

Minutes of a meeting of the Scrutiny Committee on Wednesday 5 November 2025

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Committee members present:

Councillor Powell (Chair)	Councillor Rowley (Vice-Chair)
Councillor Azad	Councillor Corais
Councillor Jarvis	Councillor Mundy
Councillor Ottino	Councillor Qayyum
Councillor Snowton (Substitute)	Councillor Stares

Officers present for all or part of the meeting:

Celeste Reyeslao, Scrutiny and Governance Advisor
Hannah Carmody-Brown, Committee and Member Services Officer
Jonathan Malton, Committee and Member Services Manager
Lucy Cherry, Policy and Partnerships Officer
Caroline Green, Chief Executive
Nigel Kennedy, Group Finance Director
Bill Lewis, Financial Accounting Manager
Mish Tullar, Transition Director

Also present:

Councillor Susan Brown, Leader of the Council

Apologies:

Councillor(s) Miles sent apologies; Councillor Snowton attended as substitute.

55. Declarations of interest

The Chair reminded the Committee that due to the nature of the report being discussed, it was advisable that membership of Parish Councils be declared.

Councillor Snowton and Councillor Stares noted their membership of Littlemore Parish Council.

56. Chair's Announcements

The Chair reminded the Committee that the Monitoring Officer had advised that all Members must attend this meeting with an open mind when considering Local Government Reorganisation, despite the fact they may also serve other local authority bodies. Any recommendations made at this meeting may feed into decisions taken at Cabinet.

57. Addresses by members of the public

None.

58. Councillor addresses on any item for discussion on the Scrutiny agenda

None.

59. Local Government Reorganisation

Cabinet, at its Special meeting on 10 November 2025, will be presented with three final unitary proposals and decide which proposal should be submitted to Government by Oxford City Council on 28 November 2025.

All Oxfordshire Councils have been invited to submit proposals for Local Government Reorganisation, replacing existing two-tier councils with a single 'unitary' layer of local government. Oxford City Council has developed a proposal for the creation of three unitary councils across Oxfordshire and West Berkshire. Proposals for two unitaries (covering Oxon & W Berks), and a single unitary (covering Oxon) have been developed by other councils in Oxfordshire and West Berkshire.

The Scrutiny Committee is asked to consider the item and agree any recommendations.

Councillor Brown presented a summary of the proposal and welcomed feedback from the Scrutiny Committee. Members were informed of the work undertaken to develop the proposal so far, and Councillor Brown thanked the officers involved. The proposal was summarised as a place-base and future-focused approach.

The Chief Executive provided a comprehensive summary of the three-unitary proposal for Local Government Reorganisation.

The Transition Director outlined the interplay of devolution with the Local Government Reorganisation proposal.

The Chair invited questions from the Committee only in relation to Oxford City Council's proposal at this stage.

Councillor Rowley recognised the value of voluntary organisations to local communities and the difficulties they currently face. He asked what opportunities the three-unitary proposal would provide for these organisations to pursue their goals.

Councillor Smowton queried what steps are being taken to consider a scenario in which the government minister chooses to merge aspects of multiple proposals, rather than just selecting one of the three as submitted.

Councillor Brown, in response to Councillor Rowley, noted the importance of voluntary organisations to civic society and assured the Committee that the place-based approach of three-unitary proposal would support these organisations through enhanced and specific focus on communities. The Committee also heard of the expected cooperation between the proposed three unitary councils to ensure that wider voluntary efforts across the Oxfordshire region would be supported.

In response to Councillor Smowton, Councillor Brown outlined the benefits of the three-unitary proposal for maintaining the green belt zone whilst supporting the expanding needs of the region on matters such as housing and transport.

In response to Councillor Rowley, the Chief Executive explained that the three-unitary proposal would seek to develop neighbourhood governance structures that would support local voluntary organisations and provide engagement channels.

The Chair invited further questions.

Councillor Ottino queried whether alternative boundary options were considered for the city unitary, and how or why they were ruled out.

The Chair asked, in relation to the interaction between unitarisation and devolution, how the three-unitary proposal would fit into the development of a Mayoral Strategic Authority (MSA), noting concern about representation within decisions at the MSA level.

Councillor Smowton requested further information on how the MSA would work in terms of voting structures.

Councillor Brown clarified that although the green belt was an obvious boundary, other options were considered to ensure balance between size, the government's aspirations, and to ensure future growth and financial stability. The decision was made to also ensure that a genuine sense of place was retained, and that the other two unitary bodies within the proposal would not be destabilised.

In response to the Chair, Councillor Brown explained that with any of the other proposals, the urban voice of Oxford City would not be adequately represented within the MSA structure. It was emphasised that the MSA must include both rural and urban representation. In response to Councillor Snowton, Councillor Brown noted that as with any voting system, some voices would inherently have larger representation than others, however, the three-unitary proposal would ensure that sufficient rural and urban voices would be present around the table.

The Chief Executive further outlined the powers and responsibilities of the MSA, and the likelihood that local economies would become better connected as a result of this structure. The Committee heard that Oxford City Council's place-based proposal would better support local representation within an MSA structure.

The Chair queried how it would be ensured that any boundary changes would retain a sense of place whilst being reflective of new geographies.

Councillor Brown recognised that future work must focus on this, and it may fall under the remit of incoming shadow authorities. The Committee also understood that this would depend on decisions of the Boundary Commission and that a focus would need to be paid to the considerable number of Parish Councils which would fall under the new boundaries of the three-unitary proposal.

The Chief Executive acknowledged discussions with residents which pointed to the connections they value with the city from more rural areas and therefore noted that future work would need to be considerate of this to ensure local benefits for all communities.

The Transition Director also pointed to the importance of individuals feeling represented through councillors, noting that this is the channel through which close contact with residents and communities occurs. Therefore, the smaller the unitary, the closer this dialogue can be, and the stronger the governance is.

Councillor Azad queried whether some Council employees will lose their jobs and whether their salaries will change.

The Chair requested an explanation of the transition process in relation to staff.

The Chief Executive provided a summary of the long-term changes which will occur to staff numbers, noting a reduction in senior officers and the expansion in opportunities for other officers through restructure processes. The Committee were also assured that existing contracts will be observed until the natural end. The Chief Executive provided a summary of the staged implementation plan for Local Government Reorganisation, including timeframes for shadow authorities. It was also confirmed that conversations are ongoing with unions in relation to these changes.

The Chair expressed sympathy for the stress and uncertainty officers may be experiencing.

Councillor Azad asked whether existing employees will be expected to input into the Local Government Reorganisation programme.

The Chief Executive described the range of work ongoing in relation to Local Government Reorganisation and confirmed that whilst existing staff are involved, additional funding and resourcing is being secured for the longer term; this is being factored into the upcoming budget.

Councillor Brown emphasised that the trade unions are enthusiastic about the three-unitary proposal.

Councillor Ottino firstly queried whether the government recognised the budgetary impact on Councils and whether support will be provided, and secondly, asked how the funding for a shadow authority would be sourced and managed.

The Chief Executive confirmed that the costs of transition had been factored into the proposal put forward and that a small amount had been received from government to support this. The Committee heard that any costs would be recoverable from futures savings.

The Group Finance Director confirmed that £90,000 was received from Government and provided a detailed summary of the costs and potential savings expected.

Councillor Ottino queried where this money would go, and what costs there would be, if one of the alternative proposals was chosen by government.

The Chief Executive explained that the County Council has already allocated £10 million to support the mobilisation and implementation of Local Government Reorganisation. The City and Districts are considering allocations via budget processes. Following the Government's decision next year, the direction of travel will be clearer, and the existing local authorities will align to implement the plans as required.

The Chair invited comments on the two-unitary model, noting that recommendations could not be made on this; there were none.

The Chair invited comments on the one-unitary model, noting that recommendations could not be made on this; there were none.

Noting that West Berkshire is already a unitary authority, Councillor Ottino asked whether it has expressed a view on the one-unitary proposal.

The Chief Executive explained that each proposal had been required to include an options appraisal. As a result, West Berkshire would have commented on all other proposals, including the one-unitary option. Furthermore, the next stage of the process will include formal consultation which will require responses and comments from all local authorities.

The Transition Director summarised the implications of all three proposals in relation to West Berkshire.

The Chair thanked the officers and invited final comments and questions from the Committee.

Councillor Azad asked whether money will be saved under the three-unitary proposal.

The Chief Executive confirmed that the efficiencies which will be developed over time will be cost saving and emphasised that the value and quality of public services must also be a key consideration in order to support a healthy and prosperous population.

Councillor Ottino noted his belief that the proposal from Oxford City Council is the best option for ensuring better local governance with decision-making brought closer to the people.

The Chair expressed the view that this will be the most fundamental change to local government in a generation and it must positively benefit future efficiencies and service deliveries through a focus on specific demographics.

The Chair thanked the Committee for their questions and invited discussion of possible recommendations on the three-unitary proposal to Cabinet.

The Scrutiny Committee resolved to recommend to Cabinet:

1. That the Three Unitary Authorities proposal be formally submitted as Oxford City Council's preferred model for local government reorganisation to Government.

The Chair thanked the Transition Director, the Chief Executive, Councillor Brown, and Cabinet for the inclusive nature and cross-party development of the proposal.

Councillor Brown thanked the Scrutiny Committee for its contributions, and the officers in attendance for their hard work.

60. Dates of future meetings

The Committee **noted** the dates of future meetings.

The meeting started at 6.00 pm and ended at 7.25 pm

Chair
2025

Date: Tuesday 11 November

When decisions take effect:

Cabinet: after the call-in and review period has expired

Planning Committees: after the call-in and review period has expired and the formal decision notice is issued

All other committees: immediately.

Details are in the Council's Constitution.