status will ultimately be self-financing.

The consequences of failure to achieve unitary status will be a continued democratic deficit for the people of Oxford, which will irrevocably harm the city's economic future and perpetuate poor service delivery to the detriment of stakeholders across the Oxfordshire sub-region.

The current system is not functioning in the interests of the people of Oxford or, in our view, in the long-term interests of the rest of Oxfordshire. Unitary status for Oxford is the only solution that will deliver these benefits.