

OXFORDSHIRE
LOCAL GOVERNMENT REORGANISATION
Three Unitary Authorities Proposal

Empowering People, Growing Prosperity, Building Communities

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1 Foreword

Local government reform is not simply a matter of administrative change — it is an opportunity to reshape how we deliver for our communities for generations to come.

Across Oxfordshire and West Berkshire, our councils have a proud record of service, partnership, and local leadership. Yet we face challenges that demand bold thinking and collaborative action: a housing crisis decades in the making, rising demand for care and support, growing pressures on local infrastructure, and an economy whose full potential remains constrained by outdated structures and boundaries.

Our proposal for the creation of three new unitary authorities represents a once-in-a-generation opportunity to design a system of local government that is simpler, more effective, accountable, and financially sustainable — and above all, close to the people it serves. It sets out a clear, evidence-based vision for councils that are capable of tackling the big issues of today while preparing for the opportunities of tomorrow.

At its heart, this proposal is rooted in place — in the distinct identities, strengths and ambitions of our communities. The creation of Greater Oxford, Northern Oxfordshire, and Ridgeway Councils will align decision making with the geography of people's lives and the economic realities of our region.

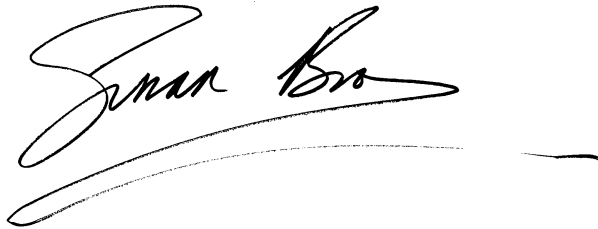
Each will be responsible for all council services in their area and empowered to deliver better outcomes for residents and businesses alike. Together, they will form the foundations of a modern, connected region — one that works in partnership through a Mayoral Strategic Authority to drive growth, investment and innovation across the wider region.

This is not simply about doing things differently; it is about doing them better. By consolidating seven councils into three, we can unlock over £48 million in annual efficiencies and reinvest in front-line services designed around local needs. In doing so, we will finally be able to tackle Oxford's housing crisis and deliver the homes we need. It will unlock Oxfordshire's full economic potential — contributing an estimated £170 billion to the national economy while ensuring that the benefits of growth are felt locally, through new jobs, skills, and investment opportunities for residents and businesses alike. Just as importantly, these reforms will ensure that decisions are taken locally, by people who understand their communities and are accountable to them.

This is a plan not just for more efficient local government, but for stronger, fairer, and more forward-looking councils that deliver the homes, jobs, and services our people deserve.

The proposals set out in this document have been shaped through extensive engagement with residents, businesses, and partners. Their message has been clear: people want councils that are closer, more responsive, and more ambitious for their places. The three-unitary model delivers on that vision — empowering people, growing prosperity, and building communities that can thrive long into the future.

This proposal marks the next step in that journey. It presents a compelling, evidence-based case for change — one that will create councils fit for the challenges and opportunities of the twenty-first century, and for the generations to come.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Susan Brown', with a long, sweeping horizontal line extending to the right.

Councillor Susan Brown
Leader, Oxford City Council

2 Executive Summary

The reorganisation of local government is a once-in-a-generation opportunity to deliver more effective, accountable, and financially sustainable local governance. More than that, it's a chance to design councils capable of driving meaningful change, addressing the challenges communities and public services face today and those in the decades to come.

Our proposal is rooted in the ambitions and needs of communities, and the governance structures that are best able to empower communities and deliver the homes, jobs, infrastructure and services essential to their wellbeing. But in doing so, our proposals will advance national objectives for housing supply, prosperity, and public sector efficiency.

Our proposal to create three new unitary councils spanning Oxfordshire and West Berkshire will:

- Create **three financially sustainable and robust councils delivering £48.6m efficiencies annually** rooted in achieving better results, not just from economies of scale.
- Deliver new **homes at the scale and where they are needed** to tackle the area's decades-long housing crisis in the most sustainable way;
- Unlock Oxfordshire's constrained economic potential, **contributing £170 billion to the national economy, whilst ensuring the benefits of growth are felt locally**
- **Strengthen local accountability** through councils that are closer to the people they serve, responsible for all services in there are, able to reflect the distinct identities and ambitions of their communities;
- **A community-based prevention approach** to give residents the best possible access to services that are shaped to their specific needs and support a better quality of life
- **Enable regional collaboration** through the proposed Thames Valley Mayoral Strategic Authority, ensuring alignment on major transport and growth priorities.

Growth – Oxfordshire's historic dividing line

Oxford City Council has long prioritised meeting housing needs and achieving the city's economic potential, through development both of housing and commercial space. However, Oxford's population constitutes 22% of Oxfordshire's and its pro-growth outlook is not shared in many parts of the county. An inbuilt rural majority has generally prioritised conservation overgrowth. For decades the democratic will of this rural majority has led to the return of councils across Oxfordshire's other districts and at the county level that have sought to minimise the amount of growth planned or delivered. The divide overgrowth has played out in the ceaseless tussle over how to provide for Oxford's unmet housing need, with the city unable to build all the houses it needs because of being so tightly bounded on all sides.

The need for boundary changes – Modification request

Our proposal is for three unitary councils covering the current Oxfordshire geography and extending to include West Berkshire. This requests a Modification by the Secretary of State to enable boundary changes that will see the creation of **Greater Oxford Council** based on the city and its Green Belt. It also creates **Northern Oxfordshire Council** merging West Oxfordshire and most of Cherwell, and

Ridgeway Council that unites most of South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse with West Berkshire.

We have conducted detailed work that sets out an overwhelming case for expanding boundaries for the city of Oxford. This rationale – for the creation of a Greater Oxford – forms a golden thread that runs throughout the three unitaries proposal. Expert analysis of the economic, geographic and demographic case for change and engagement with literally thousands of stakeholders and residents across the geography demonstrates how it best delivers on the statutory criteria set by government.

We have shaped our proposal to create places with a strong sense of identity, opportunity and accountability for residents, businesses and services. This lay-down of boundaries enables three viable unitaries, close to the people they serve, and each with a distinctive identity and profile for their people and communities.

Three unitary authorities: Six key pillars

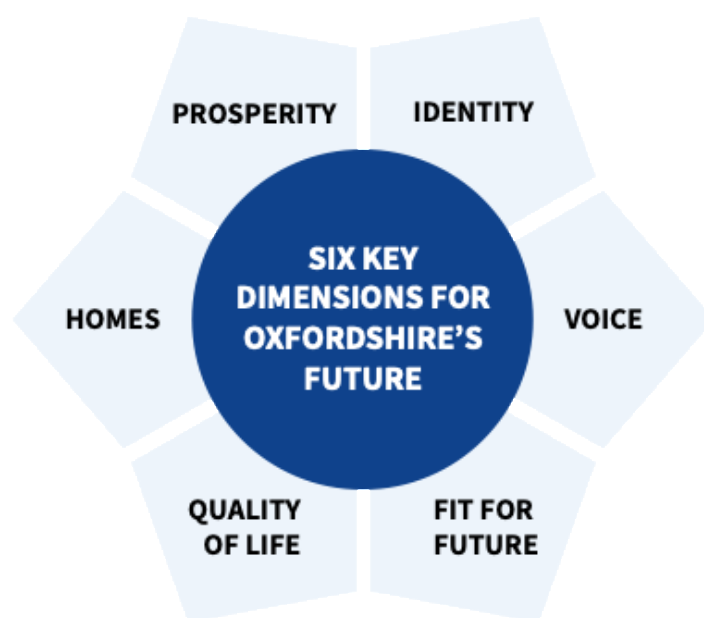


Fig 2.1: Six key dimensions for Oxfordshire's future

Our proposal is built around six key pillars, showing that the 3UA model is the best option for Oxfordshire and West Berkshire and those who live and work here in terms of prosperity, homes, quality of life, identity, voice and future fit services.

Prosperity

3UAs give Oxfordshire and West Berkshire the best possible platform to create and retain the most **jobs and prosperity locally** while also **driving nationally-significant growth for UK PLC**.

The economic opportunity unlocked by the boundary change leading to the creation of 3UAs could deliver up to 218,000 additional jobs – some 65,000 more jobs for local people than either competing proposal, and £43.1 billion more GVA than would be achieved through a single unitary authority. In Greater Oxford, the 3UA proposal will enable more growth around the city, realising the significant

economic, social, and environmental benefits that will flow from greater agglomeration and productivity.

The 3UA option will also allow the other unitaries to work with their own major opportunity areas, including Harwell, Milton Park, Bicester and Banbury to promote sustainable economic growth. Alternatively, the 2UA and 1UA options will continue to constrain Oxford and deliver fragmented and uncoordinated governance across the whole county, unable to prioritise the needs of the city, its other conurbations, and its majority rural communities. This fundamental tension, alongside their significant political and policy constraints in releasing the green belt, will mean the 2UA and the 1UA will grow much more slowly than the 3UA.

Furthermore, 3UAs best complement the strategic economic development role of the new Thames Valley Mayoral Strategic Authority (MSA), which will include responsibility for strategic matters such as inward investment, plus housing, infrastructure and skills planning, all at a regional scale. This is because 3UAs provide the opportunity and place-based leadership to promote and unlock more development in the right locations, including within Oxford's green belt. The 3UA would do this working within the strategic framework created by the MSA. The 1UA option in particular, will struggle to deliver in this space given its scale and its inherent political tensions.

3UA, with its focus and proximity to local communities and businesses, will complement the strategic economic development role of the new MSA. Oxfordshire suffers from significant pockets of deprivation and major inequalities. 3UAs will allow for a focus on place-based responses to address this, through local wealth creation and retention, which the larger unitary options will find much harder. This will include the ability to better focus on the specific sector strengths within each of the 3UAs, and on skills and supply chains at the local level.

Homes

3UA is the best way to **sustainably deliver the scale of homes** Oxfordshire needs, while protecting and enhancing our environment and villages.

3UAs will address this head on, providing each council with plenty of suitable land to meet their own housing need, within their own boundaries, for the first time. This will ensure that more rural areas outside Greater Oxford can grow in line with their own priorities rather than meeting the housing needs of the city. Moreover, Greater Oxford could go well beyond its housing target (by 1,217 homes a year) to secure a total of 40,000 new homes in 15 years via the release of only 2.6% of the green belt.

As such, 3UAs is the only option to directly address both the affordable housing crisis we face and our wider economic growth ambitions. Oxfordshire's affordable housing crisis can in large part be traced back to decisions on boundaries made in the 1970s. This constrained the city from delivering the housing it needs and put in place political fault lines that have led to major challenges in securing the right levels of housing growth across the county, not least in meeting Oxford's housing need. This in holding back growth, with objections received from the County Council and some district councils to Oxford's now withdrawn pro-growth Local Plan 2040. Moreover, where growth has happened, this has largely been beyond Oxford's Green Belt, leading to unsustainable commuting patterns and increased congestion. This all impacts on economic growth and investment because a lack of affordable and accessible homes is a key consideration for businesses looking to locate.

The 2UA and 1UA options will fundamentally fail to address Oxford and Oxfordshire's housing crisis. Even if there were the political imperative to do so, the National Planning Policy Framework means that both options will struggle to release sites at scale from the green belt. This is because of the availability of other suitable land in each of their proposed areas, which will push more growth further away from the city. Moreover, 2UA would see all of Oxford's housing need rolled in with that of Cherwell and West Oxfordshire. This will create a significant imbalance in housing provision between the north and the south of the county and is likely to prove politically challenging to deliver.

Quality of Life

3UAs give Oxfordshire the best possible chance to **deliver and enable access to services which give better quality of life** by working at a local level and whole systems approach.

80% of the 1,580 Oxfordshire and West Berkshire respondents to our public survey on LGR agree that urban and rural areas require different approaches to housing, social care, transport, education, skills, and other key council services. The 3UA supports models of service delivery that respond to this, allowing for enhanced service integration, simplified governance and increased democratic accountability, leading to authorities that are inherently closer to communities they serve.

3UA will allow for service delivery through councils that reflect local need and coordinate support across services at the local level – understanding and engaging with communities and their different requirements. There are clear advantages and improved outcomes to have place-based and designed social care, housing and SEND offers. Economies of scale, joint commissioning and strong partnership working within social care can all be delivered at a wider scale dovetailing with support and services that better understand and respond to local circumstances.

Place-based, more agile councils are better able to focus on coordinating support around the needs of residents to deliver outcomes that matter most to individuals and families, rather than expecting them to bend around council siloes. The key is about creating a single and integrated pathway and 3UAs are fundamentally better placed to deliver this.

The 2UAs and 1UA will by their very nature create larger authorities (1UA will be second only after Birmingham by 2040) which will find it much harder to join up services and respond to varying local needs. Due to their size and proximity to the communities they serve, 3UA will also intrinsically be better placed to deliver a more preventative approach to service delivery, to address the root cause of demand and promote holistic problem-solving.

Identity

3UAs are the best way to **protect local identity** and gives the strongest possible **local representation** in decision making.

3UA much better reflect the true identities of the places and people of Oxfordshire than the 1UA or 2UA options. The histories of Banbury, Witney, Oxford and the Ridgeway towns and villages are proud and unique. Moreover, Oxford's demographic profile is very different to its neighbours, while its population also identifies directly with the opportunities brought through growth in a way other parts of the county do not.

From a place and identity perspective, the need for Oxford to expand is clear. Areas outside of Oxford, like Botley, Kidlington and Kennington and Sandford-on-Thames have become a near contiguous conurbation with Oxford. While Wheatley and Berinsfield are both separated from the city, most of their residents have regular work, family or leisure connections there and all struggle with the chronic congestion in and around the city. The 3UA proposal addresses these by creating a Greater Oxford, a completely new authority belonging as much to these places, as to the Oxford of today. The 2UA largely ignores these on the ground realities and will serve to prevent residents in these areas (except Kidlington) from having a say in how the city is run.

The 2UA and 1UA options also both fail to recognise the need for a place-based and locally responsive approach that most residents want. When compared to the 2UA option, the 3UA option will serve to protect the identities of the market towns and rural areas of the current West Oxfordshire and Cherwell within a separate Northern Oxfordshire unitary. These would otherwise be brought together with Oxford - and indeed its housing need. The 3UA option also directly supports the principle of the Ridgeway proposal, as set out in the 2UA option, but seeks to alter its northern boundary with Oxford, with the Greater Oxford taking in around 40,000 residents close to the city. The 1UA will quite simply wipe out centuries of governance arrangements linked to place and identity.

Voice

3UA are the best way to **empower local communities with representative democracy** which supports genuine resident-focussed design, aligned to the places and communities in which people live.

The 3UA option establishes the right powers, at the right scale, to deliver real change for our communities and places, leading to services and places designed with and for residents. It empowers Oxfordshire's towns and villages to speak strongly for their residents and businesses. At the same time 3UA provides vital city-scale governance for Oxford that has the focus and clarity of vision to help realise its full potential as a city of global significance. The 1UA and 2UAs simply cement in the decades old dynamic that has seen the interests of city and rural areas represented together in a vehicle which is unable to effectively speak for either. Oxford's population would represent only 22% of the wider 1UA population, meaning those making the decisions for the city, will not be nearly as accountable to those that live there as with the 3UA option.

The creation of Neighbourhood Area Committees (NACs) will grant communities a direct voice in contributing to and shaping priorities, real influence over decisions, and stewardship of local budgets, as well as building capacity and capability. We will ensure the NACs are fully coterminous with the planned Health Neighbourhoods set out in the NHS 10-year Plan. This hyper-local focus and voice, alongside the place-based scale of the 3UAs will create a local governance system that works best with the new MSA.

3UA is the only option that will give the city of Oxford a seat at the table on what will be the new Thames Valley MSA. This is critical and will ensure the needs and priorities of the city are heard loud and clear at the strategic regional level, alongside the existing unitary conurbations of Reading, Slough, Bracknell and Swindon. The 3UA is also best for the wider county. It gives one urban voice and two rural voices for Oxfordshire on the MSA, each able to advocate for its own priorities. The 3UA option is also the best fit for the new national hierarchy of local government, as a significant amount of the MSA powers will move from the County Council level, including strategic transport planning

and delivery, inward investment and skills. This shifting of responsibility to the MSA undermines the case for larger more strategic unitaries like the 1UA option, which will lack distinctiveness with the MSA. Moreover, it underlines the case for effective placed-based unitaries that will complement the delivery of these more strategic functions at the MSA level.

Future-Fit

3UA will create three councils are **financially robust and sustainable** from Day 1, and which will provide **quality services that work** for the current state and through future transformation, with a continuous focus on prevention and growth.

Our 3UA proposal is self-financing and does **not** require or seek Exceptional Financial Support (EFS) or any central government subsidy to fund the transition. Instead, it is underpinned by local resources — including reserves and the Flexible Use of Capital Receipts allowances. Our proposal **fully pays back in 4 years**, through efficiencies and transformation savings delivered by streamlining seven councils into three. **By year 5 annual net savings of £48.6 million will be delivered.** Pixel Financial, experts in local government finance and funding has reviewed the financial analysis presented in this proposal.

The 3UA provides the best opportunity for longer-term financial stability by creating the platform for both economic growth, and prevention-led services in a way the 2UA and 1UA do not. Our higher levels of growth will not only significantly increase the tax base; the delivery of new homes and jobs will increase health and wellbeing. The ability to focus more on prevention, will enable more residents to live high-quality, independent lives with reduced need for long-term intervention from the council. This includes adult and children's care services across Oxfordshire and West Berkshire where we see significant preventive opportunities that will help to ensure the delivery of better outcomes for individuals in receipt of care and support, as well as more responsive and efficient services. The funding challenges faced by statutory services are ones felt nationally. However, we believe our programme of transformation will achieve the significant benefits and saving.

The opportunity to drive public sector reform through the creation of 3UAs is greater than with the 1UA or 2UA options, because of their scale and proximity to place. The prize is councils that is efficient, modern, and responsive to local needs, utilising technology and digital solutions to provide fast, seamless support, while maintaining a strong face-to-face offer for those who need it most. The ability to work at a local level means each authority can be responsive to the priorities of the specific communities they serve.

Public engagement

We believe the 3UA is based on a clear mandate. Our extensive engagement has shown that people want governance that is closer to communities, more responsive, and more accountable. Furthermore, business and economic partnerships back the proposal for its ability to simplify planning, strengthen representation, and accelerate decisions.

Our online survey of residents across Oxfordshire and West Berkshire found that **69% agree** that councils are most effective when they are smaller and closer to the people they serve, enabling them to respond and adapt more easily to local needs. Moreover, **80% agree** that urban and rural areas often require different approaches to housing, transport, education and skills, and other key council

services. While **88% agree** that councils have an important part to play in supporting the local economy, including through housing, infrastructure and transport policies. This feedback aligns directly with the foundation principles of the 3UA proposal, while undermining the case and rationale for either the 1UA or the 2UA options.

As well as engaging key stakeholders and businesses through workshops and meetings, our online survey to Oxford businesses found that over **80% of respondents** said being located in or near Oxford is very or extremely important to their success. While around **68% strongly agree** that Oxford should go beyond the government's housing delivery targets, and almost **85% agree** that affordable housing near Oxford is important for business growth. Furthermore, **46% favour** building additional homes close to the city, including suitable locations within the Green Belt. (**23%** would prefer development beyond the Green Belt). **Over half (54%)** believe future development should balance new homes with employment space. This again supports the fundamentals behind the 3UA and undermines the rationale for both the 1UA and 2UA options.

Feedback from these surveys and our wider engagement has demonstrated that the City Council itself is seen as the key convener in the city of Oxford and is most aligned with the ambitions and issues the city faces. Moreover, that creating the right scale of council, close to the people and places it serves is critical to ensuring local government remains in a position to take on, and expand further, into this role.

Empowering People, Growing Prosperity, Building Communities

Any model for consolidating local authorities will realise efficiencies from economies of scale and integration of services. However, this unique opportunity of LGR should be used to deliver the far greater benefits from purposeful, people-first redesign of government for future generations. At its heart, it should maximise growth while removing barriers to sharing in that prosperity - particularly through ensuring everyone has access to a good, affordable home. The **3UA model** delivers efficiencies, but more than that, it is a transformative opportunity to deliver sustainable and inclusive growth, homes, services, and community empowerment, ensuring Oxfordshire and West Berkshire thrive today and into the future.

Our submission is out over eight chapters, which together provide the detailed justification and evidence to support our proposal. Alongside the foreword and this Executive Summary, Chapter 3 sets out an Options Appraisal, our assessment of all the proposed LGR options being put forward for Oxfordshire and West Berkshire. Chapter 4 then expands on our case for three unitary authorities, set against our six key pillars. Chapter 5 provides the detail of our financial case, explaining how we will deliver savings and efficiencies by moving from 7 to 3 local authorities. Chapter 6 builds on this from a service delivery perspective. It articulates how 3UAs create the opportunity to establish a new Target Operating Model that will help drive improvements and transformation to deliver better outcomes. Chapter 7 moves on to explain our proposed implementation road map, while Chapter 8 concludes our submission with an assessment of how our 3UA option achieves the criteria for LGR set by Government.

3 Options Appraisal

In developing our case for a three unitary proposal – a city unitary with expanded boundaries, a northern unitary and a southern unitary including West Berkshire – we have compared the preferred option to alternative proposals to ensure we are proposing the best option for our region. Each option has been appraised and scored against the Government’s LGR criteria.

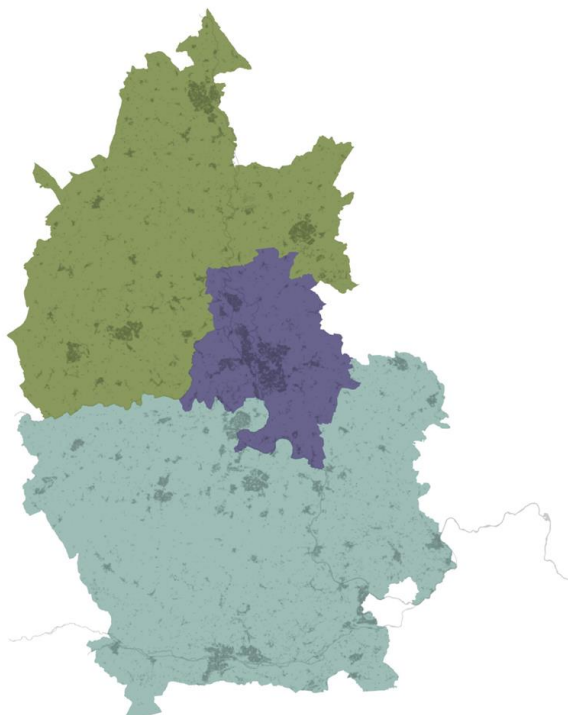


Fig 3.1: Three unitary authorities

3.1 Options considered

As part of our work to develop this proposal, we have also considered the alternative options for Local Government Reorganisation in Oxfordshire. The three potential options are defined as follows:

1. **Single Unitary Authority for Oxfordshire (1UA):** Amalgamation of all councils into a single unitary authority for the whole of Oxfordshire, where Oxfordshire Council is responsible for every local government service across Oxfordshire.
2. **Two Unitary Authorities (2UA):** Replacing the current two-tier, six-council system with two unitary councils. Oxford and Shires Council created from the existing district councils for Cherwell, Oxford City and West Oxfordshire; and Ridgeway Council, created from the existing district councils of South Oxfordshire, Vale of White Horse and the unitary council of West Berkshire.
3. **Three Unitary Authorities (3UA):**
 - a. Introducing three unitary councils that create a unitary city on existing boundaries, as well as northern and southern unitary authorities, also including West Berkshire. These would be Oxford, Northern Oxfordshire and Ridgeway. This is presented as a

compliant proposal under the Local Government and Involvement in Public Health Act 2007.

- b. Introducing three unitary councils that create a unitary city on expanded boundaries, as well as northern and southern unitary authorities, also including West Berkshire. These would be Greater Oxford, Northern Oxfordshire and Ridgeway and involve boundary changes. This is presented as a requested modification to the Three Unitary Authorities proposal, as it better meets the criteria set out in the Government's statutory invitation in terms of financial sustainability, sensible economic areas, increased housing supply to meet local needs, robust public services, neighbourhood empowerment and supporting devolution. The development of the modified boundaries is described in greater detail in Appendix A.

3.1.1 Single Unitary

Under this option, the County Council and six district councils are merged into a single unitary authority serving the whole of Oxfordshire. This option is being explored by Oxfordshire County Council. This is projected to bring lower growth, a lack of place-based leadership and a reduced ability to represent different communities across diverse geographies and population. The Day 1 efficiencies it would deliver are at risk of being swallowed up by need to respond to place based needs and an absence of targeted models to build in prevention and boost community resilience.

This unitary council would be responsible for all local government services across a huge geography (over 1,000 square miles and 763,200 population¹). It is expected to grow to a population of nearly 1 million by 2040. This would put its population as the second largest unitary authority in England, behind only Birmingham. Yet, this area has a wide range of different needs – from the urban centre and challenges of Oxford to deeply rural areas.

For services such as planning, local transport system management, community services and culture, this scale would present difficulties to deliver in ways which engage and respond to the needs of local communities. Additionally, this option would look to retain the current Oxford Green Belt in its current form – even if that long standing policy position of the County Council changed it would be difficult to make the case for Green Belt release under National Planning Policy guidelines as there is available development land beyond the Green Belt, which is likely in a countywide unitary authority. This stymies development potential in the Green Belt around the city of Oxford and means that building of homes and businesses would need to take place in a more dispersed way across the wider county – requiring more of the countryside and natural environment to be placed under threat whilst failing to capitalise on the growth benefits of agglomeration. Overall, there is a risk of a fragmented approach to growth, given the need to focus on rural and urban needs, that will lead to the continuation of difficulty in prioritising Oxford's needs as a national significant economic centre.

While a single unitary may present an opportunity to realise greater efficiencies through economies of scale and reduced duplication of staffing and functions, these are considered to be marginal when considered in the context of the foregone additional business rates and council tax revenues as well as well the growth dividend to the Exchequer that the 3UA proposal would deliver.

¹ [ONS 2024](#)

The annual savings identified through this single unitary proposal are around £30.1m per annum from consolidation, and a further £33.2m from transformation. This compares with a total £48.6m annual savings from 3UA. However, this option reduces significantly the ability to realise the latent economic growth and housing delivery opportunity within the area. This would only exacerbate the ongoing challenges faced by Oxford as a global leader in education and research. 3UA projects an additional £43.1 billion of GVA growth by 2050 – or £2 billion per annum – relative to 1UA. This provides a far greater financial impact than the potential incremental greater cost savings of £14.7m per annum that 1UA delivers over 3UA.

This model is fundamentally the wrong fit for Oxfordshire. It is too large and too remote to deliver the place-based leadership, targeted growth, and responsive services that our diverse communities need. Instead of unlocking Oxfordshire's potential, it risks diluting local priorities, stifling growth, and leaving residents lost in a system that cannot reflect or respond to their unique needs.



Fig 3.2: A single Oxfordshire unitary (not including West Berkshire)

3.1.2 Two Unitary Councils

Under this option, the County Council and six district councils are reorganised into two unitary authorities:

- Oxford and the Shires Council, created from the existing district councils of Cherwell, West Oxfordshire and Oxford City Council; and
- Ridgeway Council, created from the existing district councils of South Oxfordshire, Vale of White Horse and the unitary council of West Berkshire.

This proposal is being developed by these district councils and West Berkshire (except for Oxford City).

The inclusion of West Berkshire in Ridgeway Council reflects the strong historic and current links with southern Oxfordshire. Much of southern Oxfordshire sat within the county of Berkshire up to 1974.

West Berkshire also shares with southern Oxfordshire very similar demography, landscapes and economies, and is within an area expected to sit within the same devolved Thames Valley MSA. Ridgeway as defined here is very similar to the Ridgeway proposed under the three unitary model, with the main difference being the treatment of Oxford's boundaries.

Although the two unitary model could enable some cashable savings through economies of scale and transformation, around £59.8m annually, these potential efficiencies are outweighed by the structural problems it creates. The core issue is that Oxford remains chronically under bounded, its boundary to the south is fixed by Ridgeway, preventing the city from expanding on three sides to meet its own housing and economic needs. While Ridgeway as a unitary makes sense for the southern area, the real challenge is that Oxford and the Shires Council would combine one of England's fastest-growing, most densely populated cities with some of its most rural and sparsely populated areas. This creates an authority with fundamentally different demographics, geographies, and priorities, making it extremely difficult to focus on the needs of either community. Additionally, this boundary cuts through the Oxford conurbation and would create significant issues for residents, such as differential access to city services like libraries and Household Waste Recycling Centres.

By amalgamating Oxford's housing need into a wider requirement for Oxford and the Shires, this model requires the city's unmet need to be met only to the north, cementing the current issues that prevent expansion to the south, east, and west. As a result, Oxford's growth is constrained, and development pressure is pushed into less sustainable rural locations, increasing the risk of scattered, car-dependent development and failing to address the city's acute challenges. The inability to release sufficient green belt land around Oxford means there is no realistic way to deliver the homes and business space needed where demand is highest, undermining agglomeration benefits and the city's role as an economic engine for the region.

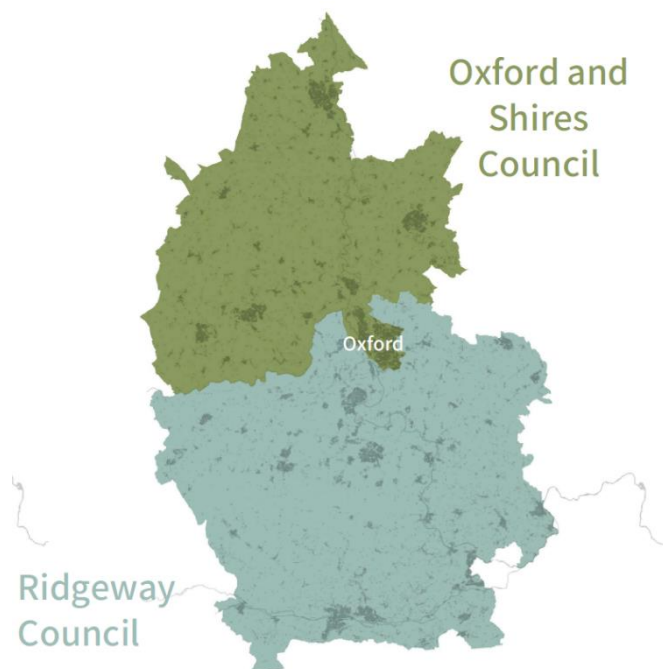


Fig 3.3: A two unitary model, including West Berkshire

3.1.3 Three Unitary Councils

The three unitary proposal would create three new unitary authorities from the current two-tier, seven authority system including West Berkshire – a Northern Unitary (Northern Oxfordshire), a Southern Unitary (Ridgeway), and a Greater Oxford. These unitary authorities largely align with existing district boundaries, except for the area of Greater Oxford which draws in parishes around Oxford's Green Belt from Cherwell, South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse. Each unitary is envisaged to cover distinct areas which share common identities, needs and challenges.

These boundaries enable the strategic release of around 2.6% of Green Belt which would enable Greater Oxford to meet its needs for homes and commercial space in ways which not only protect the wider countryside across Oxfordshire, but drive significant growth and sustainability benefits through using land value capture to fund protection and enhancement of the remaining Green Belt. These will be achieved through concentrating more, new development around the city, supporting a more viable public transport network and wider infrastructure, plus significant agglomeration benefits for businesses and research.

Greater Oxford is the economic engine of Oxfordshire: a city-region with world leading education, research and technology sectors. It has an extensive range of key industries from world leading data science, quantum technology and life sciences to advanced manufacturing, publishing, automotive industry, healthcare and tourism.

Northern Oxfordshire is made up of strong and ambitious towns working to fulfil their growth priorities while maintaining their character, including Banbury, Bicester, Carterton and Witney. It is a key tourism and shopping destination for the UK, with attractions including Bicester Village and Blenheim Palace, as well as the natural beauty of the Cotswolds. It is home to key sectors which benefit from its central location within the UK and link with the Oxford to Cambridge Growth Corridor. These include motoring and other high-tech industries form that part of the 'knowledge spine' together with logistics.

Ridgeway as defined under the three unitary authorities proposal is similar in most respects to that proposed under two unitary authorities and includes West Berkshire for the same reasons. The main difference is the northern boundary around Oxford is changed to align broadly with the edge of the Green Belt. Ridgeway balances a strong network of idyllic market towns and rural areas with cutting edge industries. It also forms part of the strong technology sector spine which runs down into West Berkshire and includes a world leading fusion energy research project, cutting-edge laboratories, and a central hub to the UK's digital infrastructure. The area already has a strong history of collaboration of services between the existing authorities to deliver highly successful shared services.

The distinct demographics and geography of each unitary and the ability to balance the voices of the rural and urban populations at a Mayoral Strategic Authority level necessitate creating authorities smaller than 500,000 residents. There is a strong economic case for this exception. This will ensure that the unitary authorities can deliver optimum economic and housing delivery strategies, place-based outcomes, manage risks and engage with their communities in service delivery at a local level. The smallest proposed authority, Greater Oxford, has a current population which is larger than many established unitary authorities, such as York, Luton and Swindon. Rapid growth as a result of housing delivery ahead of existing Government targets would see Greater Oxford population expand by 44%

by 2040, placing it among the top third largest unitary authorities in the UK based on population projections.

Our proposal has been developed by Oxford City Council and focuses on the ability of a three unitary model to deliver the growth in homes, jobs and economy within Greater Oxford. By concentrating the growth needs for the area in this authority, Northern Oxfordshire and Ridgeway would be able to pursue their strategic objectives in close partnership with their local communities without being overwhelmed by the distinct requirements of Oxford and its very different demographics, needs and geography. Crucially, they would be able to grow in ways which appropriately maintain and build upon the existing characteristics and identities of its unique settlements as Greater Oxford's release of Green Belt and focus on development in this area would greatly reduce the needs to develop across the wider countryside.

The three unitary model not only creates the right structure for Oxfordshire, it forms part of a wider opportunity across England to define a new national structure and empower cities through Local Government Reform. As set out in the *Case for Cities in Local Government Reorganisation*² report, enabling cities like Oxford to govern at the right scale is essential to unlocking inclusive, prevention-focused growth and delivering on national priorities. The generational opportunity is not just for Oxford and Oxfordshire but for Norwich, for Cambridge, for Exeter, for Lincoln and other small cities. The UK's small cities have historically underperformed compared to our international comparators, despite often outperforming larger cities on growth and resilience, even while under-bounded. Giving them the tools to lead, through right-sized, city-led unitary authorities, would supercharge national GVA and help tackle inequalities at their source. Modelling shows that creating unitary cities across the country would deliver major increases to national GVA above current trends, enabling UK cities to compete globally rather than against each other.

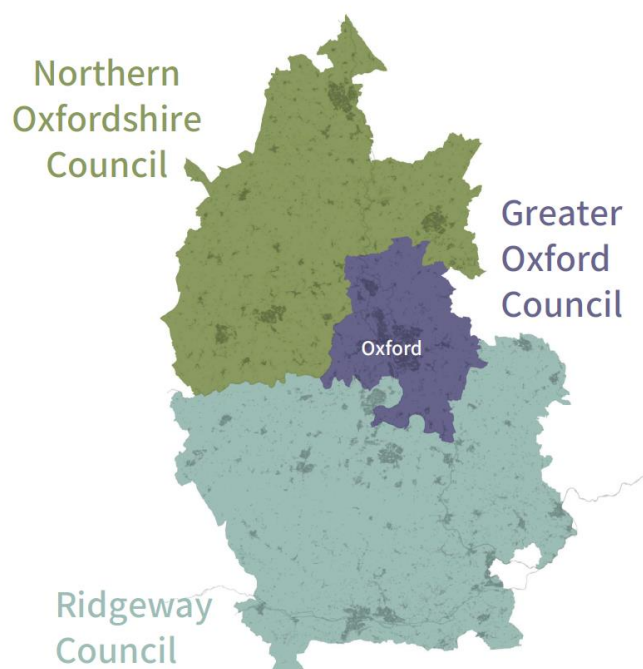


Fig 3.4 A three unitary model including West Berkshire with expanded boundaries for the Oxford city authority

² <https://www.caseforcities.uk>

3.2 Appraisal Outcome

The three unitary model will realise efficiencies from economies of scale. However, there are far greater benefits to be gained from using the opportunity of LGR to direct a purposeful, people-first redesign of government for future generations; and to drive growth. By working with these three distinct areas, this reform will embed the principles of place-based leadership, collaboration and citizen empowerment. They will work at a level which enables joined up delivery of services within the localities which respond to local need and work to prevent issues in people's lives. It is not only the option which delivers the greatest financial benefits by reducing the need for expensive interventions and preventing need but makes the greatest positive impact to living standards and quality of life – providing and breaking down barriers to good housing and prosperity for the most people.

We have built on our initial analysis and used the criteria set out by the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) to appraise each of the primary options. The table below provides the scoring of each option against the criteria. It uses a scale of 0-3 where 0 indicates it does not meet the criteria at all and 3 indicates that it fully meets the criteria. A more detailed explanation of the scoring for each option against the government criteria is set out in the Appendix B.

Based on our assessment, the three unitary proposal with modified boundaries for Greater Oxford represents the option which best meets the government's LGR criteria, its wider growth mission and, most importantly, the needs of the residents and communities of Oxfordshire. Our three unitary model empowers locally accountable, place-based leadership to deliver services which are tailored to the needs of communities and creates significant benefits of size and scale. Greater Oxford, Northern Oxfordshire and Ridgeway would represent, co-produce with and serve areas which have their own distinct identities, context and existing partnerships. Three unitary authorities represent a model of councils with a sustainable scale and geography to work with a Mayoral Strategic Authority with a balance of voices which truly represent the communities for which they advocate.

Table 3.1: Single Unitary for Oxfordshire (excluding West Berkshire)

LGR Criteria	Score	Rationale
A single tier and sensible geography to improve housing supply and outcomes avoiding creating (dis/)-advantaged areas	1	This would create the third largest unitary in the country and cover too diverse an area to deliver local priorities. It would deliver fewer homes than other proposals, and they would need to be built in areas which may change local characteristics of rural areas.
Unitary local government must be the right size to achieve efficiencies, improve capacity and withstand financial shocks	2	This option would deliver the most benefits in economies of scale and, with the largest revenue budget, increase its resilience to financial shocks. However, it would also be least able to deliver public service reform which responds to local needs to address demand and reduce the overall cost of service delivery.
Prioritise the delivery of high quality and sustainable public services to citizens	1	This would minimise disruption as many services are currently provided by the County authority. However, this would also limit the ability for public service reform around a deep understanding of local communities at a place-based level. The size of organisation would limit its ability to deliver agile and fast transformation and be flexible to tailor high quality public services to local needs.
Councils must work together in coming to a view that meets local needs and is informed by local views	1	This proposal does not respond to the clear view expressed by engagement across the county that councils should be closely linked to their communities and that bigger authorities risk losing touch with residents.
New unitary structures must support devolution arrangements	1	A single unitary would be too close in size to the MSA and would account for at least 37% of its total population. It would aim to take a strategic view over the area, duplicating the strategic role of the MSA. It would mean that Oxfordshire's rural and urban areas would only have one voice at the MSA level for its diverse views and priorities, and Oxford would have a weaker voice than the other metropolitan areas in the MSA.
Enable stronger community engagement and deliver genuine opportunity for neighbourhood empowerment	1	The size of the unitary would make it feel too distanced from the communities it serves to be able to engage and co-design most meaningfully. Having to balance the views of a major city, a network of market towns and rural communities would give too many contrasting priorities to be able to ensure specific neighbourhoods are suitably empowered.

Table 3.2: Two Unitary Proposal (Oxford and the Shires comprising current Cherwell, West Oxfordshire and Oxford City, Ridgeway comprising South Oxfordshire, Vale of White Horse and West Berkshire)

LGR Criteria	Score	Rationale
A single tier and sensible geography to improve housing supply and outcomes avoiding creating (dis/)advantaged areas	2	This creates authorities of an appropriate population size with a sensible geography for Ridgeway. However, the merging of Oxford and the Shires combines two distinct geographies with very different priorities and demographics. This would retain the under bounding of Oxford and deliver fewer homes than a three unitary proposal, with more of these homes being built in rural areas and affecting the character of villages.
Unitary local government must be the right size to achieve efficiencies, improve capacity and withstand financial shocks	2	This would create savings through economies of scale, although less than a single unitary, and be viable with ability to withstand financial shocks. However, savings from rationalisations would be smaller than the additional costs of demand.
Prioritise the delivery of high quality and sustainable public services to citizens	2	The two unitary model would be more able to tailor services to meet the needs of its geographies than the single unitary option – particularly in Ridgeway. However, the contrasting populations, demands and priorities of Oxford and the Shires would require a constant balance to deliver appropriate services to very distinct areas within one authority.
Councils must work together in coming to a view that meets local needs and is informed by local views	2	While Ridgeway would be able to respond to local needs across its villages and market towns, Oxford and the Shires would need to balance competing local needs. This would not be informed by local views, which want councils based on areas relevant to their communities and show that the north of Oxfordshire and city of Oxford view themselves as distinct from each other.
New unitary structures must support devolution arrangements	2	This would support devolution arrangements better than a single authority. However, Oxford and the Shires would mean a single voice at MSA level would need to represent both rural and urban needs rather than distinct areas. It would weaken the voice of Oxford compared to other major metropolitan areas in the MSA.
Enable stronger community engagement and deliver genuine opportunity for neighbourhood empowerment	2	Ridgeway would be able to engage strongly and deliver neighbourhood empowerment across its towns and villages. There would be a greater challenge across Oxford and the Shires, which would need to develop distinct approaches and models for its urban and rural areas. Those living in “the shires” would feel their priorities are competing with Oxford and vice versa, reducing the feeling of empowerment and being heard in working with communities.

Table 3.3: Three Unitary Proposal (Greater Oxford comprising Oxford City and expanded borders, Northern Oxfordshire comprising West Oxford and remainder of Cherwell, Ridgeway comprising West Berkshire and remainder of South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse)

LGR Criteria	Score	Rationale
A single tier and sensible geography to improve housing supply and outcomes avoiding creating (dis/)advantaged areas	3	Creates a single tier through three unitary authorities: a Greater Oxford, Northern Oxfordshire and Ridgeway. By addressing the under bounding of Oxford, targeted green belt release will deliver the most homes, in places which minimise the impact on the environment, infrastructure and rural settlements.
Unitary local government must be the right size to achieve efficiencies, improve capacity and withstand financial shocks	2	Creates three unitary areas which are financially viable and deliver savings from economies of scale. The greater savings will be driven by the transformation of services to a preventative approach with a place-based approach to ensure that services work within each location to best reduce demand, and therefore cost, while improving outcomes.
Prioritise the delivery of high quality and sustainable public services to citizens	3	The proposal ensures services are high quality and tailored to local needs through close collaboration with the local community and partners. Decisions can focus on the needs of specific areas, and analysis has shown all unitary authorities will deliver sustainable services which focus on prevention and align with the wider public sector reform agenda.
Councils must work together in coming to a view that meets local needs and is informed by local views	3	A comprehensive and inclusive engagement programme has been delivered across Oxfordshire and West Berkshire to understand the local needs and views which this proposal seeks to answer. Through this it gives residents more say in local planning and ensures services are tailored to the specific needs of each place, meeting the desire for councils to be locally responsive and relevant to their communities.
New unitary structures must support devolution arrangements	3	This proposes a balance of three voices across Oxfordshire to the Mayoral Strategic Authority, balancing the rural and urban populations. It gives consistency of scale across the Thames Valley MSA, and a voice for a globally significant in line with the other authorities represented.
Enable stronger community engagement and deliver genuine opportunity for neighbourhood empowerment	3	Three unitaries enable governance which is more tailored and representative to local need. It will support local leaders to better understand and tackle local challenges. It supports increased community engagement in democratic processes, the design of services and community empowerment more generally. It allows each area to speak for itself and its own identity and priorities.

4 Case for Three Unitary Authorities

This proposal for three unitary authorities (3UA) is designed to deliver the best possible outcomes for the people, places, and economy of Oxfordshire – together with West Berkshire. It is a direct response to the clear needs and ambitions of the area, providing a blueprint for a modern, effective, and equitable model of local government.

The current two-tier system has proven incapable of delivering this vision. It has constrained economic growth, diluted local identity, and hindered the preventative and collaborative approaches needed to tackle deep-rooted social challenges. It is the single greatest limiting factor in the development of modern and resilient governance.

Growth – Oxfordshire's historic dividing line

The three unitaries Oxfordshire proposal is unashamedly a pro-growth proposal. Oxford City Council has long prioritised growth – both in housing and commercial space – whilst always seeking to protect the city's historic architectural treasures. This is strongly supported by Oxford's residents and businesses alike. In the Council's 2025 annual Residents Satisfaction Survey just 14% of citizens were satisfied with the number of homes being built to meet Oxford's housing needs. In the Council's 2025 survey of businesses for LGR 68% believed Oxford should go beyond the government's target for delivering new homes in and around the city.

But Oxford population constitutes 22% of Oxfordshire's and its pro-growth outlook is not shared in many parts of the county. An inbuilt rural majority has generally prioritised conservation overgrowth. For decades the democratic will of this rural majority has led to the return of councils across Oxfordshire's other districts and at the county level that have sought to minimise the amount of growth planned or delivered.

The divide overgrowth has played out in the ceaseless tussle over how to provide for Oxford's unmet housing need, which the city itself so tightly bounded on all sides cannot do alone. This has led to demands that Oxford abandon plans to develop a cutting-edge Knowledge Quarter on regeneration land in the city centre next to the railway station and instead prioritise housing. Contention overgrowth also saw the collapse of work to create the much-needed Oxfordshire 2050 Strategic Plan due to concerns by other authorities over having to agree housing numbers beyond the now defunct old 'Standard Method' approach.

Progress made last decade in securing Oxford's unmet needs sites in other districts is now being lost, where the latest Local Plans from South Oxfordshire, Vale of White Horse and Cherwell Councils have all sought to deliver lower levels of housing than new government 'Standard Method' targets by utilising transitional arrangements. While Oxford City Council did object to this approach, it is relevant to underline that Oxfordshire County Council did not, providing tacit support for their approach. However, objections to proposed levels of housing in Oxford's pro-growth 2040 Local Plan (now withdrawn) were received from the County Council, as well as South & Vale district councils. It is also material that the last time land use planning sat at County level, the Structure Plan 2016, sought overtly to constrain Oxford's growth.

Government has made clear that growth is its number one mission and set clear housing targets for every area - and therefore all three proposals for unitarisation of Oxfordshire local government will

reference housing delivery and support for business. However, the nature of the geography in either of the one unitary and two unitary proposals would create the strong likelihood of an anti-growth majority within any of these councils and putting Oxford's residents in the position of a minority voice. The democratic will of those populations is likely to lock in a status quo and stymie any real dash for growth in Oxfordshire. Conversely, with Oxford constituting 71% of Greater Oxford there is more likely to be continued majority support for an acceleration of housing delivery and the creation of skilled jobs.

Six key principles of the case for three unitary authorities

The right geography for governance is the foundation for success. The three unitary authorities model is built on this principle. The three unitary authorities will deliver a future where Oxfordshire achieves its full potential across six critical dimensions:

- where **prosperity** is unlocked through Oxford's economic engine;
- where good **homes** are available to all, and fit well into Oxfordshire;
- where **quality of life** is enhanced through preventative, integrated services;
- where community **identity** is strengthened rather than diluted;
- where democratic **voice** is empowered at every level; and
- where governance is **future-fit** and financially sustainable.

Extensive public engagement has been central to shaping this proposal, revealing strong support for councils that are closer and more responsive to the people they serve. This informs directly our commitment to enhancing democratic voice.

The following sections set out how the three unitary model delivers against the six key dimensions of Oxfordshire's future. It demonstrates why this proposal is not merely an administrative change, but the most credible and forward-looking framework to secure a better future for all of Oxfordshire and West Berkshire, now and for generations to come.

4.1 Prosperity

Prosperity: Unlocking Oxfordshire's True Economic Potential

The three unitary authorities model delivers a step change in economic growth. Significantly, it does so in a way that can fully unlock the opportunities across high-growth sectors. It will increase productivity; making growth and employment more inclusive whilst maximising our existing partnerships and coordination across each area's strengths and challenges.

This proposal unlocks Oxfordshire's full potential by aligning land, infrastructure and skills within a coherent economic geography, creating up to **65,000 additional jobs** more than either competing unitary proposal and **£43 billion more GVA** by 2050 than would be achieved through a single unitary authority (1UA).

Oxford is already a success story, central to which sits its universities. For every £1 invested in the University of Oxford, £10.30 is returned to the UK economy³. However, we are not fulfilling our potential. For too long, Oxfordshire's prosperity has been constrained by outdated boundaries and fragmented governance.

³ [The economic impact of the University of Oxford](#)

Oxford's current functional economic area extends well beyond existing administrative boundaries. Its global research base and innovation ecosystem have been held back by a lack of space to grow, limiting the scale of high-value employment and investment the county can sustain. Without addressing this imbalance, Oxfordshire risks losing its competitive edge to other global innovation hubs. The three-unitary model removes these constraints. The approach allows each distinct part of Oxfordshire to focus on its strengths, delivering growth in key sectors and collectively maximising impact.

The creation of a Greater Oxford will enable the release of strategically located employment land at the edge of the city. This will bring firms closer to the research, talent and transport connections that drive productivity – while minimising the impact on infrastructure and the environment.

This focused approach mirrors the pattern seen in the world's other successful innovation economies. As shown by Volterra's independent analysis, when Oxford can grow beyond its current boundaries, it achieves a higher rate of employment growth across Oxfordshire, around 1.5% a year compared with 1.0% under a single authority, translating into a more productive mix of sectors, stronger wages, higher tax receipts and more funding for public services across the county.

We will ensure that the growth we achieve benefits all of our residents and is genuinely inclusive, by having place-based unitary authorities which can work at the local level to create the right interventions to address barriers to better jobs. This is vital given that, despite perceptions of affluence, we have very significant areas of deprivation.

Constraints on Growth

Oxford brings together knowledge industries and technology clusters due to its world-renowned university and research institutions. Over 73% of Oxford's businesses operate in knowledge-intensive sectors – including life sciences, biotechnology, data science, and robotics – forming one of the strongest and most dynamic tech clusters in the UK. Ensuring these sectors have the space, connectivity, and infrastructure to expand is critical to sustaining Oxfordshire's global leadership in innovation and maintaining the UK's competitiveness on the world stage. It is also home to a wide range of other sectors of strength which have huge importance to the whole country, such as automotive and advanced manufacturing, publishing, healthcare and tourism.

Oxfordshire's global reputation, innovation ecosystem and demand point to huge potential for growth. However, it currently underperforms. Oxfordshire lags well behind neighbouring Berkshire and Swindon in terms of productivity. The aspiration of the proposed Thames Valley MSA is to return to annual GVA growth of 2.35% a year. However, Oxfordshire's current model risks holding that back. Historical employment growth of around 1% in Oxfordshire and productivity is only around the UK average. Despite Oxford's position as an innovation leader, the constrained nature of the city, combined with a sector profile that includes a high proportion of public sector and academic workers, currently sees it score lower in terms of productivity than the national average.

The lack of space in Oxford's tight boundaries has also driven up the cost of new commercial development. This has constrained the growth of more productive employment, pushed activity into less connected locations and weakened agglomeration and productivity benefits. At worst, it has cost the UK huge opportunities. Volterra analysis (see Appendix C) has outlined that the city of Oxford can

be a huge draw for major global firms. However, for some, where they cannot find accommodation within proximity of the city they will not re-locate around Oxfordshire or even the UK – they will invest internationally in places like Boston or Silicon Valley. Our survey of businesses on LGR (see Section 4.7) reinforces the importance of proximity to the city: with 83% this was ‘very’ or ‘extremely important’ to the success of their business.

The Chancellor has committed to making the Oxford-Cambridge Corridor Europe’s Silicon valley – addressing years of underinvestment in public transport, affordable housing and infrastructure.⁴ This notes a potential prize of up to £78 billion in cumulative economic growth by 2035. Ensuring that Greater Oxford has the available space for this growth, and that Northern Oxfordshire can benefit from its links to East-West rail at Bicester Village for its own technology sector, will ensure we can deliver on this key priority for the country’s economic development.

A place-based approach aligned to the Mayoral Strategic Authority

3UA are best placed to complement the role of the new Mayoral Strategic Authority. The MSA will take on powers including strategic planning, inward investment, skills and both strategic transport planning and delivery. The scale and broad strategic scope of the MSA undermines the case for a larger unitary, as proposed under the 1UA option. Conversely, it underlines the case for smaller place-based unitaries, as put forward under the 3UA option.

As such, strategic economic, planning, investment and infrastructure will not be planned at the county level, instead, the MSA will provide a single, joined-up framework for leadership, investment, and delivery, enabling coordinated action at that scale. Working as three unitary authorities will enable each area to take a place-based and delivery-driven approach while the MSA coordinates strategic infrastructure and investment across the wider region.

Economists, Volterra have assessed each of the proposal LGR options to look at their likely impact on economic growth. They conclude that the 3UA provides the best possible platform for growth by creating unitary authorities that can prioritise the investment needs of their own areas, working with the MSA. However, they conclude that both the 1UA and two unitary authority (2UA) options are much more likely to deliver un-coordinated and fragmented leadership across their areas, unable to prioritise the investment needs of the city, while also prioritising the very different needs of the majority rural communities and market towns.

Realising agglomeration benefits around Oxford

The three unitary authorities option unlocks additional land around Oxford, while enabling Northern Oxfordshire and Ridgeway to focus on their own economic strengths and priorities.

The creation of a Greater Oxford unitary as part of the 3UA proposal could release green belt land around the city to deliver 13m sq. ft. of additional commercial space and up to 29,000 new jobs, alongside 40,000 new homes.

Both the 1UA and 2UA option would instead see employment growth spread across a wider area, and at a smaller scale. Both those options would have available land outside the green belt that would need to be prioritised. Setting aside any political imperative within the 1UA and 2UA not to grow the

⁴ [23 October 2025 HM Treasury Press Release](#)

city, national planning guidance limits the ability to allocate green belt land, especially where other developable land is available in local plan areas. The 2UA does provide some potential opportunity for the growth of Oxford northward, while constraining the city to the south, east, and west of its boundaries. The 1UA on the other hand, for the reasons set out above, will see commercial growth focused beyond the green belt.

As such, only the Greater Oxford and the 3UA proposal would allow the city to expand in a balanced way, delivering more land to meet demand. This land will also be in the right places, close to its universities, hospitals and science parks, while protecting rural areas from dispersed and unsustainable development. By focusing jobs closer to good public transport links, it will make sustainable travel the easy choice and reduce the need for car-based commuting. Moreover, Oxford's economy would become more productive, with expansion allowing for a greater proportion of higher value jobs to come forward. The provision of additional commercial land around Oxford, facilitating a more productive sector mix, are both noted by Volterra as reasons why the 3UA option will drive more economic growth than the 1UA or 2UA options.

Research from the Centre for Cities also shows that locating development in this way around urban areas creates agglomeration, which drives even greater productivity and innovation through three interconnected channels:

- **Sharing:** businesses benefit from shared infrastructure and services, achieving economies of scale and lowering costs.
- **Learning:** regular interaction accelerates the exchange of ideas between firms, researchers, and institutions.
- **Matching:** dense labour markets make it easier for employers to find the right skills and for workers to secure high-quality, highly skilled jobs.

Volterra's modelling shows that this specific agglomeration effect adds a further **£5.3 billion in GVA** in addition to the direct impact of new, and more productive, jobs. The result is self-sustaining growth: firms locate near leading institutions, attract skilled workers, and in turn generate more innovation and investment.

This growth will be delivered through strong local partnerships. Greater Oxford will build on the City Councils close relationships with the University of Oxford, Oxford Brookes, the NHS, major landowners, and major employers such as BMW Mini and Culham (the UK's first approved AI Growth Zone) to shape investment, coordinate infrastructure, and ensure that new development supports both economic and environmental goals.

The City Council's ability to bring together partnerships alongside EDF Renewables, the University of Oxford, Habitat Energy, RedT and Kensa to deliver the Energy Superhub Oxford and Europe's most powerful EV charging hub demonstrates a track record in leveraging innovation to make transport clean. Strong partnerships and strategic leadership from the City Council has already brought through the re-opening of the Cowley Branch Line. This will provide vital and sustainable connectivity options to new and existing jobs.

A model that works for the whole county

We have set out in this proposal the importance of ensuring Oxford as a city realises its full potential through agglomeration and intensification of development on edge of city sites. Growth which does not address Oxford's constraints and which relies on provision spread across the County will see Oxford fail.

However, whilst a successful Oxford is vital to a prosperous region, it is equally important that all parts of the County flourish. To close the productivity gap between Oxfordshire and other parts of the Thames Valley MSA region requires a pan-Oxfordshire approach.

Northern Oxfordshire has a strong base in advanced manufacturing, logistics, and green technology, with market towns such as Banbury, Bicester and Witney providing vibrant local economies. Around 36% of residents hold degree level qualifications, and another 40% have intermediate or technical skills. With greater local control, the new council can strengthen partnerships with Bicester Motion, Banbury College and the Oxfordshire Advanced Skills Centre to deliver new training routes in sustainable industry, clean mobility and construction. There can also be a focus on the strengths of the market towns, ensuring that economic growth reflects the character and identity of much-loved communities, towns and villages, with a focus on creating new jobs across sectors such as mid tech, motorsport, tourism and agriculture.

In Ridgeway there will be the opportunity to progress Harwell's unique offer as part of the wider Science Vale and the expansion of Didcot. Alongside the Harwell Campus, Milton Park and Didcot Garden Town together host more than 250 companies working in life sciences, space, quantum technologies and renewable energy. Around 41% of residents hold degree level qualifications, supporting one of the most productive workforces in the country. The Crown Estates recent acquisition of a 221 acre site next to the Harwell Campus with potential for 4.5m sq ft of laboratory and advanced manufacturing space provides an enormous opportunity.

Under the new structure, Ridgeway and Northern Oxfordshire unitary authorities will coordinate growth across these nationally significant sites for the first time, working with the MSA.

Together, these changes will enable Northern Oxfordshire and Ridgeway to grow in ways that strengthen local economies while preserving the distinctive character of their much-loved communities, towns and villages.

The most impactful option

Volterra have undertaken modelling to look at the likely different economic futures under each of the different LGR proposals. They conclude that the 3UA option is the only one that is likely to provide co-ordinated governance, able to prioritise the needs of each of the three unitaries. Furthermore, that it is the best option to support the release of more land in the right places, and at scale, including around Oxford. As such, 3UA delivers more effective and timely investment, more, productive jobs, and greater agglomeration benefits. Volterra look at past trends and forecasts to conclude that the 3UA is best able to deliver a step change in employment growth, increasing it from its historic trend rate of 1% to 1.3% per annum, across the 3UAs.

While they conclude that both the 1UA and 2UA will both suffer from governance and leadership unable to prioritise across both urban and rural dimensions of their areas, they recognise that the 2UA does have the ability to support Oxford's growth northwards, estimating that this could deliver employment growth at 1.1% per annum. However, the political and policy constraints faced by the 1UA in releasing more land around Oxford, alongside the governance issues, lead Volterra to conclude that this option will not be able to make a step change in the county's economic growth and would continue to see Oxfordshire's jobs growth at the status quo, 1% per annum.

Table 4.1: Volterra Comparative Economic Impact of Alternative LGR Models

	3UA	2UA	1UA
Total jobs growth up to 2050	218,000	180,000	153,000
Direct additional GVA up to 2050 (NPV)	£37.8bn	£15.5bn	£0bn
Additional GVA from agglomeration benefit up to 2050 (NPV)	£5.3bn	£0.8bn	£0bn
Total additional GVA up to 2050 (NPV)	£43.1bn	£16.3bn	£0bn
Total GVA (NPV) to 2050	£168.8bn	£142bn	£125.7bn
Annual GVA growth	2.6%	2.0%	1.8%

As set out in the table above, Volterra conclude that the 3UA could deliver £43.1bn more in GVA than the 1UA option, and £26.8bn more than the 2UA. The 3UA could also see 65,000 more jobs up to 2050, than the 1UA option, and 38,000 more than under 2UA.

Prosperity with Purpose

True prosperity must be shared. Despite Oxfordshire's global reputation for research and invention, some communities still feel disconnected from opportunity. The three unitary model places inclusive growth at its heart, ensuring that economic success reaches every corner of the county.

The emerging MSA will set strategic policies for delivering skills across the region to ensure the needs of businesses are met. However, growth will only be truly inclusive if there are locally identified bespoke interventions which deal with the specific challenges of individual communities and ensure all residents have access to emerging opportunities. We believe this is best achieved through a 3UA model rather than via larger unitaries which are likely to replicate the role of the MSA.

Each council will have the power and insight to tailor skills and employment programmes to local needs, ensuring that prosperity and the growth of opportunities are more widely shared. In Greater Oxford, where inequality remains high, partnerships with universities, hospitals and major employers will create new opportunities in the city's growing innovation economy. In Northern Oxfordshire, where technical skills are a major strength, collaboration between colleges, businesses and local government will expand apprenticeships and training in sectors such as low carbon manufacturing

and logistics. In Ridgeway, partnerships with the science and energy institutions at Harwell and Milton Park will ensure that local people can access the jobs created in these fast-growing sectors.

Improving access to training, transport and housing will make growth more inclusive. Each authority will integrate employment and infrastructure planning so that people can live closer to where they work, reducing commuting pressures and supporting a greener, healthier economy. This balanced approach will create stronger, more connected communities and ensure that Oxfordshire's prosperity benefits all who live and work here.

4.2 Homes

Building the homes Oxfordshire needs

The three unitary authorities model offers the biggest opportunity in a generation to unlock housing for Oxfordshire. It could deliver 1,220 more homes per year than other proposals (16,000 over 15 years)⁵. It addresses the long-standing housing shortage across Oxfordshire, providing the homes needed for the future, while protecting wider rural locations from inappropriate development that may be otherwise required to deal with Oxford's overspill.

By releasing just 2.6% of the current Green Belt around Oxford, only enabled by rebounding the city to create Greater Oxford, up to 40,000 homes in total could be built by 2040 – with at least 40% of these being affordable homes. This would be coupled with major housebuilding projects already proposed or underway including at Didcot, Dalton Barracks, Salt Cross and Heyford Park that will deliver large numbers of homes across Oxfordshire.

Engagement with the public in Oxfordshire has consistently shown that there is strong support for building more genuinely affordable homes in the right places. In Oxford City Council's 2025 Resident Satisfaction Survey⁶, only 14% of Oxford residents said they were satisfied with the number of homes being delivered to meeting housing need. Citizens want these homes to be close to jobs, connected by good infrastructure. Unlocking housebuilding at this scale is also the only way to ensure Oxfordshire can deliver on Oxfordshire's economic growth potential and increase prosperity.

Building at density, particularly around Oxford, will enable more sustainable and viable public transport routes as well as active travel – reducing congestion. The scale of delivery possible in Greater Oxford will also mean that Ridgeway and Northern Oxfordshire will no longer need to meet Oxford's unmet housing demand. Because of this they can focus on delivering homes which fit the specific characteristics and needs of their unique settlements.

Oxfordshire's housing crisis

Oxfordshire does not build enough homes. There are several contributing factors, included the under-bounded nature of Oxford city alongside its restrictive Green Belt, and the historic townscape in and around Oxford and many other parts of the county and around the city.

⁵ This is calculated as with authorities delivering their Standard Method numbers of homes and excludes the delivery of the New Town at Hayford Park as New Towns are not part of the Standard Method targets.

⁶ [Satisfaction with Oxford and Oxford City Council rise but concerns about housing, transport and crime remain, Oxford City Council 2025](#)

On current boundaries, due to a lack of available land, the city can accommodate less than half the housing target set by the Government's new Standard Method. This would therefore require the export of around 600 dwellings per year to its neighbours. With Oxford's Green Belt in place, this then forces growth around towns and villages unconnected to the city.

While a national issue, this lack of supply is perhaps felt most keenly in Oxford, which is the least affordable city in the UK – with the average house price 13.6 times the average wage.⁷ and average wages are 68% of average rent levels in the city. With one third of the city's housing stock privately rented (either as HMO or private tenancy), the issue of affordability of housing is further exacerbated.

These issues have in turn spread this demand and price inflation across Oxfordshire. There is an overwhelming need for all tenures of affordable housing, and particularly socially-rented properties in Oxfordshire.⁸

This is a cost of living, a public health and a quality-of-life issue for many of Oxfordshire's residents. Furthermore, where growth has happened it has typically leaped the green belt, creating congestion issues, additional carbon emissions, and made it harder to deliver sustainable public transport connections. Economic growth in Oxfordshire is also being held back by these issues, making us a less attractive place to set up or expand a business. Other competitor locations globally can offer a higher quality of life with lower housing costs.

Unlocking home building and meeting Oxford's housing need

The boundary change to create Greater Oxford, proposed as part of the 3UA option, is the most appropriate and most sustainable way for Oxford to meet its own housing need. It is the only option that will deliver homes at scale close to jobs, amenities and public and active transport networks, via a careful but strategic green belt release.

As noted in the Prosperity section above, both the 1UA and 2UA option would instead see Oxford housing need spread across a wider area, where the abundance of available land outside the green belt would need to be prioritised. Setting aside any political imperative within the 1UA and 2UA not to grow the city, national planning guidance limits the ability to allocate green belt land, especially where other developable land is available in local plan areas. As such both options would serve to increase the pressure on villages and smaller towns across a wider area and add further stress to an already creaking transport network. In the case of the 1UA this housing would be spread county-wide, and in the case of the 2UA, this additional housing would need to be met in what is currently Cherwell and West Oxfordshire.

Under 3UA, Greater Oxford's ability to deliver its own housing need will allow the Northern Oxfordshire and Ridgeway Councils' plan-making process to focus on their own growth requirements, with new homes that fit these locations and communities, alongside the need to conserve the current natural environment and characteristics of rural settlements.

The 3UA approach will also improve the quality, function, and accessibility of Oxford's green belt. New development will be expected to deliver on-site green spaces as well as contributing to

⁷ Centre for Cities, Cities Outlook 2025.

⁸ Volterra report, 2025

expanding and maintaining public access areas while protecting and enhancing other areas for biodiversity net gain and nature recovery. This could support the potential expansion of Shotover Country Park, or the realisation of Berks Bucks & Oxon Wildlife Trust's (BBOWT's) ambition of linking the unique habitats of Otmoor and Bernwood. This will be supported by ensuring appropriate developer contributions and land value capture from the release of green belt land. It will also be possible to deliver appropriate levels of community infrastructure, working with the local communities to ensure their voice guides its design and delivery.

Oxfordshire bus operators are also clear that increasing the density of housing around the city would directly improve the viability of bus services to villages in the Greater Oxford area.

The best option for homes

The 3UA option therefore provides the best opportunity to address housing delivery given the imperative Greater Oxford would have to unlock green belt land, and the political and technical challenges faced by the 1UA and 2UA options in doing the same.

It provides the land and opportunities to deliver housing in line with the new Standard Method in each of the 3UA. Moreover, it creates the platform to go beyond this target in Greater Oxford by 16,000 homes up to 2040. This could result in over 1,200 homes per year above the new Standard Method being delivered. The table below demonstrates this, setting out housing targets based on the old Standard Method (SM) and the new one for the existing district councils across Oxfordshire, alongside the proposed new ones under the 3UA option.

Table 4.2: Model of housing supply annually under existing and 3UA models

	Old SM	New SM	3UA with new SM	3UA potential (supply-led)
Oxford City	762	1,087	1,449 (Greater Oxford)	2,666 (Greater Oxford)
West	549	905	1,837 (Northern Oxfordshire)	
Cherwell	706	1,118		
South	579	1,179	1,952 (Ridgeway without W Berks)	
Vale	633	949		
Total	3,229	5,238	5,238	6,455

Greater Oxford's drive towards a more ambitious housing targets could be further supported by the creation of one or more Mayoral Development Corporations in collaboration with the new Mayoral Strategic Authority (MSA). This would build upon Oxford City Council's strong reputation as a proactive partner in delivering growth and act a catalyst for targeted growth. It is also welcome news that a New Town is proposed in Northern Oxfordshire, at Heyford Park. However, Government is clear that this housing growth will be in addition to the new Standard Method requirements, so removing Oxford's unmet need from the equation will be helpful in achieving this.

4.3 Quality of Life

The 3UA proposal will develop place-based organisations that possess deep local knowledge and insight, adopting a whole systems approach to enable access to high quality services across Oxfordshire and West Berkshire to provide better quality of life. Place based collaboration will ensure outcomes that matter most to residents are reflected in local strategies through bringing together functions and partners across the system, at a local level to deliver joint outcomes. Place-based partnerships will focus on tackling the root causes that currently lead to health, social and economic inequalities across the footprint.

The ambition is to develop affordable homes in the right places, place-based investment to boost transport and connectivity so individuals can better access spaces and jobs that fit their personal aspirations, safeguard green spaces and uphold climate resilience, provide proactive health and care services that consider all the wider determinants of health within their design to help residents maintain their wellbeing and age well, enhance education settings to meet the needs of all children supporting them to preserve their sense of belonging and ensure community safety.

All these strategic objectives are best delivered through the 3UA proposal as place-based organisations support quality and sustainability of local services.⁷ District councils' deep community connections and extensive local knowledge is well evidenced to effectively improve the health and quality of lives, as service delivery is embedded within communities, generating local-level insights that shape service design.⁸ These strengths will be built on through detailed analysis of local contexts within each unitary, to determine functions that are best delivered across system, place and neighbourhood levels to better resident outcomes.

Supporting our communities

Our public survey on LGR received 1,580 responses from residents across Oxfordshire and West Berkshire, evidencing 80% agreement that urban and rural areas require different approaches to housing, transport, social care, education, skills, and other key council services. The 3UA proposal provides a platform to best deliver improved socio-economic outcomes through enhanced service integration, simplified governance and increased democratic accountability in a way that best addresses specific rural and urban needs. It will establish authorities that are closer to communities they serve.

Our extensive public engagement shows there is an aspiration for high quality services and outcomes that enable residents to live healthy and rewarding lives. However, this is not a reality for many across Oxfordshire as socio-economic and geographic differences mean unequal access to opportunities.

Research highlights that residents in rural areas are more likely to be impacted by the twin pressures of energy and transport poverty due to environmental and infrastructural characteristics, including older homes with poor insulation.⁹ Urban pressures more typically include housing affordability, social and economic inequalities and deprivation. 3UA will allow for mobilisation of more locally responsive services in rural geographies, including better infrastructure across Northern Oxfordshire

⁹ Identifying double energy vulnerability: A systematic and narrative review of groups at-risk of energy and transport poverty in the global north

and Ridgeway and sustainable local development strategies to ensure rural communities are prioritised.

Deep pockets of deprivation persist across Oxfordshire, in the city, urban market towns and rural areas, which often require different responses. The one size fits all approach of a single unitary risks failing to meet specific needs of different communities. The extent of local differences is stark – a 14-year gap in life expectancy exists for men across the footprint and 26% of children in Oxford live below the poverty line.

The most recent figures from the Indices of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) indicated that Oxford's place-based, preventative approach is working, with improvements in areas within the Community Impact Zone¹⁰ and adjacent to the service hub provided by Rose Hill Community Centre. Other areas in the city that have moved up from the lowest 20% IMD rankings have benefitted from the City Council locality working model, with Neighbourhood Plans driving the focus for support and resources in places that are now seeing better outcomes, like Barton and Blackbird Leys. Overall, the city has reduced the number of areas in the 20% most deprived from nine to four areas. This demonstrates the power of place-based, locally led interventions to tackle the root causes of issues that can have life-long impacts and create better outcomes for individuals and communities.

The IMD figures also show South Oxfordshire, West Berkshire and Vale of White Horse are closely grouped in the average rankings, indicative of their similarities and shared challenges. Oxford continues to be an outlier with the highest average ranking, with Cherwell more closely aligning to West Oxfordshire. The ability of these areas to take an appropriate, place based and preventative approach will be strengthened by the three unitary arrangement that brings together places with shared characteristics.

A focus on residents and communities

Delivering better outcomes for residents through public services is about focusing on individuals and families, rather than expecting them to bend around council siloes. From a service perspective it is about creating a single and integrated pathway, to avoid residents from having to tell their story multiple times. We understand that human experiences and needs are complex, requiring a holistic and systems-based approach underpinned by a strong insight, to identify and address the root cause of demand and promote holistic problem-solving.

Deeply community-connected services will form the backbone of neighbourhood working, strengthening partnerships with health, education, and voluntary sectors, and making full use of multi-agency Hubs. Oxford City Council's Rose Hill Community Centre already performs such a function – housing council, NHS, Police and voluntary sector services in one of the most deprived areas of the city. As a result it was the venue chosen for the joint Oxfordshire councils' launch of the countywide Marmot Place initiative. This integrated, place-based approach builds resilience and reduce reliance on acute support services over time. This way of working will seek to link into wider community assets, a strong wellbeing leisure offer and local green spaces.

¹⁰ The Community Impact Zone (CIZ) aims to tackle inequalities of health, education and opportunity in South East Oxford www.oxfordhub.org/ciz

This approach will support a person-centred, community-based, preventative approach within adult social care. This will enable residents to receive support in a personalised way through effective short-term interventions, technology-enabled care, and specialist housing as powerful alternatives to traditional, high-cost models of provision.

Caring, stable, and nurturing family environments, supporting by the wider community offer will underpin Children's Services. Expanding existing specialist provision will allow more children to learn closer to home, supported by improved transport infrastructure and inclusive schools that foster belonging and opportunity.

Building on existing practice

This is not new territory for district councils, which are already embedded within the delivery of support for vulnerable residents and have a strong on-the-ground presence. This is instrumental to promoting and enabling the independence and wellbeing of local populations.¹¹ Far from all the relevant knowledge sitting in the existing upper tier authority, Oxfordshire's District Councils are well versed in being the first point of contact for individuals requiring support through their housing, benefits and neighbourhood teams.

Oxford City Council's Home Improvement Agency exemplifies this, as it has enabled residents to remain at home through accessing grants for adaptations – this includes creating safer home environments for individuals with dementia and those experiencing frailty, preventing hospital admissions or transfer to care homes.

District Councils are also deeply embedded within communities and core to prevention delivery, including providing support for individuals who fall below statutory and social care thresholds. Oxford City Council worked in close partnership with Oxfordshire County Council to deliver Blackbird Leys Youth Hub which provides support services and activities for young people, driving positive outcomes including improved mental and physical wellbeing, and skills for life and work.

Districts also lead delivery of projects with system partners that tackle housing and homelessness, possessing local knowledge and invaluable data on issues that people and organisations face day-to-day to design the most effective and evidence-based solutions. Oxford City Council is a leader in this area, partnering with third sector organisations including Crisis to deliver innovations like Built for Zero to enable communities to end homelessness for specific homeless populations.

3UA will result in councils that are effective stewards and convenors for their areas and are able to effectively deliver locally focused services, connecting residents to support that ensures they are healthier, resilient and able to live quality lives independent of support from the local authority and wider public sector. In contrast to the 1UA and 2UA proposals, 3UA creates smaller more responsive organisations can tailor their services to better meet the need of their residents based on local demography and demand requirements.

Research literature shows that that District councils' smaller geographic scale, deep community connections and extensive local data lead to the development of bespoke services that improve

¹¹ The power of prevention and place in new unitary councils

health and quality of life.¹² It is precisely these strengths that will be built upon to ensure residents can stay independently at home for as long as possible, benefit from stable employment opportunities and access assets and green spaces that help to build strong community networks and boost overall wellbeing.

Early Intervention and Prevention

The three unitary model will improve residents' quality of life through adopting a place-based approach to reform. The early intervention and prevention offer will be delivered via local hubs that reflect varying needs of local communities across the three unitary authorities. This will ensure that all residents receive support even when they do not meet the thresholds of statutory services. National research highlights place-based approaches as being core to reducing demand and enabling effective service delivery – evidencing that scale is not the key determinant of positive resident outcomes, with no performance improvement across critical services including adult social care for a population size over 500,000.¹³ This principle is also seen across Children's Social Care as 58% of existing outstanding Children's Social Care authorities have a population of under 500,000, increasing to 78% if London boroughs are included.

At the heart of reform will be a deep understanding of local identity and the voice of residents, each of whom will have a different definition of what quality of life means for them. For some this will mean reduced travel time to access the right education and learning opportunities to develop their skills. For others it is about receiving respite from caring by funding and providing the right types of services so they can maintain their wellbeing. Resident engagement will be a key design principle within service delivery across the three unitary authorities, ensuring everyone can benefit equally from council-led initiatives.

Oxfordshire's ambition for inclusive growth and planning will be aligned to the vision for place-based prevention, ensuring residents are empowered through seamlessly integrated services, delivered closer to home. This vision is aligned to UK Government's agenda on developing neighbourhood health services to reduce health inequalities as part of the wider 10-year Health Plan for England.

4.4 Identity

Oxfordshire is far from homogeneous, and this is reflected in the very different histories and distinct characteristics of its three proposed unitary authorities: Greater Oxford, Northern Oxfordshire, and Ridgeway. This demographic distinctiveness, coupled with a clearly stated public preference for smaller local authorities closer to the people they serve, underlines the rationale for three separate unitary councils.

While initially settled in Saxon times, Oxford expanded around the founding of its university – the first in the English-speaking world. Since then, it has enjoyed 1,000 years of local government and has held City status for nearly 500 years, serving briefly as England's Royalist capital during the Civil War.

Quite separate for 1,000 years prior to the 1974 local government reorganisation, much of what is currently southern Oxfordshire and all of the Vale of White Horse were part of Berkshire. The

¹² Collaborate, The Bigger You Go the Less You Know for Test Valley

¹³ Bigger is not better: the evidenced case for keeping 'local' government

Ridgeway path that connects this area is Britain's oldest road, more than 5,000 years old and runs east-west – not to Oxford - threading its way between the market towns of Wallingford, Wantage, Newbury and Hungerford.

Banbury also long predates Oxford, having been settled since the Iron Age in an area that was latterly shaped by the Fosse Way and the Salt Way. It has always formed the natural centre of northern Oxfordshire, just as Witney and its specialised traditional industries like tweed and blanket making and the Cotswolds Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty characterise western Oxfordshire.

On the ground public engagement on LGR by Oxford City Council officers and members, as well as our 1,580-response survey revealed just how different identities are across the Oxfordshire and West Berkshire geography. For most people across the county, Oxford does not define Oxfordshire and - other than residents of the city and its hinterland - they describe their identities in other ways.

Three unitary councils covering respectively northern and western Oxfordshire, the city of Oxford and central Oxfordshire, and the linked areas that were historically connected with Berkshire, will much better reflect the true identities of these areas than lumping them together.

Distinct priorities and needs

Over recent years, several detailed studies and plans have been undertaken by city and district councils in recent years to better understand residents' vision, priorities and needs for the different places in which they live. These studies include: Oxford2050 Vision, West Oxfordshire Market Towns study, Banbury Vision 2050, Bicester Healthy New Town study, South & Vale Draft Local Plan 2041 and West Berkshire Local Plan 2041.¹⁴ Taken together, these show that pride of place and the aspirations of local residents reveal themselves in very different ways in across the wider geography.

Greater Oxford

Oxford stands out from the rest of the county. Its population is younger, much more diverse, and more densely housed. Nearly a quarter of its residents are students, including many postgraduates, and consequently it has fewer families with children, and most people rent their accommodation.

This young, diverse, highly qualified and very mobile population identifies directly with the opportunities brought through growth. The Oxford2050 Vision – produced with the input of the city's residents and businesses - set an aspiration that "Oxford's population will continue to grow over the next thirty years as people are drawn to live, work and study in our attractive, vibrant and thriving city." A recurring theme of the vision is the desire for more affordable housing, homes near jobs, and protection for renters.

Over the decades Oxford, Botley, Kidlington and Kennington and Sandford-on-Thames have become a near contiguous conurbation, despite spanning four separate district council areas. The hamlet of Shotover, which sits in South Oxfordshire can only be accessed by road through Oxford itself.

¹⁴ [Oxford 2050 Vision](#), [West Oxfordshire Market Towns study](#), [Banbury Vision 2050](#), [Bicester Healthy New Town study](#), [South and Vale Draft Local Plan 2041](#), [West Berkshire Local Plan 2041](#)

This proximity brings people together and unsurprisingly, while some residents attending drop-in engagement sessions on LGR in Botley, Kidlington and Kennington highlighted the distinctive nature of these parishes, many acknowledged the areas they lived already felt like part of Oxford and welcomed an opportunity to have a say in how the city is run.

While Wheatley and Berinsfield are separated from the city, most of their residents have regular work, family or leisure connections with the city and regularly use its services including retail, art and health facilities. All struggle with the chronic congestion in and around Oxford.

Greater Oxford would be a completely new authority, belonging as much to places like Wheatley, Berinsfield and Kidlington as to Oxford. The services will be provided across the whole area and for the first time in 50 years local residents would have more control over Oxford's transport. The proposals would provide additional bus services to villages around the city by extending existing routes. They will also see a redoubled focus on tackling the stark inequalities that are seen in some Oxford suburbs like Blackbird Leys and Rose Hill, as well as Berinsfield – all of which face long-standing challenges including low income, long-term unemployment, and poor health.

Places within the city itself still retain their distinct identities and even continue with a village identity as in Iffley Village and Old Marston. There is real local identity that differs between places like Barton and Jericho, or Blackbird Leys and Wheatley and our proposal aims to support community engagement and empowerment at the neighbourhood level across all areas of Greater Oxford, including the creation of Neighbourhood Area Committees.

Graphics will follow to capture the following stats:

As with many prosperous areas, Greater Oxford experiences stark inequalities. While overall health outcomes are better than the England average, there is a 10-year gap in male life expectancy between different areas.¹⁵ Wealthy wards within Oxford, like Jericho, Marston, and Summertown are among the least deprived in the country, but they exist alongside areas such as Blackbird Leys and Rose Hill, which . In other more deprived parts of Greater Oxford such as Berinsfield, 21% of children live in absolute poverty, more than double the county average (10%)¹⁶ and 26% of households claim Universal Credit, compared to 16% in Oxfordshire as a whole.¹⁷

The average age in Oxford is 31 years.¹⁸, the youngest of any settlement across the three areas, compared to averages in the 40s elsewhere. Oxford is the fifth most densely populated district in the South East of England, and Greater Oxford is the most densely populated of the three unitary authorities, with an estimated 585 residents per square kilometre¹⁹.

Young adults aged 15–24 years, make up 19% of Greater Oxford's population, which is above the national average of 12%²⁰. This is largely due to the student and postgraduate population in Oxford, where nearly a quarter (23%) of residents fall in this age group. These factors, combined with the

¹⁵ Office for National Statistics. Life Expectancy tables

¹⁶ Children aged 0-19 years old living in absolute low income families, DWP 2024

¹⁷ Total households on universal credit, DWP, May 2025

¹⁸ Census 2021.

¹⁹ Census 2021.

²⁰ ONS mid-year population estimates 2022

area's thriving knowledge economy, contribute to Greater Oxford being one of the most highly educated areas in England: 47% of residents hold qualifications at Level 4 or above, compared to 42% across Oxfordshire and 34% nationally²¹,.

As a result of its younger profile, Greater Oxford has the lowest proportion of older residents, with just 15% of the population aged 65 or over; lower than England (19%), Northern Oxfordshire (19%) and Ridgeway (20%)²²,. Conversely, it also has the smallest proportion of children under 15 (15%) of the three unitary authorities, which compares to 17% in Northern Oxfordshire and 19% in Ridgeway²³,.

Housing tenure reflects this demographic profile. Only 56% of residents in Greater Oxford own their home (with or without a mortgage), compared to 65% across Oxfordshire. Private renting is more common, with 27% of households renting privately or living rent-free, compared to 20% countywide. Greater Oxford also has higher rates of social renting (17% vs 15% countywide), rising to 21% in Oxford and 37% in Berinsfield, which lies in the south of the Greater Oxford area²⁴,.

Of the three unitary authorities, house prices are highest in Greater Oxford, averaging £550,800²⁵. This is driven largely by Oxford's average of £573,300, making it the least affordable of the three unitary authorities.

Greater Oxford is the most ethnically diverse part of Oxfordshire. Only 76% of residents identify as White, compared to 87% countywide. The proportion of Asian, Asian British or Asian Welsh residents is 13%, more than double the county average (6%). Just 70% of Greater Oxford residents were born in the UK, compared to 83% across England, 86% in Northern Oxfordshire, and 88% in Ridgeway.²⁶

Northern Oxfordshire

Northern Oxfordshire includes towns such as Banbury, Bicester, Chipping Norton, Witney, and Woodstock. These are proud, characterful, and community-driven places — rooted in heritage and independence – and all are growing rapidly. Amongst the market towns the area is a mix of rural villages across, and it is the least densely populated of the three unitary authority areas at 222 residents per square kilometre, about half the national average.

Northern Oxfordshire has often looked outwards rather than to the centre of the county, with West Oxfordshire District closely linked with Gloucestershire through its joint ownership interest in Publica and Ubico the two Teckal companies that provide many public services which it jointly owns. Cherwell District had a Section 113 formal joint working arrangement with South Northants up to the "forced divorce" in 2019 caused by Northamptonshire's own local government reorganisation.

Many longstanding residents identify with their locale - the Cotswolds or the Cherwell Valley. Yet, the area has many newer residents in more recent or still emerging settlements such as Carterton,

²¹ Census 2021

²² ONS mid-year population estimates 2022

²³ ONS mid-year population estimates 2022

²⁴ All tenure figures are from Census 2021

²⁵ Land registry data; September 2024 to August 2025

²⁶ Census 2021

Graven Hill and Heyford Park. There is also a wide variation across the area in terms of diversity and affluence between rural communities to more urban centres like Banbury and Bicester.

As the West Oxfordshire Market Towns study shows, many residents feel disconnected from strategic decisions and want more local voice, investment, and care in shaping their future. Residents attending the LGR drop-in event in Banbury were fiercely proud of their hometown and were equally clear they didn't wish decisions on its future to be taken in Oxford.

These characteristics call for a place-based and locally responsive approach. While much of the area is relatively affluent, inequalities persist, particularly in the more urban centres such as Banbury. A joined-up system that brings together housing, education, health, and infrastructure will be essential. Tailored solutions for isolated rural communities, older residents, and disadvantaged towns must be informed by the voices of residents.

Graphics will follow to capture the following stats:

Residents in the Northern Oxfordshire area are generally older than Greater Oxford, with most towns having average ages in the 40s. Conversely, Northern Oxfordshire has the highest proportion of children under the age of five (6%), and 19% of the population are under 15, higher than Greater Oxford (15%) but similar to Ridgeway (19%)²⁷.

Home ownership is high, with 67% of residents owning their homes. This is above the Oxfordshire average (65%) and higher than Greater Oxford (56%). Northern Oxfordshire also has the highest proportion of people living in houses (88%) of the three unitary authorities. This compares to the England average of 77%²⁸.

Towns such as Banbury and Carterton face high levels of deprivation, lower qualification levels, and significant private renting. Banbury has three areas ranked among the 20% most deprived in England²⁹. By contrast, places like Woodstock, Burford, and Standlake are among the least deprived.

Child poverty is higher in Northern Oxfordshire than Ridgeway, with 10.5% of children living in absolute poverty, compared to 8.5% in Ridgeway, although both have lower child poverty rates than Greater Oxford at 11%. Within the Northern Oxfordshire area, Banbury has child poverty rates as high as 17%, compared to just 6% in Woodstock³⁰.

Just over 36% of residents who are aged 16 and older, have level 4 and above qualifications. Whilst this is the lowest of the three unitary authorities, it is higher than the England average of 34%. Additionally, 15% of adults in Northern Oxfordshire have no qualifications, the highest proportion of the three areas but lower than the country average of 18%³¹.

Ethnic diversity is lower than Greater Oxford, with 91% of residents identifying as White, compared to 75% in Greater Oxford and 87% countywide. The largest ethnic minority group is Asian (4%), though

²⁷ ONS mid year population estimates 2022

²⁸ Census 2021

²⁹ Indices of Multiple Deprivation 2025.

³⁰ Children aged 0-19 years old living in absolute low income families, DWP 2024

³¹ Census 2021.

this remains below the Oxfordshire average (6%)³². Greater diversity exists in towns such as Banbury and Bicester.

Ridgeway

The Ridgeway area stretches from the outskirts of Reading across the hills of the North Wessex Downs and includes a mix of towns, villages, and rural communities. Larger settlements include Abingdon, Didcot, Henley and Newbury; market towns such as Wantage and Wallingford; and smaller villages across West Berkshire, South Oxfordshire, and the Vale of White Horse.

While some towns such as Abingdon, Didcot, and Henley act as commuter and economic hubs with strong rail and road links that connect via Reading to London, much of Ridgeway is rural, with lower-density settlements and open countryside.

As already highlighted, these areas were connected as part of Berkshire for centuries. Amateur football teams in southern Oxfordshire still compete in the Berkshire League. Some older residents, along with the campaigning group CountyWatch still hold allegiances to Berkshire and describe their transfer into Oxfordshire as ‘cultural vandalism’.³³

Across South Oxfordshire, the Vale of White Horse and West Berkshire, local identity is defined by the meeting of heritage, landscape and community stewardship — and the shared ambition is to manage change so that new growth belongs to place rather than replacing it.

The area’s large geographic spread and varied settlement types mean services must be tailored to a wide range of needs. Coordinating transport, health, housing, and education at a local level will be vital to ensuring equity. Engaging directly with communities, particularly in areas facing disadvantage, will help shape responsive and inclusive services across Ridgeway’s social and geographic landscape.

The longstanding links across this geography is reflected in the strong local political support for the creation of a Ridgeway unitary authority. In putting forward their two unitary Ridgeway proposal councils in West Berkshire, South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse highlight the strong demographic and economic similarities and significant historic ties. The only significant difference with the three unitary Ridgeway proposal is the line of its northern boundary with Oxford, with Greater Oxford taking in around 40,000 residents close to the city.

Graphics will follow to capture the following stats:

Residents in Ridgeway are older on average than Greater Oxford, with most settlements having average ages in the 40s. It has the highest proportion of people aged 65 and over, of the three unitary areas (20%), compared to 19% in Northern Oxfordshire and 15% in Greater Oxford. However, Ridgeway also has the highest proportion of children under 15 (19%)³⁴, pointing to a mixed-age population with intergenerational needs.

³² Census 2021.

³³ [Berkshire and Oxfordshire boundary debate still rages 50 years on, BBC News 2025](#)

³⁴ ONS mid year population estimates 2022

Home ownership is highest in Ridgeway, with 69% of households owning their home outright or with a mortgage. This is above both Northern Oxfordshire (67%) and Greater Oxford (56%). Only 16% of households rent privately (compared to 27% in Greater Oxford), and social renting is also lower, at 14%, versus 17%³⁵ in Greater Oxford.

Ridgeway is the least deprived of the three areas, with a lower overall Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) score³⁶. It has the highest proportion of residents who fall in social grade AB (35%)³⁷, and the lowest level of children in absolute poverty overall (8.5%)³⁸ of the three unitary authorities.

However, as is the case for both Greater Oxford and Northern Oxfordshire, Ridgeway is not an homogeneous area. While child poverty rates are low overall (around 5% in many areas within Ridgeway), there are places where poverty levels are much higher. In parts of Abingdon, Didcot, and Calcot for example, up to 16% of children live in absolute poverty³⁹.

Ridgeway is the least ethnically diverse of the three unitary areas. Around 92% of residents identify as White, compared to 87% countywide and 75% in Greater Oxford. The largest ethnic minority group is Asian, making up 3% of the population. However, more diverse populations exist in Didcot and Abingdon, where 80% of residents identify as White⁴⁰.

4.5 Voice

A New Democratic Vision for Oxfordshire

This proposal's overarching ambition is to establish the right powers, at the right scale, to deliver real change for our communities and places, leading to services and places designed with and for residents. In our LGR survey of 1,580 residents across Oxfordshire and West Berkshire, 69% agreed that: *councils are most effective when they are smaller and closer to the people they serve, enabling them to respond and adapt more easily to local needs.*

The proposed three unitary model achieves this by empowering Oxfordshire's towns and villages to speak strongly for their residents and businesses, at a scale and geography that more closely and accurately represents their interests. The model does the same for Oxford, where effective city-level governance is essential to managing the conurbation, and ensuring decision can be taken that prioritise its needs and maximises its growth potential. By creating an appropriately sized authority, communities can better hold politicians to account.

However, achieving real change is about more than getting the scale right. The success of the new authorities will also depend on their structure, size, and how effectively they engage and collaborate, formally and informally, with communities and partners. Our approach focuses on fostering strong strategic leadership, ensuring clear democratic accountability, and strengthening the community

³⁵ Census 2021.

³⁶ Indices of Multiple Deprivation 2025.

³⁷ Census 2021.

³⁸ Children aged 0-19 years old living in absolute low income families, DWP 2024

³⁹ Children aged 0-19 years old living in absolute low income families, DWP 2024

⁴⁰ Census 2021.

leadership role of local government. Together, these principles will ensure that Oxfordshire's future governance is firmly rooted in the communities it serves.

Effective decision making

With unitary powers and responsibilities, each authority can make impactful decisions that shape its area in line with local, regional, and national priorities. This approach aligns with a coherent geographic structure that maintains clear rural–urban distinctions, ensuring that the interests of cities and the countryside are not set in opposition. Realising this potential, however, depends on a governance framework that enables effective and streamlined decision-making. We therefore propose a modern constitution and tailored support for each authority, establishing proportionate governance requirements so that decisions are not mired in red tape and councillors can focus on delivery.

Larger unitary structures at a county level, or a two unitary division, would see a continuation of the decades old dynamic that has seen the interests of city and rural areas represented together in a vehicle which is unable to effectively speak for either, frustrating the ability of all Oxfordshire's places to reach their full potential.

Clear accountability and responsibilities

The current two-tier system can be confusing, leaving many residents uncertain about who is responsible for their services. Our proposal replaces this complexity with clear, single-point accountability.

With unambiguous responsibility, councillors will become more visible, influential, and effective advocates for their communities. Each new authority will be designed for decisive leadership, balanced by robust, transparent scrutiny and enhanced support for elected members. Together, these changes will create a system that can act with clarity and confidence, while ensuring decisions are well-considered and responsive to the needs of local communities.

Unlike the 2UA and 1UA options, the place-based scale of the 3UAs will also ensure the councils are accountable to their populations at the ballot box. As an alternative to this, Oxford's population would represent 22% of the wider 1UA population, meaning those making the decisions for the city, will not be as accountable to those that live there.

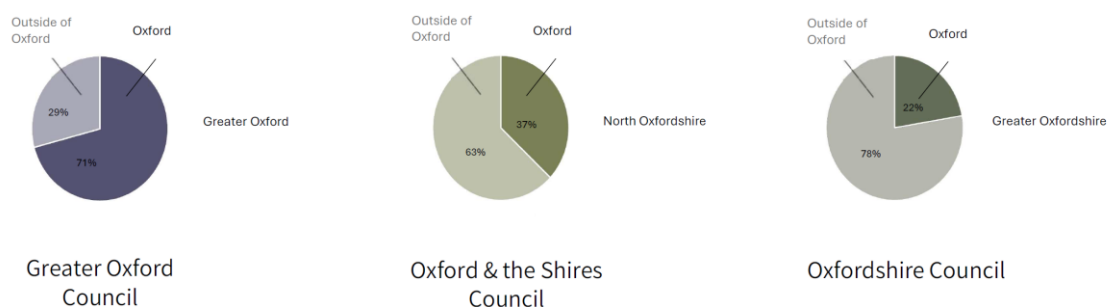


Fig 4.1: Proportion of Oxford population within proposed authority for each proposed option

Empowering Communities Through Genuine Localism

True localism moves beyond the council chamber to bring residents into the very heart of decision-making. We will establish active, formal structures for neighbourhood engagement, centred on new Neighbourhood Area Committees (NACs), in line with central government guidance and reinforced by the *Centre for Governance and Scrutiny Report* commissioned by Oxfordshire County Council.

These will grant communities a direct voice in contributing to and shaping priorities, real influence over decisions, and stewardship of local budgets. They start from the principle that people are experts in their own lives, creating spaces where residents, community groups, and local institutions collaborate as equal partners to co-produce outcomes, ensuring that local insight remains a central pillar of democratic governance. We also understand this approach as a means of building community capacity in its own right: strengthening the networks, confidence, and skills that underpin resilient neighbourhoods, and forming a foundation for wider, preventative, community-based service provision.

This model builds on the strong networks and relationships that already exist across local government and the wider system, while giving ward councillors clearer ways to champion the communities they represent. We will ensure full the NACs are fully coterminous with the planned Health Neighbourhoods set out in the NHS 10-year Plan. This hyper-local focus and voice, alongside the place-based scale of the 3UAs will create a local governance system that works best with the new MSA.

This aligns with the direction set out in the *English Devolution and Community Empowerment Bill*, embedding neighbourhood empowerment and accountability at the core of the new unitary authorities.

Devolution

Following the publication of the English Devolution White Paper in December 2024, devolution discussions are progressing positively, with full support for Oxfordshire and Berkshire as the core of a new Mayoral Strategic Authority. The area has not been placed on the Devolution Priority Programme (DPP) for 2026, but discussions continue to work towards a proposal for the Mayoral Strategic Authority (MSA). The specific boundaries, timelines and priorities for the proposed MSA have not yet been confirmed, but it is anticipated the MSA will vest in 2028 at the same time as the new unitaries.

There are clear advantages to the three unitary authorities model as part of the developing MSA and to ensure that it appropriately works towards its strategic priorities for the wider region while representing the distinct communities of Oxfordshire.

The three unitary authorities approach to LGR will provide multiple constituent authorities built on strong engagement and local democracy models to support the Mayoral Strategic Authority in delivering across the region. The three unitary authorities will provide a balance of three voices for Oxfordshire, representing distinct places within the county. It ensures that the population of Oxford and its specific urban strengths and challenges can be suitably represented at this level alongside the individual representation of the other main economic centres – Reading, Bracknell, Slough and Swindon (dependant on final Government decisions on the make up of the MSA) – but without overpowering the different priorities of the rural populations of the wider Oxfordshire.

Strategic planning with local delivery

A Mayoral Strategic Authority across the wider region will operate across multi-unitary authorities, taking on functions which require a wider strategic regional perspective. This includes management of the growth plan and associated place funding, managing the integrated settlement and investment fund. It will also take on the strategic elements of spatial planning which require work at this level, such as housing, skills, public safety, protecting the environment and tackling climate change, inward investment, economic development and regeneration, and health, wellbeing and public service reform. It will also be responsible for strategic transport planning and delivery.

As such, the role of the Mayoral Combined Authority will allow unitary authorities to focus on local service delivery. They will draw on their deep understanding of local communities' strengths and the support they need to thrive – particularly when those unitary authorities are structured around their distinct communities. By collaborating on joint initiatives and neighbourhood-led schemes, unitary authorities can build on their connections to place and drive health and wellbeing benefits which increase the quality of life for the residents they serve.

The strategic nature of MSAs and their implementation across the country has a clear context for LGR and the role of unitary authorities in the national hierarchy. Larger unitary authority proposals, such as 1UA, aim to provide the advantages of working at a strategic level across a sizable area, which risks not being suitably distinct from the MSA's approach and missing the opportunity to create authorities which can focus on their specific place. Working with smaller authorities, such as the three unitary authorities for Oxfordshire, would provide the strengths of place-based unitary authorities alongside the strategic advantages of MSAs. The three unitary authorities approach is therefore the best fit for the new national hierarchy of local government.

The ambitious housing targets of Greater Oxford could be supported by working with the MSA to create one or more Mayoral Development Corporations – or other, similar, vehicles – to assemble land. This will ensure that development benefits and land value are captured and reinvested into needed infrastructure and services for existing and future communities.

Strong decision making in the strategic authority

A three unitary model in Oxfordshire and West Berkshire, balanced with multi-unitary model across the wider MSA area, combines the benefits of strategic regional leadership, local democratic responsiveness and operational resilience.

While the precise boundaries of the new MSA have yet to be confirmed, whichever options for LGR are pursued would significantly streamline the number of councils across the region. This would entail a significant reduction and, as part of that, there will need to be a constructive balance between scale and efficiency and democratic deficit, which will support strong decision-making.

Devolution enables the MSA to take responsibility for strategic infrastructure planning and delivery, ensuring that these are developed around economic functionalities and not county administrative boundaries. Whilst individual authorities will be able to focus on their own activities, the MSA will be able to take strategic oversight and drive the more major infrastructure projects which would support the specific work of each authority.

Coming together as a Thames Valley area under one MSA will foster a shared identity and purpose, supporting civic pride and a stronger leadership to advocate for the region at a national level. Ensuring that this leadership truly represents the constituent communities requires creating the right unitary authorities to make this up. Creating three unitary authorities with strong models for engagement and participatory democracy will mean that the specific communities and priorities within this area are appropriately represented to the MSA, eliminating policy bias towards only urban or rural priorities.

4.6 Future-Fit

3UA will create three councils are financially robust and sustainable from vesting onwards. Our proposal is self-financing and does not require Exceptional Financial Support (EFS) or any central government subsidy to fund the transition. 3UA fully pays back in 4 years, through efficiencies and transformation savings delivered by streamlining seven councils into three. **By year 5 annual net savings of £48.6 million will be delivered.** The financial sustainability of the three unitaries is underpinned by local resources — including reserves and the Flexible Use of Capital Receipts allowances.

The analysis and modelling that underpins our ‘future-fit’ financial assessment of the three unitary councils has been reviewed by Pixel Financial, experts in local government finance and funding provide support to over 160 local authorities.

What sets this proposal apart: A blueprint for modern local government

This proposal lays the foundation for a fit-for-purpose, modern model of governance, one that brings together strategic scale, empowered neighbourhoods and robust shared oversight, enabling all partners to drive growth, while ensuring community perspectives are fully woven into decision-making.

First, it gives Oxford the scale and powers to deliver the homes, jobs, and infrastructure the nation needs. With a governance structure designed to support effective decision-making, the city will have the tools, as well as the space, to appropriately to grow its world-leading knowledge economy whilst protecting access to the county’s cherished countryside. Unlike other models that prioritise consolidation over effectiveness, this approach balances ambition for growth with a firm commitment to place.

Second, it builds authentic localism into the system. Oxford speaks clearly for the city, while towns and villages across Northern Oxfordshire and Ridgeway are empowered to speak for themselves.

The public survey undertaken across the entire Oxfordshire and West Berkshire geography within which more than 60% of the 1,580 responses came from areas outside of Oxford, found most people agreeing that councils were most effective when smaller and closer to the people they serve. An overwhelming majority of people (80%) expressed a view that urban and rural areas often require different approaches to housing, transport, education and skills, and other key council services.

A right-sized approach to unitarisation means that power resides at a distance which is accessible to each community, rather than getting lost in a bigger authority. Through formalised engagement structures, NACs and parish and town councils, communities will be empowered to contribute to and

shape local priorities. Where other models risk blurring or diluting identity, this one reinforces it, ensuring both urban and rural voices remain strong.

Third, it embeds prevention into the fabric of governance. Stable housing, secure incomes, and resilient neighbourhoods provide the strongest foundations for better outcomes in health, wellbeing, and opportunity. By harnessing local insight and strengthening connections with partners through a clear and consistent approach, the system and its governance are designed to co-create solutions with communities rather than impose them from the top down, delivering more effective and efficient results.

Taken together, these principles create a model that is both ambitious and grounded: strategic in scale, local in voice, and preventative in approach. This is not about redrawing boundaries for their own sake but about implementing the right governance at the right geography, from council chamber to community hall.

Clear, efficient, and future proof, our proposal offers Oxfordshire a credible and resilient framework to meet the challenges of the next generation.

Building a future-proof foundation for Oxfordshire

This proposal provides the building blocks for organisations that are truly fit for the future. A system of local government designed around people, place, and prevention. It is rooted in a commitment to sustainable growth that increases prosperity and income for the new councils. It delivers transformed, prevention-focused services that enable residents to live high-quality, independent lives with reduced need for long-term intervention from the council.

This dual focus on economic resilience and improved quality of life ensures that the new councils can deliver services that work today while remaining flexible and financially sustainable for the future. Through strong local leadership and empowered communities, this model will embed pride in place and strengthen local accountability across Oxfordshire.

Financial sustainability through growth and prevention

Detailed analysis of the finances of the seven existing councils, and modelling of transitional and transformational costs and efficiencies has been reviewed by Pixel Financial. It shows our 3UA proposal is self-financing and does **not** require or seek Exceptional Financial Support (EFS) or any central government subsidy to fund the transition. Instead, it is underpinned by local resources — including reserves and the Flexible Use of Capital Receipts allowances. Our proposal fully pays back in 4 years, through efficiencies and transformation savings delivered by streamlining six councils into three. By year 5 annual net savings of £47 million will be delivered.

This is a self-financing proposal that reimagines traditional local government structures to deliver three modern organisations with **prevention at their core and growth as a key outcome**. By leveraging extended boundaries, the new authorities will broaden their council tax and business rate bases, driving stronger revenue generation. At the same time, a focus on prevention will help to curb demand-led costs through more proactive, targeted interventions. By doing this the right way, we will be on a better financial footing for the longer term.

We have reviewed thoroughly the current performance of adult and children's care services across Oxfordshire and West Berkshire with independent advisors, Inner Circle Consultancy. This work has been woven into this report and highlights the potential for significant preventive opportunities that will help to ensure the delivery of better outcomes for individuals in receipt of care and support, as well as more responsive and efficient services.

Our proposals provide a once-in-a-generation opportunity to establish services that are transformed from vesting day, designed to be future fit from the very start. We know costs are increasing both at a unitary level across social care services due to complexity of need, and market pressures.

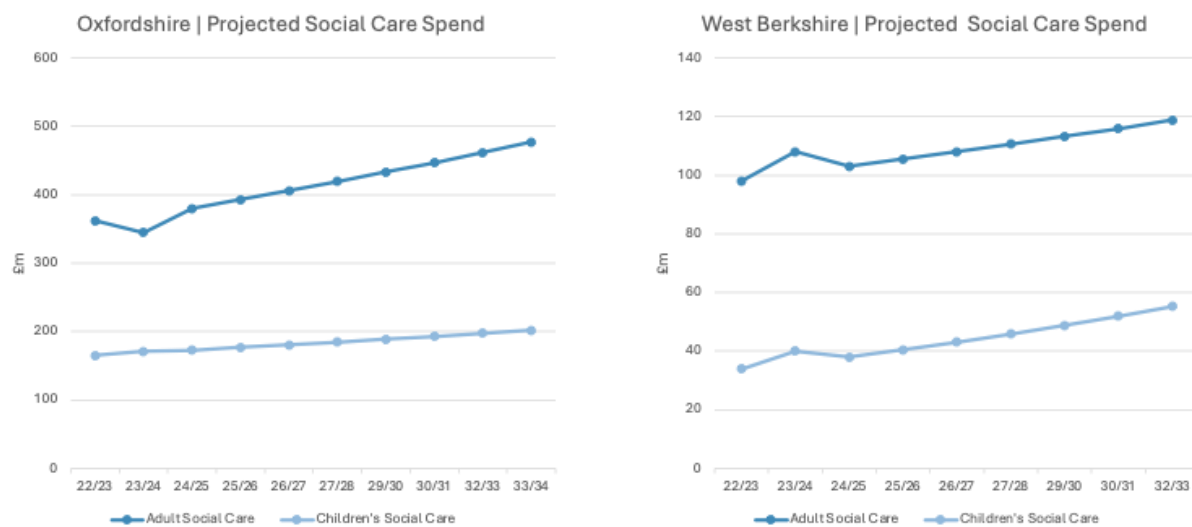


Fig 4.2: Projected Social Care Spend across Oxfordshire and West Berkshire

However, demand pressures are not unique to social care services. Oxford City Council has been recognised nationally as a beacon authority in development programmes which mitigate the rise of temporary accommodation demand and costs, delivering £8.5m in cost avoidance. Nonetheless, the annual pressure of temporary accommodation costs are expected to rise to £5.7m in two years, without further mitigation.

A proactive redesign approach is the key to unlocking both improved outcomes for residents and the financial sustainability required for long-term stability. It provides the foundation for councils that can deliver quality, prevention-led services, while driving growth and reinvesting savings back into their communities.

Building 21st century councils

New operating models for each of the three unitary authorities will deliver services that are fit for a 21st century council, that are efficient, modern, and responsive to local needs. They will prioritise the early resolution of resident queries, fully utilising technology and digital solutions to provide fast, seamless support, while maintaining a strong face-to-face offer for those who need it most. The ability to work at a local level means each authority can be responsive to the priorities of the specific communities they serve.

This future-ready approach will also ensure that the councils can adapt as services evolve and new opportunities arise. Innovative prevention and care services will be designed not only to meet current statutory duties for safe and legal practice, but also to anticipate future reforms and policy shifts.

Services connected to the community

Our transformation will consolidate prevention activity currently dispersed across multiple layers of delivery, enabling councils to streamline processes and embed data-led decision making. This will create a more holistic and efficient approach to prevention, one that avoids future costs by addressing root causes early.

Through community-rooted teams and proactive outreach, the new councils will work with children and families to prevent escalation of needs, reducing reliance on statutory intervention and legal proceedings. The focus of future Children's Services will be on building parental capacity and family resilience, enabling stable, loving family environments that promote permanence.

To address the national SEND challenge, our model will prioritise releasing sites to build specialist provision and strengthen inclusion within mainstream schools. Transformation in this area, underpinned by improved transport infrastructure, will reduce dependence on out-of-county placements and high-cost transport. By developing inclusive mainstream settings and multi-disciplinary teams around the school, we will ensure children and young people with additional needs can thrive, improving outcomes and reducing exclusions. Early intervention will help prevent many children from ever requiring an EHCP.

These community-connected services will all be underpinned by a deep understanding of place. The three unitaries will be smaller, more responsive organisations that reflect and respond to the unique needs of their communities, from the different priorities of families living urban over rural contexts, to the variations in provider markets across more rural footprints and those that are delivered via physical assets. Delivering services in this nuanced way is essential to achieving long-term, sustainable outcomes.

A financially secure, better future

Oxfordshire's future is one of rapid transformation shaped by population growth, economic expansion, and the opportunities created by the Greater Oxford area, but also across all of the 3UAs. The proposed three-unitary model is purpose built for this changing landscape. It combines the resilience and capacity required for growth with the agility to reflect the distinct character and needs of local communities. It fits the new model of national governance by giving local, place-based working which will feed local priorities into the strategic work MSA in a way which will balance the voices of Oxfordshire.

By aligning structure, scale, and local identity, this model will create councils that are future fit, financially secure, and community powered, able to deliver lasting benefits for residents and reinvest in the places they serve. Crucially, the three proposed unitary boundaries are designed to be future-fit and enduring, a structure that will stand the test of time, eliminating the need for further disruptive reorganisations in the years ahead.

4.7 Boundary proposal

The proposed lay-down of boundaries enables three viable unitaries, close to the people they serve, and each with a distinctive identity and profile for future generations. The inclusion of West Berkshire to extend the boundaries of the overall geography fits the legislative framework as a Type C proposal: a single tier that includes adjoining areas.

The redrawing of local government boundaries presents a nationally important opportunity for Oxford as a globally important city that is desperate to grow. The city already spills over its tight boundaries into three neighbouring districts. It attracts international investors keen to seize the opportunities in its knowledge economy. Yet long-standing divisions between the city and rural populations over the appetite for growth have held back the city's potential.

An unmodified three unitaries proposal on existing administrative boundaries would continue the artificial division for the city's communities. The two unitary proposal perpetuates the boundary problems and gives no scope to provide new housing and businesses in some of the most densely populated areas.

The proposal to extend to the Green Belt recognises that this is intrinsically connected to the city, a well understood and accepted geography created directly in relation to the city. Its villages and settlements predominantly look towards Oxford for work, leisure and services, and feel strongly linked to the city's fortunes and influence. Research spin outs provide business opportunities, science parks provide employment, and the population of students and academics shapes the foundational and cultural economy. Beyond the Green Belt, the influence of the university is felt much less, with the rural economy, manufacturing and tourism dominating employment, investment and skills.

The expansion of boundaries to create Greater Oxford absorbs city-adjacent areas of South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse. However, in all other respects our proposal for a Ridgeway unitary spanning across southern Oxfordshire and West Berkshire is the same as that presented in the 2UA proposal. It joins areas of common identity shaped by the historic links of these areas and their similar rural character.

The economic viability of the Northern unitary has been fully considered. This is an area with a good financial foundation, strong opportunities for future growth, and there is good alignment both politically and in the priorities of residents. There are growing economies in Bicester and Banbury, a strong and growing visitor economy, and significant plans for new housing including at Heyford Park, assuring financial resilience for the proposed unitary.

Oxfordshire's population today is in excess of 750,000 and growing - a single authority for the county would be well above the government's 500,000 guide figure. The creation of a Mayoral Strategic Authority removes the rationale for strategic scale unitaries that comprise it. Indeed, the creation of two strategic-scale organisations, at regional and at local government level, would leave a significant gap between residents and meaningful local government accountability.

Other options for the division of the area to preserve city governance have been considered, including a Greater Oxford within a 'doughnut' of an Oxfordshire authority and an authority based along the north-south knowledge spine. However, the proactive work between West Berkshire, Vale

of White Horse and South Oxfordshire to open discussions to coalesce as a unitary created an opportunity for alternative approaches.

The government requirement for better services alongside financial resilience and cost savings formed a key part of our overall approach. Our proposal creates the right size footprint for unitary councils to take a place-based approach to delivering integrated services, delivering transformation and putting a prevention approach at the core of delivery. Where the benefits of scale outweigh local adaptability we propose a shared service approach, such as the NHS joint commissioning fund for Children's Services.

Co-terminosity has been considered: the Oxfordshire Fire & Rescue Service (OFRS) performs well at an Oxfordshire-wide level, but Oxfordshire's police force and ICB both extend beyond our potential geography. The alignment of proposed timing for LGR and the creation of a Thames Valley MSA will enable a single transition for the OFRS, which is already expected to merge with Royal Berkshire Fire & Rescue Service.

Our proposal for boundary change is based on detailed work to ensure that it delivers on the criteria set by government, including making an exceptional case for boundary change. As well as expert analysis of the economic, geographic and demographic case for change, we have engaged widely with residents and stakeholders across the geography. We have shaped our proposal based on the needs of residents, businesses and future generations, to create places with a strong sense of identity, opportunity and accountability.

4.8 Public Engagement

Local government reorganisation in Oxfordshire needs governance that meets today's challenges and tomorrow's ambitions. The three unitary authorities (3UA) proposal delivers modern, efficient, and community-focused governance.

Thousands of residents, businesses, and stakeholders across Oxfordshire, and West Berkshire and regionally shaped this proposal through extensive engagement.

The engagement gave a clear mandate: people want governance that is closer to communities, more responsive, and more accountable. Business and economic partnerships backed the proposal for its ability to simplify planning, strengthen representation, and accelerate decisions.

Introduction and Strategic Context

Oxford City Council has engaged in wide-ranging and inclusive engagement to understand what people across Oxfordshire want from this once in a generation opportunity to reshape how local government is structured, to ensure that our proposal is responding to their priorities.

Engagement has indicated support for the proposal to create three new unitary authorities. There is strong support for a locally responsive option which would deliver more locally tailored services and strengthen local representation. Protection of local identity was noted, especially balancing growth with heritage and environmental priorities and where development could be directed to less sensitive areas.

Stakeholder and public engagement demonstrate support for this strategically sound option that reflects, a clear appetite for more localised governance, improved service responsiveness, and smarter, place-based decision making. The 3UA model achieves this most definitively.

In response to the feedback from engagement, the proposal will protect Oxfordshire's historic and cultural identity and align governance with community boundaries and their local identities. It empowers residents with greater influence over local planning and ensures services are tailored to the distinct needs of urban centres and rural communities.

This section outlines the extensive engagement and activities undertaken by the City Council to support the case for change, ensuring that the voices of residents, stakeholders, and communities were central to the development of the 3UA proposal.

Engagement is guiding how the City Council continues to collaborate as the proposal has evolved and the new unitary authorities are shaped in greater detail. Early and inclusive engagement has built trust and improved the quality of the proposal, reflecting a strong appetite for localised governance that meets community needs.

Stakeholders have consistently emphasised the importance of transparency and co-design in shaping future governance, alongside clear communication about service delivery, cost savings, and democratic accountability. These priorities have helped to embed a more responsive and informed approach.

Detailed information on the engagement activity and results from specific groups is outlined at Appendix D: Engagement Detail.

Oxford City Council has undertaken an extensive, inclusive, and impactful engagement programme across Oxfordshire and West Berkshire. This engagement was facilitated through a variety of channels, such as meetings, online surveys, social media, roundtable discussions, community-based events across Oxfordshire and West Berkshire, and short-form video content. This breadth of engagement ensured a representative and inclusive understanding of public and stakeholder views.

The engagement programme reached thousands of people through multiple channels, including:

- An Oxford Resident Panel survey on the 'Future of local Government for Oxford', with **266 responses**
- A public survey inviting Oxfordshire and West Berkshire residents, businesses and community groups to have their **say on proposals to reorganise local government, with over 1,580 responses, of which 61%** of respondents were from outside of the city.
- **340 residents engaged through 11 drop-in events** across Oxfordshire and one in West Berkshire
- Enhanced community engagement and inclusivity through targeted digital outreach, achieved **more than 2.6million impressions and strong interaction across six platforms, with TikTok boosting youth engagement**
- Engagement with more than **75 stakeholder organisations and statutory bodies**, including health, fire, police and neighbouring local authorities
- Engagement with **11 MPs** across Oxfordshire and Berkshire

- A second Oxford residents panel survey, which included questions on Local Government Reorganisation to the standard annual survey of residents' satisfaction with City Council services
- **35 responses** were received to the City Council survey with local businesses and employers, to gather their views on shaping Local Government Reorganisation in a way that best supports future housing and economic growth in and around Oxfordshire.

Public engagement

Key findings from the main public engagement survey show:

- **69% agree** “councils are most effective when they are smaller and closer to the people they serve, enabling them to respond and adapt more easily to local needs”
- **80% agree** “urban and rural areas often require different approaches to housing, transport, education and skills, and other key council services”
- **88% agree** “councils have an important part to play in supporting the local economy, including through housing, infrastructure and transport policies”

Some survey respondents commented:

Boundaries and Governance Models

“The existing boundaries of Oxford have long been too constrained to allow effective development of a globally important city, whilst protection of genuinely ecologically important sites. The so-called 'Green Belt', and the resulting 'County Towns' development policy, does not do this and has resulted in the major traffic flows into Oxford. The unitaries in the proposed 'single County' and 'two Councils' models seek to perpetuate the problem and are too large and diverse to be effective and democratic. They appear to have been proposed for political reasons.”

Advocacy and Strategic Oversight

“I think that the Greater Oxford model is optimal, enabling the City to be run more effectively as a cohesive whole. This should specifically include increased control over roads and traffic. However, ultimately the introduction of a Strategic Mayoral Authority is more important, as only at large scale can the main issues for the region be addressed successfully.”

“I strongly support the three-unitary model, particularly as it will mean that local, urban voices are not overridden by rural voices. I fear that in a county council unitary, rural funding pressures would come at the expense of investing in Oxford's urban and suburban needs. Oxford City Council's current boundaries mean it is tightly hemmed in with little opportunity to expand. This puts a lot of pressure on transport links, over which the current city council has no control.”

“I prefer the Greater Oxford council model since that will be focused on the housing and transport needs of the city and the nearby communities.”

“I very much welcome this proposal which recognises that Oxford's needs are quite different from much of rural Oxfordshire. Including some of the nearby urban areas outside the city's current boundary within a new Greater Oxford council would recognise their similar needs for affordable housing, good transport infrastructure and a system of education and training to provide staffing for a thriving local economy.”

A three unitary model to address diverse and local needs

“Three unitaries will offer local government most tailored to the particular needs of the different areas served. A single unitary is too large and too distant from the public. The track record for service delivery by Oxfordshire County Council - and many large local authorities such as Birmingham - is not great. A one-size fits all approach doesn't work with such diverse populations.”

“As a former County Cllr, I like the 3 unitary model. The needs of Oxford and surrounding areas are very different to the rest of the County and there is a cultural difference too. So it's good to split Greater Oxford from the rest of the County.”

“Three unitary model sounds like it will best support the people who need it.”

“Of the three proposed models, it's the one I prefer. I think Transport in Oxford, in particular, should be the responsibility of a smaller urban council and not the current county council, whose rural members make decisions about urban areas that don't affect them.”

“I feel a three unitary model is the most appropriate given the huge gulf in needs between Oxford city and rural Oxfordshire.”

“I like this proposal. Our local needs in the Ridgeway area (Faringdon and Wantage) are often ignored by County Council and have resulted in some heinous examples of local authority mismanagement and neglect of the transport infrastructure.”

“I think the 3 unitary model is the best proposed. The others are too big and mix urban and rural areas with different priorities.”

“This option seems to me to be the most effective at balancing the need to reduce the complexity of local government and providing a council that can accurately and effectively respond to the needs of the people it serves.”

This feedback aligns directly with the foundation principles of the Council's three unitary proposal.

Two additional questions were asked in the Councils annual Residents Survey 2025 in relation to Local Government Reorganisation:

- The majority of residents **(62%) agree** that councils are most effective when they are smaller and closer to the people they serve, enabling them to respond and adapt more easily to local needs
- **An even bigger majority (72%) agree** that urban and rural areas often require different approaches to housing, transport, education and skills, and other key council services

- **A substantial majority of 90% agree** that the council should prioritise good quality services and responding to local need
- Whilst **levels of agreement (43%) and disagreement (40%) were fairly equal** on the council prioritising cost savings.⁴¹

Business engagement

The City Council engaged with local businesses and employers to gather their views on shaping Local Government Reorganisation in a way that best supports future housing and economic growth in and around Oxfordshire.

Insights from the survey will inform ongoing work to ensure Oxfordshire can meet its housing needs while fostering business growth and sustainable development. The feedback received has helped shape the three-unitary proposal and will continue to guide future planning policies and partnership initiatives across the city and surrounding areas.

35 responses were received to the City Council survey, across the Health, Technology, Engineering, Arts, Entertainment and Recreation, Education, University, Property, Retail and Voluntary sectors.

- **Over 80% of respondents** said being located in or near Oxford is very or extremely important to their business success.
- **Around 68% strongly agree** that Oxford should go beyond government's housing delivery targets.
- **Almost 85% agree** that affordable housing near Oxford is important for business growth.
- **46% favour** building additional homes close to the city, including suitable locations within the Green Belt. (23% would prefer development beyond the Green Belt)
- **Over half (54%) believe** future development should balance new homes with employment space.

The following is some of the feedback examples respondents told the Council:

A commercial stakeholder commented: *"Clever and denser developments close to the city of Oxford that provide opportunities for a diverse range of commercial enterprises, and not just the well funded STEM variety are important in providing and balanced and sustainable community."*

A stakeholder in the entertainment sector said: *"increased commercial development only works if there is the housing development to support it."*

An educational stakeholder said: *"There is a healthy balance to be struck between supporting economic growth and increasing the availability of housing. A thriving economy supports the sustainability of the broader community."*

⁴¹ [Satisfaction with Oxford and Oxford City Council rise but concerns about housing, transport and crime remain, Oxford City Council 2025](#)

A voluntary sector stakeholder stated: *“The Oxford economy seems to be vibrant to me with a major issue being recruitment, retention and pay of staff for the businesses. More, affordable housing might alleviate this somewhat, so providing homes and helping business.”*

A developer said: *“Alongside new homes ambitious targets for employment growth will allow Oxford to better meet its full potential which for so long has been constrained by the tight administrative boundary.”*

A major business said: *“As a major centre for national and international research and development, which is unlikely to change in the long term, it would be shortsighted not to ensure the City can continue to adapt to changes in technology and the need to accommodate high growth companies. A mixed approach also reduces the need to commute and drives services which can be shared with adjoining neighbourhoods.”*

A university stakeholder commented: *“A single consistent focus on City Governance is essential in the 21st Century. We need to move away from governance structures which are a product of history or geography and therefore operate either within a limited, arbitrary boundary (such as the existing City boundary), or alternatively, are so big they encompass towns and rural areas which have different issues or priorities to the running of a modern City.”*

Digital engagement

Through digital engagement, the City Council achieved significant reach and high engagement across six social platforms, connecting with thousands of residents and stakeholders.

- Delivered **32 content pieces** and **11 Facebook events**, driving both online and in-person engagement;
- Targeted communications reached audiences in Oxfordshire and West Berkshire, averaging **2.8 views per person**, with **TikTok generating standout engagement** among 18- to 34-year-olds;
- **2.6m+ impressions** and **38.8k link clicks**;
- **1,650 hours** of video viewed; and
- **8.3k reactions, 2.7k comments, 1.5k shares** and **1.1k saves**.

This digital engagement – considered by the City Council to be significantly broader than the engagement undertaken by the one unitary authority (1UA) or two unitary authority (2UA) proposers – combined extensive visibility with meaningful interaction, leveraging video and shareable content to deliver a precisely targeted strategy that resonated strongly with communities, residents, and stakeholders across Oxfordshire and beyond.

Participation from businesses, the voluntary sector, MPs, parish councils, universities, residents, and community groups responded positively to the increased local representation and engagement this model would offer, while businesses welcomed the potential for economic growth and streamlined services.

Strategic partnerships

Oxford City Council has an established strong network of local and strategic partnerships that underpin its approach to shaping inclusive, world-class services and provision.

Through sustained engagement with local, regional, and sector-wide stakeholders, the Council has for many years actively listened, collaborated, and co-designed solutions that reflect a broad spectrum of perspectives.

These relationships, spanning the city, Oxfordshire, the wider region and networks of similar local authorities have enabled Oxford City Council to draw on external expertise and voices beyond its own boundaries, ensuring informed and shared priorities and collective ambition. The other District Councils and County Council – which together with Oxford City Council will form the new unitaries – have similarly worked collaboratively across many of these shared partnerships.

Key partnerships include the:

- **Oxfordshire Leaders Joint Committee:** the statutory partnership of the six Oxfordshire councils working together to deliver the county's Strategic Vision for sustainable development, coordinating efforts on housing, infrastructure, economy, and climate to secure inclusive growth and net zero by 2050
- **NHS Buckinghamshire, Oxfordshire and West Integrated Care Board - Place Based Partnership:** bringing together health, social care, local authorities, and community partners at a local level to integrate services, reduce health inequalities, and improve outcomes for residents
- **Oxfordshire Health and Wellbeing Board:** the statutory partnership of local government, the NHS, and community representatives that provides strategic leadership to improve health, reduce inequalities, and oversee joint plans and priorities for the county's health and care system supporting integrated health and social care strategies
- **Oxfordshire Health Improvement Board:** a partnership under the Health and Wellbeing Board that works to prevent ill health, reduce health inequalities, and promote wellbeing through coordinated action on priorities like physical activity, healthy eating, mental health, and wider determinants of health
- **Oxfordshire Children's Trust:** assembles public, private, and voluntary sector partners to improve outcomes for children and young people by coordinating strategic planning, promoting integrated services, and ensuring their voices shape decisions
- **Oxfordshire Inclusive Economy Partnership:** which originated from City Council-led initiatives and now operates countywide to tackle inequality and promote opportunity. Uniting businesses, public bodies, education, and community groups to tackle inequality and create a fairer, more inclusive economy across the county.
- **Oxfordshire Zero Carbon Partnership:** which also originated from City Council-led initiatives and now operates bringing together other local authorities, businesses, and institutions to accelerate climate action and achieve a net zero and climate-resilient Oxfordshire by 2050
- **Oxford Strategic Partnership:** integrates public, business, community, and voluntary sector leaders to shape Oxford's future, tackle key challenges, and promote a thriving, inclusive, and sustainable city

- **Fast Growth Cities Group:** aligns Oxford, Cambridge, Milton Keynes, Norwich, Peterborough, and Swindon to champion investment, infrastructure, and devolved powers that unlock their economic potential, drive innovation, and support sustainable growth for the UK economy
- **Oxford Safer Communities Partnership:** a multi-agency collaboration that works to prevent and reduce crime, anti-social behaviour, and community safety risks in Oxford by coordinating local authorities, police, health, and voluntary sector partners
- **Oxford Children and Young People Partnership:** unites public bodies, health, education, police, voluntary sector partners, and young people themselves, to improve wellbeing and life chances for children and young people, ensuring their voices shape services and strategic priorities.

These established partnerships create a platform for integrated action across Oxfordshire and the wider region, with a collaborative infrastructure strengthening the three new unitary councils' ability to respond to complex challenges and deliver outcomes that are inclusive, innovative, and aligned with the long-term vision for Oxfordshire, the region and nationally.

By leveraging these strategic alliances, the new unitaries will continue the existing countywide commitments to partnership led governance and joint capacity to mobilise a wider system for transformative change.

Detailed information on key Oxfordshire local government partnerships is outlined at Appendix D: Engagement Detail.

The Council worked through established partnerships and networks across Oxford, Oxfordshire, and the wider region to ensure the LGR Proposal reflected a shared, informed approach:

Locally, it engaged with the Oxford Strategic Partnership – uniting public, private, and voluntary sector leaders to shape city priorities - and collaborated with the Oxford Economic Growth Partnership, and other county-wide forums to align with growth and investment strategies.

Regionally, the Council drew on its membership of the Fast Growth Cities Group (consisting of Oxford, Cambridge, Milton Keynes, Norwich, Peterborough, and Swindon) and the *Case for Cities* group (consisting of Oxford, Cambridge, Exeter, Gloucester, Ipswich, Reading, Lincoln, Peterborough, Swindon and Norwich).

Feedback from these partnerships refined the proposal by highlighting shared ambitions, identifying challenges, and shaping actions that address local needs while aligning with regional and national priorities.

Transparency in Action – engagement feedback, questions and concerns

We have carefully considered the wide-ranging feedback received through extensive and inclusive engagement across Oxfordshire and West Berkshire. The Council is grateful to everyone who shared their views and have reflected on the key themes, concerns and aspirations raised coming out of engagement.

This proposal has been shaped by meaningful stakeholder input, placing Oxfordshire and West Berkshire voices at the centre of decision making. The Council acknowledge the concerns expressed and, in the section below, outlines how the proposal addresses common questions and concerns.

Topic	Area of concern	How this is addressed in the 3UA Proposal
Population and Sustainability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The proposed 3 unitary authorities are too small to fit the minimum population model None of the authorities will have a big enough population size to make it financially sustainable 	<p>Government has stated that authorities will be able to make the case for Unitaries of less than 500,000 population - this is guidance not a hard floor</p> <p>The three unitaries will be median in size for English unitary councils at outset and top third in size by 2040.</p> <p>Balance sheet analysis shows that all three councils fully meet government criteria on financial sustainability, with strong balance sheets and significant future growth benefits which underline financial sustainability and resilience of the three unitary councils.</p>
Service Delivery and Capacity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Oxford City Council has no experience delivering key services like adult social care, SEND, and education. What are the set-up and ongoing costs for services in three unitary authorities? Concerns about service continuity during transition 	<p>The three new unitary councils will incorporate two existing social care and SEND services. Service leadership will be recruited to oversee the safe, legal and innovative delivery of those services and the vast majority of people delivering the services in the new councils will be the same people already doing so today.</p> <p>Quality assurance will be a core part of the service delivery, and the quality of the service will be externally validated by Ofsted and CQC.</p> <p>The set-up and ongoing costs for services are set out in detail in 5.6 Transition Costs.</p> <p>The Implementation plan across section 7 covers how services will be delivered across the transition period</p>
Financial Concerns	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Future council tax levels a three unitaries authority model will not make the savings required 	<p>All three LGR proposals will involve council tax harmonisation. Future arrangements for Council Tax is described in the Council Tax section of Finance (5.9). It should be noted that there are no decisions or recommendations here and at this stage the proposal sets out the options.</p>

- Will savings from LGR be absorbed in existing debt
- There are no current concerns over debt levels or assets which are not performing as expected. Therefore, savings would not be absorbed in existing debt. This is noted in Stranded Debt section of Finance (5.5)

The proposal delivers significant Transformation Savings Finance section (5.7)

Governance and Representation

- Parish Councils may be bypassed or lose status
 - Ward boundary changes and community connections will be disrupted
 - The balance between efficiency and effective representation, and the preservation of local identity
- Parish Councils will retain their importance and have a crucial role to play in connecting the new structure with the community, set out in 6.3 Council Size and Structure.
- The proposal talks consistently (particularly in 3.4 Voice) about building on existing structures, including parish councils.
- Where possible, existing administrative boundaries have been retained. Where the unitary authorities have required new boundaries, the building blocks of these proposed changes are based on parish councils to preserve local community identity.
- The creation of three unitaries responds to a desire for local decision-making. This means that the Northern Oxfordshire and Ridgeway unitaries can both respond to their own needs in the best ways for them, and likewise Greater Oxford.

Identity and Community Cohesion

- Local areas within the proposed new boundaries have distinct identities not aligned with Oxford City
 - Loss of community identity and character
- Extended boundaries will work in a place-based way and the Greater Oxford council will ensure that these are considered as their own places in their context around the outside of Oxford, strengthening the transport links to enable people to get the advantages of proximity to Oxford while keeping their identity as smaller, suburban/rural settlements.
- By creating a single Greater Oxford unitary rather than combining with Oxford and the Shires these communities can have their voices heard better as a more distinct part of the population.

Green Belt and Environmental Protection	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Development in the Green Belt • Urban sprawl threatens the countryside, wildlife, and biodiversity 	<p>Only 2.6% of the green belt is proposed for release, as set out in 4.2 Homes. Through targeted land value capture, this limited release enables investment in the wider green belt, enhancing its ecological and community value.</p> <p>This approach could support initiatives such as expanding Shotover Country Park or advancing the Berks, Bucks and Oxon Wildlife Trust’s vision to connect the habitats of Otmoor and Bernwood (outlined in 4.2 Homes). By improving access and biodiversity, the remaining green belt becomes more meaningful and beneficial for residents’ health and wellbeing.</p> <p>Focusing development at density in small areas near Oxford reduces pressure on more rural locations, reduces overall land take for new housing, reduces commuter journeys and helps protect the broader countryside.</p>
Housing and Development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Overdevelopment and misuse of land • the need for more affordable and social housing • a focus on office, laboratory and commercial development over housing 	<p>Oxford’s housing targets include a substantial proportion of affordable homes, as detailed in 4.2 Homes. The proposal demonstrates a clear ability to meet these targets in line with local needs.</p> <p>By strategically releasing small areas of green belt land, place-based planning can ensure land is used optimally - supporting housing delivery as well as providing much needed commercial space to unlock economic growth.</p>
Transport and Infrastructure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Traffic congestion and inadequate transport infrastructure • Current infrastructure capacity may be insufficient to support the scale of proposed growth • Transport and connectivity, especially in rural and outlying areas 	<p>The proposal concentrates development around existing urban areas, enabling stronger connections to active travel routes and public transport. Concentrating new development beyond the Green Belt would lead to more commuting.</p> <p>Housing and transport planning within single authorities ensures a coordinated, place-based approach that reflects local needs (Homes 4.2). This proposal supports local area energy planning and aligns with the wider ambitions of the MSA. Ridgeway is an energy powerhouse</p>

	<p>and the strong networks there can be used to ensure robust planning to meet needs.</p> <p>Agglomeration directly supports the viability of public transport services. By engaging communities directly, the proposal allows for tailored transport solutions and locally supported initiatives, ensuring infrastructure is designed with residents in mind (TOM for Place).</p>
<p>Strategic Planning and Structure</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Fragmentation and disaggregation of services 	<p>As outlined in Table 7.1, the Council will map critical services and implement continuity plans to ensure a smooth transition. Prior to vesting day, accurate and complete data will be securely transferred to the appropriate unitary authority to support the safe and lawful continuation of services and minimise disruption.</p> <p>While shared services may be considered where appropriate, most services will be duplicated across the three authorities to reflect local priorities. The cost of duplication is expected to be offset by long-term savings achieved through reduced demand and more effective, place-based delivery.</p> <p>Disaggregation plans are informed by best practice from previous local government reforms and the establishment of new authorities.</p>

Prosperity

Businesses and developers welcomed the growth potential, streamlined services, and opportunities for economic development. SMEs expressed interest in equitable service provision and local accountability. Residents called for better transport links, including bus and rail services, particularly in rural areas.

Oxford City Council's longstanding leadership that has led to a decision to reopen the Cowley Branch Line demonstrates how local engagement drives real solutions - connecting deprived communities, easing congestion, and unlocking growth.

Although not the transport authority, the City Council's leadership on this issue that was so important for our place in terms of the economy and housing meant that in the absence of actions from the transport authority, the City Council stepped in and delivered a scheme with investment from the private sector and national government support.

By working directly with residents and partners (including with Oxfordshire County Council, ARC Oxford, The Oxford Science Park, and the Ellison Institute of Technology), the City Council is already addressing key issues like traffic and access. This targeted, place-based approach supports inclusive prosperity and demonstrates the value of retaining strong local governance.

Homes

There was strong support for building more genuinely affordable housing in the right places, with affordability and access to jobs being key priorities. People were concerned that the current infrastructure can't support the growth outside of Oxford's immediate hinterland, so the proposal focuses housing growth in areas adjacent to Oxford city. These locations are better positioned to support new development through existing and planned transport links, services, and facilities. This approach enables Northern Oxfordshire and Ridgeway to concentrate on meeting their own housing needs under the new Standard Method, while safeguarding rural character and limiting development on open countryside.

Quality of Life

The proposal is designed to enhance quality of life for residents by prioritising the delivery of high-quality public services. Engagement findings indicate that 90% of residents prioritise service quality over cost savings, underscoring the importance of maintaining standards that directly impact wellbeing. In addition, feedback from the voluntary and community sector highlights the value of accessible, person-centred services and the preservation of green spaces - both of which are recognised as essential contributors to physical and mental health.

To address increasing service pressures, particularly the rising number of children and young people with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), the proposal sets out a framework for integrated care across health, education, and social services. It embeds preventative approaches and promotes cross-sector collaboration to enable earlier identification of needs and more coordinated, effective interventions.

By aligning services and reducing duplication, the proposal aims to improve outcomes for individuals and communities, while also strengthening long-term resilience. This future oriented proposal supports the sustainability and fairness of service provision, ensuring that public services continue to meet the evolving needs of residents and contribute positively to their quality of life.

Voice

Residents, community groups and the voluntary sector supported the proposal's potential to enhance local voice and participatory governance. Parish councils expressed interest in clearer roles and funding, with many welcoming greater localism.

This proposal responds to that and strengthens local voice by embedding participatory governance at every level. The proposal gives Oxford, Oxfordshire's towns, and villages distinct democratic platforms - each empowered to represent their communities, drive place-based priorities, and contribute to strategic leadership.

Our proposal to establish active, formal structures for neighbourhood engagement, centred on new Neighbourhood Area Committees will grant communities a direct voice in contributing to and shaping priorities, real influence over decisions, and stewardship of local budgets. It also aims to put local voices at the heart of decision making to make sure that decisions are made alongside the people who live and work in Oxford and Oxfordshire.

Identity

There was a clear desire to preserve local identity and concerns about villages becoming urban extensions of Oxford. Cultural organisations emphasised the need to embed Oxfordshire's cultural heritage and amenities in future planning.

People were concerned that rural communities would lose their identity. The proposal responds to that and acknowledges the distinct identities and governance needs of Oxfordshire's rural communities. By establishing a three unitary authority, it enables areas to articulate and pursue their local priorities without being subsumed by the strategic focus of the city. For areas that would be incorporated into Greater Oxford, the proposal ensures that their community interests are safeguarded through appropriate representation and tailored service delivery within the new structure.

This proposal will help people stay locally rooted, with better access to public transport. By avoiding scattered development, it safeguards the distinct character of Oxford, Oxfordshire, and historic and local landscapes, ensuring that community identity and rural heritage are preserved for future generations.

Future-Fit

Stakeholders strongly endorsed differentiated strategies for urban and rural communities (72% agreement), recognising that a one-size-fits-all model is no longer viable. There was a call for transformative reforms across welfare systems, sustainable transport, and integrated health and social care - key pillars of a future-fit public service ecosystem.

The engagement process highlighted the critical role of smaller, place-based councils in cultivating meaningful local relationships. These councils act as agile connectors between residents, community groups, and local authorities, enabling more responsive and resilient service delivery.

There was consistent and widespread support for a place-based, community-led approach. Participants advocated for services that are locally tailored, inclusive, and reflective of the distinct needs and aspirations of each area. This feedback presents a clear mandate to design governance structures that are adaptive, participatory, and capable of delivering equitable outcomes.

The Council has embedded these principles into its proposal.

Engagement Strategy and Timeline

Oxford City Council adopted a phased and inclusive engagement strategy to inform and shape the proposal. Key milestones included:

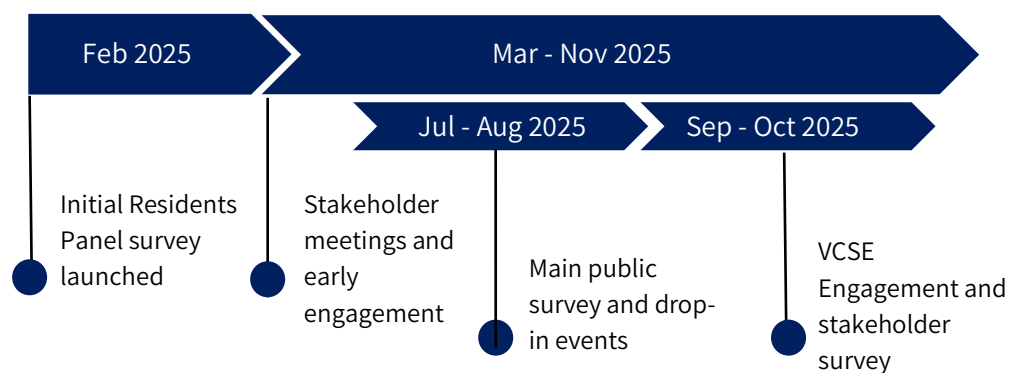


Fig 4.4: Timeline of Engagement

5 The Financial Case

All seven councils included in this proposal – the Oxfordshire authorities plus West Berkshire – shared data to support the financial modelling undertaken in the development of the three proposals. As the granularity of information provided varied across the councils some assumptions were required. A common high level approach to modelling, including use of 2025-26 Revenue Account returns, non-inclusion of projections for Fair Funding impacts on business rates, and data on assets, staffing, etc. was agreed by the Section 151 Officers of all councils with the objective of enabling a like-for-like comparison of the financial benefits identified for each proposal.

Pixel Financial, experts in local government finance and funding, worked with Oxford City Council officers in a number of areas to undertake the financial modelling and assessments, with further support from consultants at **LGFin** and **Inner Circle Consulting**.

Pixel Financial undertook specific work including grants and business rates disaggregation and other metrics used to disaggregate revenue expenditure; detailed modelling on Council Tax harmonisation; and a review of the overall modelling of transitional and transformational costs and benefits. LGFin undertook specific work on balance sheet disaggregation. Inner Circle Consulting provided overall support across the financial section and a review of the financial modelling.

The analysis below show that the three unitary authorities (3UA) proposal fully meets Government criteria on financial sustainability:

- Strong balance sheets and significant future growth benefits underline the financial sustainability and resilience of the 3 unitary councils.
- A manageable revenue position on formation of the unitaries based on disaggregation of their 2025-26 budgets.
- Payback of transitional costs of £36.2 million and the transformation of services could be achieved within a 4-year period with no need for any Government support.
- By year 5 annual net savings of £48.6 million per annum will be achieved through transitional and transformational efficiencies which is broken down as follows:

Table 5.1: Transformation and Transition Costs and Benefits

Year 5 Transformation and Transition Costs and Benefits				
	Greater Oxford	North Oxfordshire	Ridgeway	Total
	£000's	£000's	£000's	£000's
Transformation Benefits	-9,210	-8,407	-10,648	-28,265
Transformation Costs	4,419	4,530	4,732	13,681
Transition Savings	-7,070	-8,910	-18,072	-34,052
Net Benefits	-11,861	-12,787	-23,988	-48,636

The additional commercial and housing growth enabled by the creation of Greater Oxford is not included in the above table of transitional and transformational benefits, but is very significant (set out in Section 5.11 below):

- By year 5 (2032/33) Greater Oxford's growth will yield an additional £8.4m per annum in business rates and an additional £11.8m in council tax receipts.
- By 2040/41 Greater Oxford's growth in commercial floor space and housing will yield an additional £41.9m per annum in business rates and an additional £72.8m per annum in council tax receipts

5.1 Financial Position

The baseline position has been analysed using the 2025/26 budgeted position of each of the Councils in Oxfordshire plus West Berkshire. A summary of the current position is shown in the following table:

Table 5.2: Financial Position of Existing Local Authorities

	Net revenue Expenditure Budget	Forecast Total Funding	Forecast Net position (Surplus(-) / Deficit)	General Fund Allocated Reserves	General Fund Unallocated Reserves	Total Long Term General Fund Borrowing (Capital Financing Requirement)	General Fund External Debt	Total General Fund Property and Equipment Assets
	£ million	£ million	£ million	£ million	£ million	£ million	£ million	£ million
Cherwell	32.8	-34.7	-1.9	1.9	39.3	235.5	139.0	173.4
West Oxfordshire	12.1	-13.6	-1.5	3.6	27.8	29.4	0.0	129.6
Oxford City	27.8	-30.5	-2.7	11.6	48.8	45.3	0.0	343.2
South Oxfordshire	18.3	-18.4	-0.1	2.2	63.8	-0.1	0.0	58.0
Vale of the White Horse	20.1	-19.2	0.9	10.0	27.2	0.3	0.0	86.8
West Berkshire	336.4	-340.6	-4.2	7.8	13.9	319.7	202.7	422.4
Oxfordshire	1,129.1	-1,138.9	-9.8	58.6	238.1	505.5	259.9	724.3
Total	1,576.6	-1,595.9	-19.3	95.7	458.9	1,135.6	601.6	1,937.7

This section will show several key aspects of the 3 unitary proposal:

- All of the forecast opening revenue surpluses and deficits are relatively small and would be manageable through the normal budgetary process.
- Depending on how the new authorities decide to manage it, could be achieved between one and two years
- The Housing Revenue Account (HRA) currently operated by Oxford City Council adds the benefit of supporting the growth agenda and providing increased affordable dwellings
- The housing company, OX Place, provides an opportunity both to develop new housing and for the HRA to manage on behalf of the citizens of the new unitary
- Oxford Direct Services Limited and its sister company Oxford Direct Services Trading Ltd will continue to thrive and deliver dividends back to its shareholders. The increased boundaries of Greater Oxford and the potential to work in partnership will give the potential for the companies to continue to grow

- The balance sheet analysis shows that all three proposed unitary authorities will have strong financial resilience
- All of the new authorities would start with above average levels of usable revenue reserves along with the strong balance sheets.
- The proposed unitary authorities will have the resources to finance the necessary transition and could also release capital resources to take advantage of the proposed flexible use of capital receipts.
- The analysis of the costs and benefits of transition to unitary status and the transformation of service provision shows payback over a four-year period (three years for Ridgeway) with an ongoing financially sustainable position thereafter for all of the three unitaries in this proposal
- None of the unitary authorities in this proposal will be looking for exceptional financial support
- This proposal will deliver growth which will benefit the citizens of the area and also the wider national economy.

5.2 Existing council budgets and pressures

The district councils in Oxfordshire are experiencing many of the same pressures faced by local authorities nationally with the main pressure coming from demand for temporary accommodation and other demand-led services. As the main urban centre in Oxfordshire, Oxford City Council is experiencing the greater increase in demand for temporary accommodation. The temporary accommodation (TA) placement rate has risen from an average of 4.26 households placed per week in 2022/23 to 10.20 in the current financial year. The Council currently has a Temporary Accommodation stock of 188 dwellings and will grow this to over 300 by 2026, with a mixture of purchases, long term leasing and conversion of existing units. Whilst this stock will grow, the council will continue to incur a significant expenditure on short term hotel and B&B accommodation in the short term. Demand is also forecast to continue to grow and alternative measures are being introduced to further mitigate costs, including the purchase of additional housing, taking our TA housing stock to around 560 by 2029-30, introducing a face to face offer to improve homelessness assessments and decrease the placement rate, as well as introducing a new IT system for Housing Needs which will increase staff productivity.

To deal with the financial pressures, most councils have responded with prudent financial management, delivering in-year underspends, replenishing reserves, and in some cases forecasting surpluses. West Berkshire Council asked for and received a £16 million loan from the government to cope with "tremendous financial demands". Of this, £13 million was to provide reserves for future sustainability while the remaining £3 million was to fund a gap in the 2025/26 budget. As can be seen from the later analysis, the combination of West Berkshire Council into the Ridgeway Unitary will support the future financial position and, along with transition and transformation savings that are available to all of the unitary authorities in the proposal, this will allow the new unitary overall to be financially sustainable in the future.

In accordance with the Local Government Act 2003 all council chief financial officers are required to assess the robustness of their budget estimates and the adequacy of reserves. In the case of West Berkshire Council, the budgets and reserve levels were signed off assuming the receipt of the government exceptional financial support (which was received) and noted that this was a one-off

measure and that there is a clear path to securing a balanced financial position in the immediate future. In these assessments all the chief finance officers signed off their budgets but some with reservations over the longer term. The opportunities afforded by the transition to unitary status will, as shown later in this chapter, deal with the concerns over the future financial position.

Our three unitary model delivers the optimal balance between scale, resilience, and local accountability. It creates councils that are financially sustainable, operationally efficient, and close enough to their communities to design services around local priorities. The model spreads transformation effort and cost, reducing implementation risk and ensuring that efficiencies are achieved without over-centralising decision-making. Savings would primarily derive from:

- **Consolidation of management tiers and corporate services** within each unitary;
- **Reduction in duplication** of governance and back-office functions across districts and county;
- **Rationalisation of estate and ICT systems** through harmonised transformation programmes;
- **Stronger procurement leverage and shared commissioning frameworks** at a sub-regional level; and
- **Transformation of major services** such as Adult Social Care, Children's Service, Early Intervention Programme.

Three unitary authorities also create a more balanced distribution of financial risk. Concentrating all fiscal exposure in a single authority would heighten vulnerability to demographic and economic shocks, such as rising demand in adult social care or business rate volatility. A tri-structure allows for differentiated fiscal strategies, greater flexibility in financial management, and collaboration where shared arrangements deliver best value. This approach builds long-term resilience and aligns with the Government's commitment to fiscal devolution and empowered local leadership — ensuring decisions about tax, spending, and reform are made at the level where they can deliver the greatest impact.

Proposed Unitary Model

Our proposed three unitary authority model for the future of local government in Oxfordshire will result in significant financial benefits by reducing duplication, achieving economies of scale, without being so big that diseconomies of scale creep in, and capitalising on opportunities for service transformation and improvement. This would be achieved whilst retaining good local democratic representation and being responsive to the needs of local communities in a way that a larger more remote Council would not.

Oxfordshire currently has six councils; five district councils and one county council. The proposal is also bringing in West Berkshire Council which is currently a unitary council. This proposal replaces these with three new unitary councils comprising:

- Greater Oxford - Oxford City Council plus parts of its Green Belt (surrounding parishes from Cherwell, South Oxfordshire, and Vale of the White Horse Councils)
- North Oxfordshire - West Oxfordshire Council and the balance of Cherwell District Council
- Ridgeway - West Berkshire Council and the balance of South Oxfordshire, and Vale of the White Horse Councils

5.3 Financial Disaggregation and Aggregation Process of Baseline position

Revenue Baseline

The baseline position for the new unitary organisations has been estimated using Revenue Account (RA) returns for 2025/26. These are returns that every Council must submit to the Government reporting a breakdown of budgets. The figures for each of the Councils has been disaggregated using various appropriate metrics such as Population, Dwelling numbers, and various relative needs formulae. The figures have then been aggregated into the totals for each proposed unitary Council. The totals of the original RA returns and the revised totals on aggregation have been checked to ensure that the same figures are resulting.

The revised totals have then been compared to a calculation of the total Council tax which will be raised by each Council using the detailed Council Tax setting data.

Based on the assumptions above, the initial results show that each of the three new Unitary authorities is financially viable based on the assumptions used, with the largest variance being Greater Oxford at a £2.0 million deficit and Ridgeway at a £1.1 million surplus based on the 2025/26 budgets. While the shortfall in Greater Oxford would require attention, it is relatively small in the context of local government and given the size of the revenue expenditure for each new Council of between £396.3 million and £748.9 million; these variances would be manageable through routine financial management measures and the normal budgetary process.

Table 5.3: Baseline Financial Position For Unitary Councils

	Greater Oxford	North Oxfordshire	Ridgeway	Total
	£ million	£ million	£ million	£ million
Revenue Expenditure	396.3	431.4	748.9	1,576.60
Grant Funding	-169.7	-180	-347.9	-697.6
Transfer to Reserves	6	6.5	6.8	19.3
Collection Fund Surpluses	-3.1	-3.7	-2.9	-9.7
Retained Business Rates	-62.7	-51.3	-58.4	-172.4
Net Council Tax Requirement	166.8	202.9	346.5	716.2
Estimated Council Tax Chargeable	164.8	203.8	347.6	716.2
Variance	2	-0.9	-1.1	0
	<i>Deficit</i>	<i>Surplus</i>	<i>Surplus</i>	

Building on the starting position for each unitary above, work has been progressing to identify the one off and recurring cost of setting up and transitioning to the new unitary authorities as well as the costs and benefits that may arise from service transformation. This is shown in following sections.

5.4 Balance Sheet Disaggregation

Methodology

We have taken the balance sheets from the published draft 2024/25 statements of accounts of all Oxfordshire authorities and the West Berkshire unitary and then apportioned these into the proposed unitary authorities. The apportionment has been undertaken using populations of the current and proposed areas applied to apportion Oxfordshire County Council's balance sheet between the proposed unitary authorities and also Cherwell, South and Vale between Greater Oxford, North Oxfordshire and Ridgeway. Having established balance sheets for the proposed unitary authorities using this apportion methodology, the results have been compared to national benchmarks over a number of financial health measures.

Overall Results

The table below shows a summary of the financial health measures for the three proposed unitary authorities.

Table 5.4: Financial Health Measures for Unitary Councils

Area	Measure	Greater Oxford	North Oxfordshire	Ridgeway	England Average	Unitary Average	HRA Unitary Average	Non-HRA Unitary Average
		HRA	non-HRA	non-HRA			HRA	non-HRA
Net Assets	Net Assets (excl. pensions)/CSP	684%	279%	280%	426%	354%	419%	233%
	Usable Reserves/CSP	138%	104%	92%	74%	61%	67%	51%
Usable Reserves	URR/CSP	71%	65%	48%	41%	35%	37%	30%
	DSG Balance/CSP	-10%	-11%	-10%	-6%	-7%	-6%	-9%
	URR and DSG Balance/CSP	61%	54%	38%	35%	27%	31%	21%
	HRA Reserves/Dwelling Rents	34%					47%	
	Current Resources/CSP	128%	94%	83%	68%	54%	61%	43%
Capital Health	CFR/CSP	241%	158%	118%	229%	222%	238%	192%
	Debt Gearing	32%	46%	38%	39%	42%	40%	50%

The measures are colour coded showing green where the measure is better than the benchmark average and yellow where it is worse than the benchmark average. Where the measure is marked as yellow, the reasons for this are explained in the narrative below. There is no colour coding for asset and debt measures because these are heavily affected by whether an authority has an open Housing Revenue Account (HRA) as HRA and non-HRA authorities have different benchmark averages. This will also be considered in the narrative below.

Net Assets

Net asset levels are heavily influenced by whether an authority holds an HRA or not. For this reason, the graph below shows Net Assets excluding pensions compared to Core Spending Power (CSP) and distinguishes between HRA and non HRA authorities.

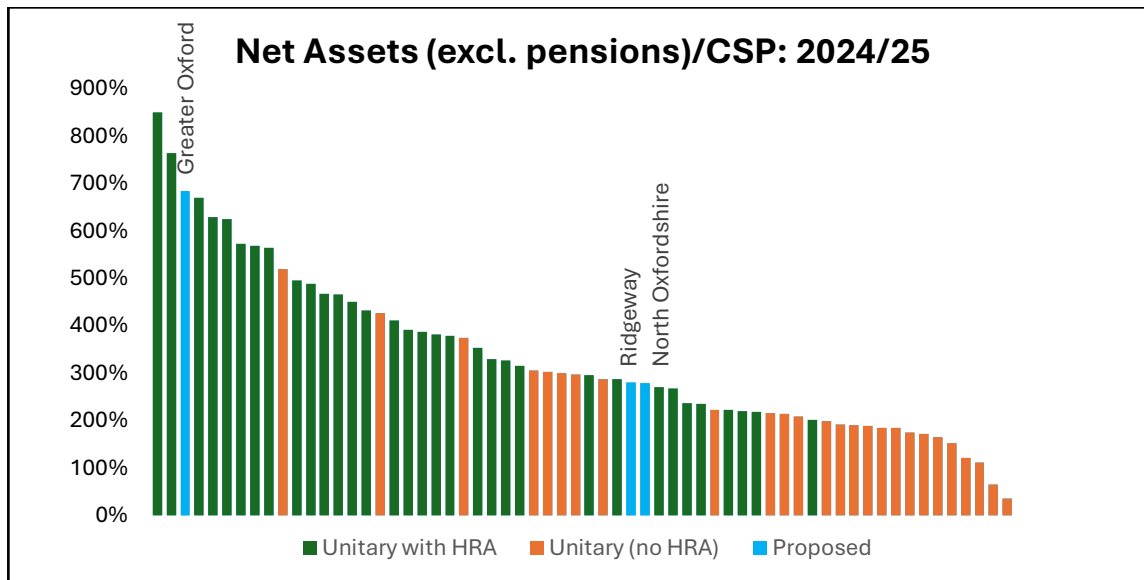


Fig 5.1: Net Assets / Core Spending Power

Both Ridgeway and North Oxfordshire have lower average net assets compared to the average whereas Greater Oxford is in the top quartile. This is to be expected since neither Ridgeway nor North Oxfordshire will have an HRA. The graph therefore is designed to show HRA and non-HRA authorities separately with HRA authorities as green bars and non-HRA authorities as orange bars.

Both Ridgeway (280%) and North Oxfordshire (279%) compare favourably on net assets to the upper tier non HRA benchmark of 233%. The conclusion is that all proposed authorities are therefore resilient in respect of balance sheet net assets.

Usable Revenue Reserves

The graph below shows the Usable Revenue Reserves (URR) of each unitary compared to CSP.

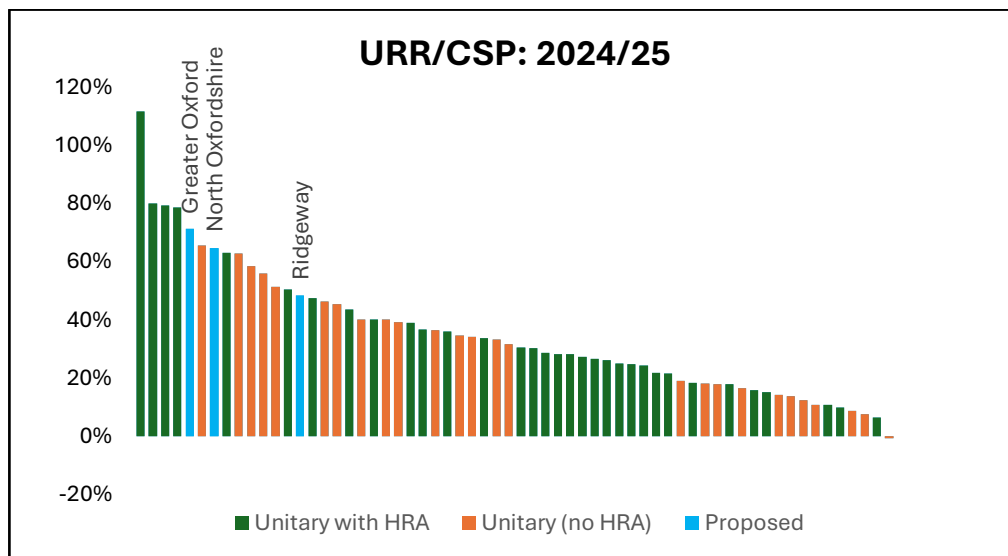


Fig 5.2: Usable Revenue Reserves / Core Spending Power

All proposed authorities have above average usable revenue reserves. Ridgeway's levels will be lower than the other two unitary authorities due to West Berkshire having relatively low levels of URR in 2024/25.

Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG)

All proposed authorities will have higher than average DSG deficits. This is because both Oxfordshire and West Berkshire have higher than average DSG deficits in 2024/25.

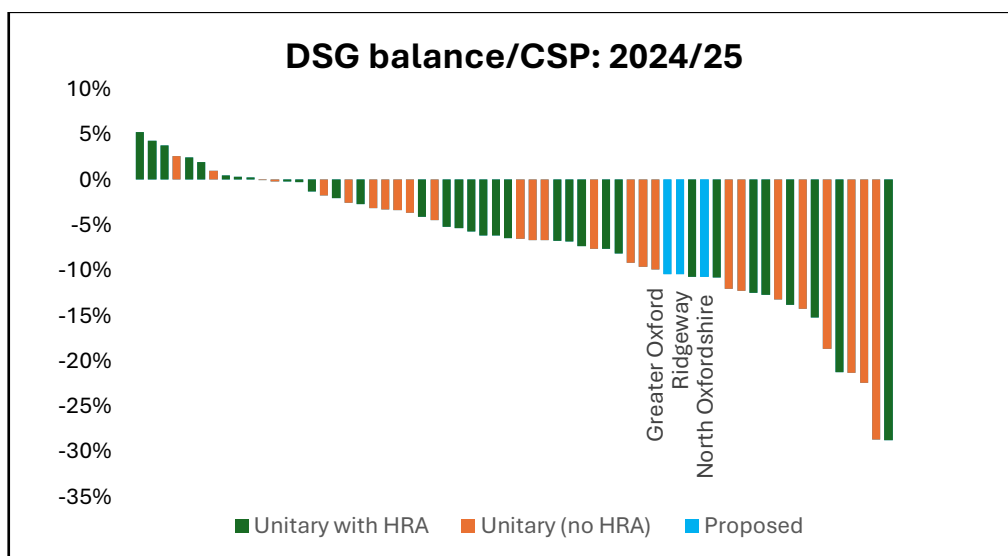


Fig 5.3: Dedicated Schools Grant / Core Spending Power

There is a national issue with Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG). The statutory reporting requirements for the accounts require the closing deficit balance on the Dedicated Schools Grant to be held within the Dedicated Schools Grant Adjustment Account, which is an unusable reserve. There is an existing statutory override in place that supports this accounting treatment which was due to end on 31 March 2026 but the Government has now extended this until 31st March 2028.

The Oxfordshire DSG deficit balance has increased from £45.8 million as at 31st March 2024 to £80.3 million as at 31st March 2025, an increase of £34.5 million in the year. This is clearly an issue for the Oxfordshire area, however the Government has recognised that there is a structural problem in the system with associated large financial implications and the Government has stated that they are going to implement measures to rectify the position. A consultation is expected in the Autumn. Additionally when looking at the overall position of the Dedicated Schools Grant Adjustment Account plus Usable Revenue Reserves, this shows that Oxfordshire is more resilient overall than many others.

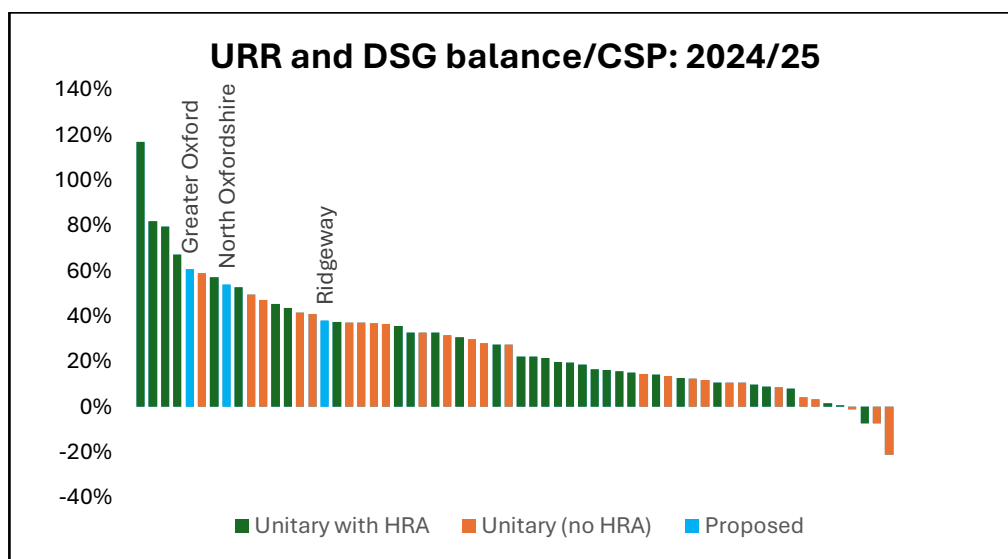


Fig 5.4: Usable Revenue Reserves & Dedicated Schools Grant / Core Spending Power - All

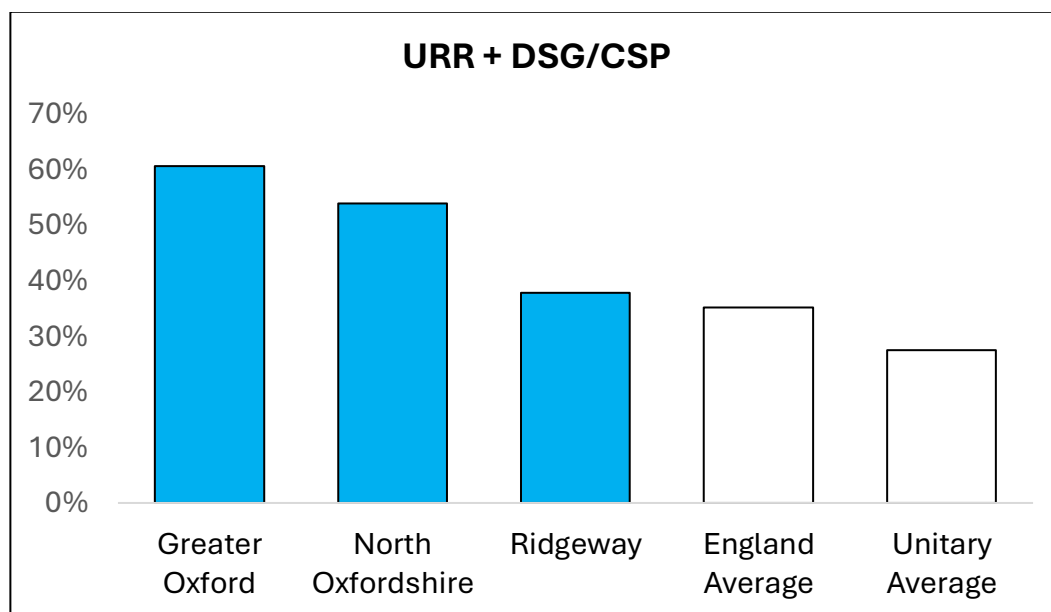


Fig 5.5: Usable Revenue Reserves & Dedicated Schools Grant / Core Spending Power – Average Comparison

Despite higher than average DSG deficits, all three proposed unitary authorities have better than average resilience when adding those deficits to existing levels of usable revenue reserves.

Capital Financing Requirement (CFR)

Greater Oxford will have a higher need to borrow than the overall average benchmark averages. This is to be expected since Greater Oxford will have an HRA. Consequently, the graph below shows HRA and non-HRA authorities separately with HRA authorities as green bars and non-HRA authorities as orange bars.

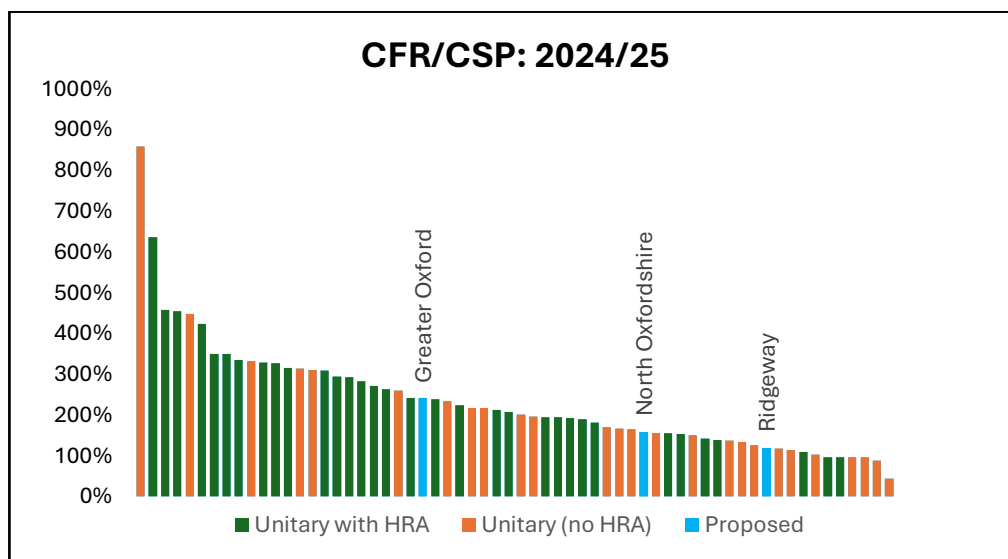


Fig 5.6: Capital Financing Requirement / Core Spending Power – Average Comparison

The Greater Oxford CFR to CSP is 241% which is in line with the unitary with HRA authority average of 238%.

Debt Gearing

Debt gearing is an important measure to ensure that authorities are not overborrowed compared to the underlying value of their long term assets. The comparison between the proposed Oxfordshire unitary authorities and the rest of the country can be shown graphically as follows:

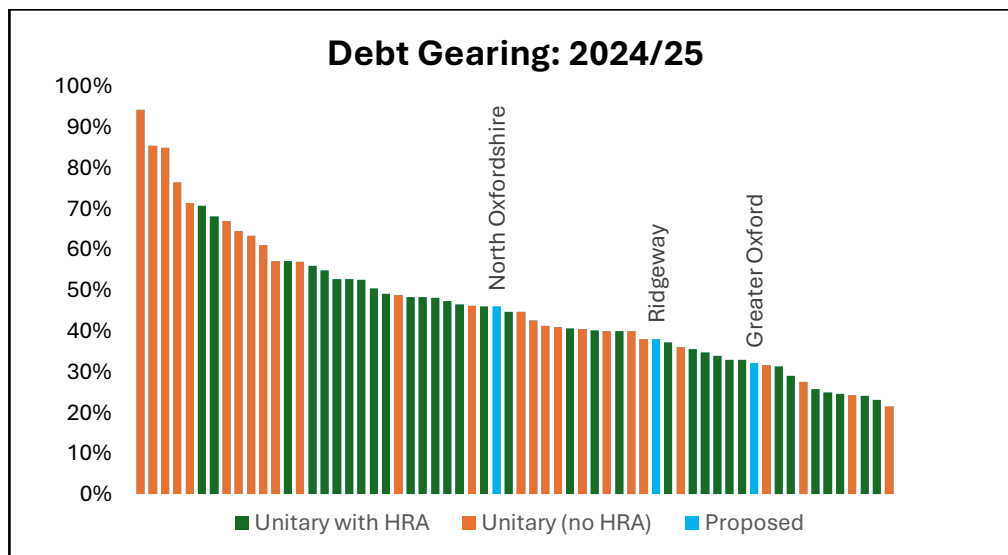


Fig 5.7: Debt Gearing

North Oxfordshire is projected to have higher debt gearing than both the unitary and the all England averages, however it is lower than the non-HRA Unitary average.

Revenue and Balance Sheet Conclusion

CIPFA (Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy) provides a Financial Resilience Index for UK local authorities, which uses a range of indicators to assess financial health. Whereas some of these indicators are useful, they do not properly take account of the differences between HRA and non-HRA authorities. Some of the indicators measure aggregate authority totals (i.e. debt) with general fund only metrics which make authorities with an HRA appear to be high risk for some of the indicators. This is misleading and so we have provided metrics above which allow comparison between similar authorities. The balance sheets of the current authorities were disaggregated in to balance sheets for the 3 unitaries by a Finance Specialist at LGFin. This showed that, from a balance sheet perspective, the new authorities would have a sufficient level of assets and resources to be financially sustainable. Various measures of financial health show that the new authorities will start on a strong financial basis when compared with like authorities.

None of the unitary authorities in this proposal will be looking for exceptional financial support; the base disaggregation of the existing revenue and balance sheet positions would not indicate that the new unitary councils would need to seek exceptional financial support after the savings from transition to unitary status and the transformation of services.

The balance sheet analysis shows that all three proposed unitary authorities have strong financial resilience when compared with relevant benchmark averages and there are no wide and unexpected variances in financial resilience measures between the proposed unitary authorities. Greater Oxford has a higher level of net assets and debt which is entirely consistent with being an HRA authority.

With the exception of DSG deficits, which the Government has pledged to resolve, the key balance sheet measures are around or better than the average national position.

All authorities would start with above average levels of usable revenue reserves and strong balance sheets. On this basis it is anticipated that all three of the proposed unitary authorities will have the resources to finance the necessary transition and could also release capital resources to take advantage of the proposed flexible use of capital receipts.

5.5 Current Debt Position (and stranded debt)

Background

In the context of UK local government reorganisation, stranded debt refers to the liabilities of a dissolving council that cannot be covered by its assets or future revenue. This issue arises when a local authority with significant debt is broken up or merged with others, leaving a financial deficit that needs to be settled and this debt cannot be taken on by the successor authorities without putting them in a financially unsustainable position. In general terms debt becomes "stranded" if the revenue-generating assets that were originally intended to service that debt are not transferred or do not perform as expected. It can also arise if an authority has overborrowed such that it now cannot service its debt from its normal revenue stream.

Debt position

The level of local authority debt across the Oxfordshire and West Berkshire areas is variable between authorities. The current levels of debt can be seen in the table below:

Table 5.5: Long Term External Debt

Long Term External Debt	
£ million	
Cherwell	139.0
West Oxfordshire	0.0
Oxford City	288.5
South Oxfordshire	0.0
Vale of the White Horse	0.0
West Berkshire	202.7
Oxfordshire	259.9
Total	890.1

Compared to the other districts, Oxford City Council appears to have a high level of debt, however this is due to the council being the only council in this proposal to have a Housing Revenue Account (HRA) (see more detail in the section below). For this reason, the Oxford City Council debt needs to be split between the HRA and the remainder of the General Fund.

There are not currently any concerns over debt levels or assets that are not performing as expected within the areas under consideration. In addition, Oxford City Council currently has capital plans that will require borrowing in the future, most of which on the Housing Revenue Account. This borrowing requirement would transfer to the new Greater Oxford unitary and is shown in the table below.

Table 5.6: Oxford City Council Planned Borrowing

	HRA Borrowing Capacity	Oxford City General Fund Future Planned Borrowing
	£ million	£ million
Current Capacity	57.3	0.0
2025/26	121.6	0.0
2026/27	72.0	10.1
2027/28	64.0	32.0
2028/29	57.5	62.2
2029/30	175.3	17.7
Total	547.7	122.0

There will therefore be enough capacity within the Greater Oxford unitary HRA to absorb any existing external debt that cannot be supported by the other unitary authorities.

5.6 Transition Costs, Efficiencies and Longer-Term Transformation Savings

Introduction

For Greater Oxford, the transition to unitary status is not seen as simply a change to the structure of local government. This is a once in a generation opportunity to reshape how services are delivered for the urban centre of Oxfordshire. Greater Oxford will be an organisation that is financially resilient, efficient, and innovative through creating a council that is leaner, more agile, and better able to meet residents' needs in a rapidly changing social and financial environment. Longer term, the organisation will invest in digital capability and capacity and provide innovative service models which focus on preventative measures rather than reactive management. Initially, it is important to demonstrate that the new unitary, along with the other two unitary authorities, is financially viable on transition.

In calculating the projected financial effects of this proposal we have been careful not to overstate the benefits or to be too optimistic about the timing of changes and Pixel Financial Management has reviewed the cost and savings calculations used. To ensure that we have not underestimated additional expenditure we have built in a contingency of 10% on costs, however the calculations

show that the unitaries would still pay back within a 5 year period with a 30% contingency. This can therefore be seen to be both a prudent and a realistic proposal.

In the Interim Proposal we said: *Pixel Financial has estimated realistic transition costs of between £5-10 million per district and existing unitary (West Berkshire) moving into three new unitary authorities.* Our estimated transition costs, including redundancies and project management, are estimated at £36 million for all 3 unitaries. This is within the expected range of £30 million to £60 million.

We are mindful that during any transition or transformation process it is imperative to maintain full continuity of service. Also, the larger and more the complex the service the more time it will take to get the process right without an adverse effect on citizens. This will inevitably mean that the benefits will phase in over time. We have taken this into account when considering the costs and benefits of our proposal. In our opinion any proposals that suggest they will break even or start paying back in the first year are being extremely overly optimistic.

The county council's RO expenditure, medium term financial strategy and council tax baselines currently include costs and funding for Oxfordshire Fire and Rescue Service. In the longer-term these will sit with the mayoral strategic authority. It is assumed that the costs and income related to Fire and Rescue Service will be transferred and will have a net nil effect on the overall financial position of the proposed unitaries.

Given the relative sizes of organisations (aggregate net expenditure of districts can be around only 10% of the county net expenditure), in all the unitary proposals the majority of any savings must come from current county services. If any one unitary authority (1UA) proposals suggest an early payback period one must question why the savings are not being made now without the conversion to unitary. A key basis for the Greater Oxford proposal is that, in addition to keeping services closer to and more responsive to citizens and their needs, we believe that taking the approach to service provision that is currently employed at Oxford City Council, we can make overall savings in the costs of local authority services currently not provided by the City Council.

Overall Results for the Oxfordshire and West Berkshire Unitary Authorities

In line with guidance, the financial modelling has been completed at today's prices, not considering the impact of inflation and not discounting future cash flows.

Each of the individual savings, additional costs and transition costs have been phased in line the expectation of when it is anticipated these will be realised or incurred. Some transition costs will be incurred ahead of vesting day and these are shown against the relevant year in the overall costs. The financial case has been modelled up to year five after vesting day.

Based on our detailed analysis of costs and savings, the overall result of converting the councils to unitary status can be summarised as follows:

Table 5.7: Financial Impact of All Unitary Authorities in Oxfordshire

Aggregate of All 3 Unitaries			One off Costs	Recurring Costs and Savings	Net Impact	Cumulative Net Impact
Year			£000's	£000's	£000's	£000's
Pre vesting	0	2026-27	-900	-90	-990	-990
	0	2027-28	-29,926	-2,992	-32,918	-33,908
Vesting	1	2028-29	-12,284	1,537	-10,747	-44,655
	2	2029-30	-8,615	4,524	-4,091	-48,746
	3	2030-31	-5,313	37,152	31,839	-16,907
	4	2031-32	0	45,136	45,136	28,229
	5	2032-33	0	48,636	48,636	76,865

This is broken down between the three unitary authorities as follows:

Table 5.8: Financial Impact of Greater Oxford Unitary

Greater Oxford			One off Costs	Recurring Costs and Savings	Net Impact	Cumulative Net Impact
Year			£000's	£000's	£000's	£000's
Pre vesting	0	2026-27	-300	-30	-330	-330
	0	2027-28	-7,835	-783	-8,618	-8,948
Vesting	1	2028-29	-3,821	-2,250	-6,071	-15,019
	2	2029-30	-2,071	-1,757	-3,828	-18,847
	3	2030-31	-1,771	9,653	7,882	-10,965
	4	2031-32	0	10,991	10,991	26
	5	2032-33	0	11,861	11,861	11,887

Table 5.9: Financial Impact of North Oxfordshire Unitary

North Oxfordshire			One off Costs	Recurring Costs and Savings	Net Impact	Cumulative Net Impact
Year			£000's	£000's	£000's	£000's
Pre vesting	0	2026-27	-300	-30	-330	-330
	0	2027-28	-9,235	-923	-10,158	-10,488
Vesting	1	2028-29	-4,479	41	-4,438	-14,926
	2	2029-30	-3,472	994	-2,478	-17,404
	3	2030-31	-1,771	6,943	5,172	-12,232
	4	2031-32	0	11,249	11,249	-983
	5	2032-33	0	12,787	12,787	11,804

Table 5.10: Financial Impact of Ridgeway Unitary

Ridgeway			One off Costs	Recurring Costs and Savings	Net Impact	Cumulative Net Impact
		Year	£000's	£000's	£000's	£000's
Pre vesting	0	2026-27	-300	-30	-330	-330
	0	2027-28	-12,856	-1,286	-14,142	-14,472
Vesting	1	2028-29	-3,984	3,746	-238	-14,710
	2	2029-30	-3,072	5,287	2,215	-12,495
	3	2030-31	-1,771	20,556	18,785	6,290
	4	2031-32	0	22,896	22,896	29,186
	5	2032-33	0	23,988	23,988	53,174

This shows that payback for each of the three unitary authorities is around year 4 after vesting day on 1st April 2028 for Greater Oxford and Northern Oxfordshire and year 3 for Ridgeway and that the authorities between them incur around £31 million of one-off costs in the pre-vesting period. This is in line with analysis of previous unitary authorities provided by Pixel Financial Management Ltd which therefore supports our figures from this detailed localised work. As with other proposed unitary authorities it is assumed that these one off costs will be funded locally through reserves and realisable assets. The analysis of the balance sheet strength of the authorities shows that these costs can be covered without government support.

Fair funding is currently out to consultation and the provisional finance settlement is not expected to be announced until December, the Chancellors Budget having been pushed back to 26th November. There is considerable uncertainty around this funding and therefore no projections have been made on this.

The Proposal

The disaggregation of existing councils and consolidation into the new unitary councils will involve taking the services provided by the five district councils and allocating these to the new unitary authorities plus splitting up the services currently provided at the Oxfordshire county level so that they can be delivered by the three new councils. West Berkshire services will transition into the Ridgeway Council and become part of that unitary. This process will affect both frontline services and back-office functions.

The transition process will include:

- Redundancy and early retirement programmes.
- Establishment of programme delivery teams.
- Creation of shadow authorities.
- Closing down existing councils and transferring staff, assets, and services.
- Designing harmonisation plans for council tax.

Local Government Reorganisation will change the boundaries of local authorities but more importantly it involves two distinct but interconnected changes. Firstly, it will involve the consolidation of seven existing organisations into three and then secondly, the transformation of those three new councils into agile, efficient, and responsive authorities.

This process will involve bringing together both frontline resident services and back-office functions and transforming them into agile and services responsive to the needs of the communities within the area. It will be necessary for upper-tier functions, such as highways, social care and education, to be disaggregated amongst new unitary authorities, providing opportunities for better outcomes through service alignment.

Costs

The main costs of disaggregation arise from:

- Recreating senior posts (such as Directors of Children's Services) for each unitary (incorporated into the senior management calculations below)
- New IT systems (incorporated into the IT transitional savings calculations below)
- Project Management
- Public Engagement
- Contingency

Project Management

Managing the transition from a two tier system to a unitary system of local government will require significant project management over a prolonged period. It is estimated that the cost will be circa £5 million per unitary for providing resources such as a programme director, project officers and external report over the life of the project. This cost is consistent with other Local Government Reorganisation business cases already submitted.

Public Engagement

There will be a need to 'get the message out there' both pre vesting day and post vesting day in terms of public engagement and media publications. It is anticipated that costs of circa £300k per annum, based on other business cases put forward, will be required to provide for the costs of this public engagement.

Contingency

With a multi-million programme of re-organisation planned one can never predict costs with complete accuracy. A contingency of 10%, based on the gross annual cost, has therefore been assumed over the 7 year life of the programme (including the 2 years in the lead up to vesting day).

Savings

Key initial savings arise from:

- Senior Management
- Councillor numbers and governance; Members' allowances
- Elections
- External audit costs
- IT Transition
- Additional adult social care precept (covered in the section on Council Tax)
- Transformation (see separate section)

Senior Management

We have specifically modelled new senior management structures (top three tiers). This work has incorporated reductions in staff in some areas and increasing staffing in others (such as Directors of Children's Services). Data on the number of senior staff for each authority in Oxfordshire and West Berkshire has been obtained and broken down into the different levels of senior management as follows

- Tier 1 – Chief Executive (Head of the Paid Service)
- Tier 2 – Executive Directors
- Tier 3 – Assistant Directors

The number of senior managers for all authorities has then been compared to the benchmarked structures of senior managers based on unitary population sizes based on guidance from the Local Government Association and the Local Government Boundary Commission for England and adjustments made from the combining authorities either by reducing or increasing the number of posts.

Where posts are reduced an appropriate level of redundancy is calculated.

Democratic Service and Elections

Members allowances

The current cost of members in the form of allowances has been obtained from the most recent Statement of accounts and the current number of councillors and ward members obtained from publicly available data. Our data shows that there are currently 331 members across Oxfordshire and West Berkshire at a total cost of circa £3.8 million. The revised number of members for the 3 new unitary authorities is estimated at 214.

Elections

The current cost of elections for Oxfordshire and West Berkshire is estimated at £5 million. Unitary authorities generally have 1 election per four years and savings have been calculated on this basis – other than the two-yearly cycle proposed for Greater Oxford.

External Audit

Local government reorganisation will deliver a benefit from the external audit fees compared to the predecessor authorities. External audit fees have been obtained from the latest statement of accounts and our assumption is that external audit fees will vary according to the population size of authorities. The audit fee for Oxfordshire County Council will be a saving to the audit fees going forward and hence it is allocated as a saving based on population across the new three unitary authorities.

IT Transitional Savings

There is some consistency in the use of ICT systems across the current 7 authorities with 6 of the authorities using the same financial management system, 2 use the same HR and Payroll system, all use the same elections system and there are only 2 different systems for revenues and benefits. Whilst the Greater Oxfordshire and Northern Oxfordshire authorities would require a system to deal with adult social care and children's services, the costs for which have been factored in to the transitional analysis, there will be savings to be generated from the combining of contracts in the other systems once they expire. A modest 5% saving has been assumed albeit from 2030-31 onwards.

5.7 Transformation Savings

The areas where savings from transformation could be achieved include:

- Asset rationalisation and proactive management of assets
- Service Transformation
 - Adult social care, children services and Early intervention programme
 - Environmental and Regulatory
- Enabling Services
- Growth; not included in the overall costs and savings summary table (see section below); growth is in addition to the other benefits

5.7.1 Asset Management

Overall Position

Information taken from the latest Statement of Accounts indicates a net book value of approximately £2 billion across Oxfordshire and West Berkshire. A rationalisation of assets including disposal of property either in terms of the freehold or a long-term lease has been assumed to release around 10% of the property in each new unitary. This is consistent with other business plans and in the case of Greater Oxford is corroborated via an exercise undertaken by the councils Property team. Based on net book values of assets as at 1st April 2025, rationalisation of assets translating into a revenue saving of around £3 million per annum has been calculated for Greater Oxford (see below). Clearly since this is based on net book values the saving is likely to be higher than this, so this is considered prudent and potentially able to be realised across the whole portfolio of property.

Greater Oxford Analysis

Oxford City Council has a strong track record of actively managing its asset portfolio and it is assumed that Greater Oxford will continue with this approach. A common assumption adopted across all of the unitary business cases is that assets will transfer to successor authorities based on their physical location. The asset lists from each of the existing authorities has been reviewed and categorised by establishment type to understand the opportunities which may be available in the Greater Oxford authority. As a result of the detailed work undertaken to assess asset rationalisation opportunities across the Greater Oxford geography, the identified 10% savings figure has also been used to model similar opportunities for Northern Oxfordshire and Ridgeway.

It is assumed that the property transfer will be undertaken at book value since the asset transfer will follow the disaggregation and reaggregation of the balance sheets of the respective authorities.

Based on this, the assets to be transferred will predominantly consist of operational assets; the investment portfolios are small and mostly land and most of this sits outside the Greater Oxford boundary. The review of the asset portfolios has however highlighted a number of opportunities to consolidate operational services and reclassify assets as part of the investment portfolio. It is anticipated that once the full detail of the portfolio is better understood there is likely be further opportunities, however these have not been included in the costings.

The information available is not comprehensive enough to fully establish whether there are any opportunities for growth, although potential opportunities that need further investigation have been identified. As the key information available is book value has been provided, it has been assumed in the modelling that where the asset is not needed, the Greater Oxford Council would dispose of the asset either by way of freehold transfer or, more likely, by way of long lease.

Further Assumptions

The following **Establishment Types** have been assumed to be required to be retained in their entirety:

- Schools and Nurseries
- Fire Stations
- Children's Homes
- Libraries
- Gypsy and Traveller sites
- Elderly persons homes

For **Staffing and Office Space**, it is assumed that staff working within the Greater Oxford Authority would predominately work from home, using the Town Hall as a city centre base and making better use of Community Centres and libraries for locality working.

In East Oxford there would be the **Consolidation of Services** for Community and Health facilities which is likely to lead to a disposal of one centre. Similarly, in Berinsfield there is the assumption one of the buildings would be redeveloped following consolidation of services.

If all other assumptions remain true, a **Cost of Delivery** allowance of 25% of the additional income/savings should be made to deliver the consolidation works required. This would also cover staff time. When the Council reviews options for each of the identified properties, the cost and mechanism of delivery would be considered as part of the business case. This would be expected to be contained within the 25%.

Values

Savings, Income and Capital Receipts have been calculated using the book value not market value, since this is the information available on a comprehensive basis. The exception to this is in relation to infill sites which have been valued at £200k per acre based on recent transactions undertaken by the City Council. Although flagged for disposal and costed into these calculations, the infill sites would present an opportunity for the wholly owned housing company which would improve the profitability of the company and hence the dividend return to the shareholder. In the event the property is developed by the housing company, the company would have to pay the going rate for the property and so any development by the company would be over and above the benefits included here.

Opportunities for growth

The data provided does not allow a full review of opportunities for growth within the portfolio and while, for the purpose of this exercise a capital receipt has been assumed, it is likely there would be opportunities for growth. A fuller options appraisal would need to be undertaken to better understand the opportunity.

Results

The number of assets transferred from Oxfordshire County Council, South Oxfordshire Council, Vale of the White Horse District Council and Cherwell Council together with their estimated disposal value or revenue streams is summarised below

Table 5.11: Net Book Value Of Assets Transferred

Council	Assets TransferredTotal Book Value	
	Nos	£
County	227	187,615,797
South Oxfordshire	19	1,264,353
Vale of the White Horse	11	1,067,079
Cherwell	20	6,566,826
Total	277	196,514,055

The review indicates there is around £17.6 million of capital receipts available, predominantly from the County portfolio, plus additional Revenue Income and some revenue savings. It is expected that there will be additional opportunities for savings or additional income once each of the opportunities is reviewed in more detail, however the amounts below are a comfortable estimate.

To assess the annual impact of this, the capital receipts have been converted to revenue by assuming a 4% saving on borrowing interest costs and a 2% saving on the principal element representing a reduced minimum revenue provision charge. The property team estimate that there would be a 25% cost relating to additional staffing and other costs associated with selling or converting the assets. An additional 10% cost contingency has also been included to account for any cost overruns. It is also assumed that the full benefit would not be achieved until 2030/31 representing the lead-in time to realise the benefits. This would result in the following:

Table 5.12: Revenue Impact Of Asset Rationalisation For Greater Oxford Unitary

Capital Receipt, Revenue Income or Revenue Saving	Value £	Revenue Benefits £
Capital Receipt	17,598,352	1,055,901
Revenue Income	160,000	160,000
Revenue Saving	3,840,000	3,840,000
Total benefit	<u>21,598,352</u>	5,055,901
Assumed Related Cost Implications		1,263,975
Cost Contingency		505,590
Net Benefit		<u>3,286,336</u>

For the Greater Oxford unitary a 10% benefit would achieve a benefit of £3.3 million. This granular work therefore supports the use of 10% saving for the unitary projections.

5.7.2 Service Transformation

Taking the opportunity to redesign services not only provides improved quality of life and services to residents but also the ability to unlock financial benefits and enable the new unitary organisations to be financially sustainable.

Our benefit modelling includes each unitary being provided the tools to embark on a programme of ambitious redesign and innovation – rather than simply amalgamating new services and continuing with the status quo.

Not all services will benefit from transformation programmes in the medium term although over the longer-term new managers will bring in new ideas and savings going forward may be established from changing the long running practices that have prevailed over the years. No assumption has been made around these longer-term savings although there are some areas in County Council and other services where in the medium-term, we believe savings can be generated as follows.

Early Intervention & Prevention, Social Care & SEND Transformation

The approach we have taken to creating our recommended Target Operating Models for the new unitary authorities began with understanding the current baseline activity for services across both district and unitary services. Combining detailed analysis of local data sources and benchmarking with national returns, we were able to identify where additional interventions could release financial benefits and improved outcomes for residents.

We have ensured that our service design will align to coming and expected reforms, including the Families First Partnership Programme within Children's Social Care, the Fit for the Future plan within the NHS and anticipated further reforms in SEND and Adult Social Care.

Through consolidating cross-cutting prevention activity currently dispersed across layers of delivery, we will be able to build on existing best practice prevention innovations and take these further – streamlining processes and embedding data-led ways of working. This consolidation will also enable us to make efficiency savings and right sizing the organisation to ensure that we wrap around the right skills and expertise to residents at the right time.

Our preventative approach to service delivery will avoid additional cost on temporary accommodation, through reducing the number of residents who are made homeless through proactive data-led identification of households at risk and intervention to prevent them falling into crisis⁴².

A more holistic approach to prevention will also avoid the need for long-term spend on Adult Social Care. Through deploying digital tools to resolve client queries early, and through community-based signposting, more people would have their needs met without a need for long-term care. Where residents may need additional support, short-term TEC-enabled reablement will be used across the footprint building upon existing offers for older adults and expanding this to be available to all residents who may require short-term support⁴³.

A deep knowledge of local places and community-based providers will also enable a focus on working closely with young people and their families to undertake a programme that sees children and young people supported in placements that are close to their communities, and are family-based wherever possible, reducing overall spend. This includes exploring reunification where safe and appropriate, preventing the need for long-term spend on care.

This local knowledge will also be deployed in deploying Teams Around the School⁴⁴, which will work in a develop deep relationships with SENCOs, teachers, young people and their families to identify and support additional needs without an escalation in need either to exclusion or additional support, reducing the need for additional spend.

⁴² Luton's data-led approach identified 78 at risk households, of which 22 were supported the authority to manage finances and avoid crisis – Policy in Practice

⁴³ Herefordshire Enablement Team saved approx.. £800k in its first year of operation, reablement functions across the country (including in Leicestershire, Rochdale and Southwark) have led to fewer people requiring long-term support following an intervention (LGA)

⁴⁴ Blackpool's Team Around the School pilot saw a positive impact on children & families, and reducing escalation to crisis (DfE)

In the longer-term, transformation also expects each unitary to develop a vibrant and local provider market – leveraging local spend into improved outcomes for residents and reduced spend⁴⁵. We also anticipate opportunities to be unlocked via housing development in both specialist housing for adults with support needs, and young people, reducing high-cost spend in both residential and supported living sectors as people are able to move into these schemes or stepped down out of more acute support.

We believe that this programme of transformation will deliver savings as set out below. This is £15.9 million of annual cashable savings and cost avoidance from year 5 onwards:

Table 5.13: Revenue Impact Of Social Care Innovation

Area of innovation	Total Ongoing Saving as at year 5		
	Greater Oxford £ million	North Oxfordshire £ million	Ridgeway £ million
Early Intervention & Prevention	3.9	2.6	4.1
Adult Social Care	0	0.3	0.5
Children's Social Care	1.3	1.4	1.8

Other Service Areas Considered

Education

While the three unitary approach will enable a more focused approach to meeting the distinct support needs of schools serving urban and rural and rural areas, there is limited scope for changes that would deliver transformational cost savings.

Highways and Transport

There is an existing £840 million 8 + 6 year Milestone highways contract which will remain in place and will be managed collaboratively. The costs of this will be apportioned over the three unitary authorities but with West Berkshire's own highways continuing to be separately until the services can be combined.

Service delivery for Greater Oxford is safeguarded through as now through the wholly owned company, Oxford Direct Services (ODS) who collaborate and partner with an extensive supply chain to minimise risk and ensure lower fixed costs by deploying sub-contractors where needed to deal with fluctuations in demand. ODS also provides services commercially, delivering some £4m worth of schemes in 2024/25 with margins that result in returns to the shareholder, currently Oxford City Council. No savings on highways are currently being assumed; any savings in costs are assumed will be used to improve the road network.

⁴⁵ Self-Directed Futures is a social enterprise that works with local authorities to make their commissioning approaches more localised and focused on the individual, including working with Somerset to make smaller providers available to those on direct payments.

Public Health

There are currently two Public Health teams serving the Oxfordshire and West Berkshire geography, which would continue to be the case with one team serving Ridgeway and the other a shared service between Greater Oxford and Northern Oxfordshire. No transformational savings have been identified. However, longer-term it is expected that the alignment of MSA and Integrated Care Board geographies may create opportunities for a more strategic approach to public health commissioning across the Thames Valley area.

The current Oxfordshire public health budget is £47.75 million, equating to £63.67 per head. Proposed budgets for unitary authorities are weighted by population and deprivation, e.g., Greater Oxford's weighted budget is £16.73 million. A 5% efficiency gain is targeted through service integration, co-working, and better use of voluntary sector resources.

Housing

The Housing Revenue Account (HRA) currently operated only in the Oxford City Council area, will continue to operate as a separate function. The formation of the Greater Oxfordshire unitary will provide more opportunity for OX Place the housing development company operated by Oxford Council to broaden its operation boundary, providing it access to much needed land for future development (see the section on growth below).

In respect of homelessness challenges, Oxford Council is already responding to the financial challenge by the purchase of new dwellings and moving homeless families out of expensive hotel accommodation. The Greater Oxford Unitary should allow it greater access to accommodation together with the scale of operation and the associated services within social care, giving the authority the ability to deal with these financial pressures.

Cultural Leisure Services

No transformation savings proposed.

Planning and Development

The combination of district and county services would amalgamate the district and county level planning functions. Savings from Development Management would be expected to be realised in senior management savings which have been captured in the transition calculations. There may be some small savings at an officer level but broadly as the geographical area changes, the officer cover is just reapportioned so no net savings have been built into the business case in respect of this. With respect to the Committee system it is anticipated that any additional work required at Planning Committee level would be alleviated by redesigning the scheme of delegation such that more decisions would be delegated to officers.

Policy wise, a Mayoral Strategic Authority would take on the strategic planning role with the unitary authorities producing shorter time-horizon local plans. This would be expected to shift costs around rather than change the overall cost aggregate. The costs of the work of the current district planning service is already included in the district level costs and the additional responsibility for public realm

etc would be covered, capacity-wise, with the disaggregation of County costs to the unitary authorities and the consequent transfer of staffing.

AI and digitisation are likely to yield efficiencies and savings, although these will need to follow after systems and function integration and would therefore be more in the medium term. It is not possible to cost the savings impact of this at this stage and so therefore no savings have been built in to this business case.

Enabling Services

Support services include finance, ICT, Human Resources and payroll, legal and democratic, internal audit, revenues and benefit, procurement, counter fraud and customer services. Baseline data has been taken from information provided by each of the individual authorities which indicates a mixture of in-house provision of services and outsourced management arrangements through private sector companies and a wholly owned Teckal company. Enabling services will be provided separately for each council, either directly or through outsourcing arrangements.

People services will be critical to enabling the CEOs of the new authorities to create the shared organisation identity and purpose that is crucial for success. A priority will be to embed high-performance cultures in the new authorities, based on putting residents first, effective collaboration, and providing rewarding roles with strong career development.

ICT services underpin the ability of councils to deliver service integration and transformation to better meet the needs of residents. Alongside the essential deliverables of providing a secure digital environment that enables collaboration and communication, ICT will enable future innovation through common data platforms, automation and digital service design. Customer self-service opportunities will continue to develop with the rapid advance of AI technology, which will also support improved back-office functions. Data-led decision making will ensure a focus on effectiveness and efficiency. This will be supported by the technology and expertise, skilled for and applied across all service areas.

Through the transformation process we will analyse the best delivery model which will drive savings but also retain resilience and quality. We will seek to redesign and innovate processes and procedures and drive savings we believe are achievable from 2028-29, with an emphasis on data-driven decision-making and greater use of digital and AI to streamline processes and improve appropriate automation. A reduction of 10% full time equivalents has been assumed, which is prudent compared to other business cases put forward which indicate ranges of 10-20%.

Some enabling services, such as finance, HR and ICT, will require resource to manage the merger of existing systems, staffing and resources, and to support the transition process. The cost of this is factored into the prudent level of savings assumed.

5.8 Environmental and Regulatory

All of Oxfordshire's local authorities are among the highest performing waste collection and disposal authorities in the country, with residents recycling 57.6% of their household waste against the national rate of 44.6%. However, recycling performance has flatlined over the last few years and the

cost of disposing of residual waste is the highest in the country⁴⁶. In addition, much of the county's waste infrastructure, consisting of 31 sites, most of which are end of life, requires considerable investment to meet the needs of residents and businesses in the future.

A business case has been prepared for four authorities, Oxford City Council, Cherwell Council, West Oxfordshire Council and Oxfordshire County Council to work in partnership to deliver waste and environmental services in a co-ordinated and integrated way across the county to deliver improvements in operational performance; in environmental sustainability and biodiversity and substantial efficiency savings.

The Waste and Environmental Services Transformation Programme (WESP) business case outlines a new operating model for waste collection, disposal, and environmental services. It identifies significant opportunities that can be achieved through integrating operations both vertically throughout the waste system as well as geographically. The scope of the WESP business case includes:

- Waste collection: household waste, food waste, garden waste.
- Recycling: recycling centres, recycling management.
- Waste disposal: waste processing, energy from waste.
- Business waste: trade waste, hazardous waste.
- Street cleaning: street sweeping, gully clearance.
- Grounds maintenance: verge management, open space management.

Decisions by the participating councils on implementation of WESP are expected to be made ahead of the Government's announcement of its preferred LGR option for Oxfordshire. Therefore, WESP cost savings have *not* been included in the transformational cost savings projected in any of the unitarisation proposals put forward for Oxfordshire.

If implemented, WESP would be expected to deliver net savings of c£6m in the 2027/28 financial year, rising to ongoing net savings of c£14m across the 3UA unitaries from 2030/31 onwards. £63.5m of net benefit will be delivered in the first five years (by 2032/33), with £59m of this achieved in Greater Oxford and Northern Oxfordshire. Transformation savings have been modelled for each of the three unitary proposals and can be found in Appendix F.

WESP would see the creation of a shared company hybrid model to provide an agile approach to transform and respond to the significant changes Government is introducing to reduce the environmental impacts of waste and support a circular economy. WESP would ensure full alignment of commercial and regulatory incentives to minimise waste arisings and maximise the recycling of waste that is collected. In addition to helping meet Government and Oxfordshire waste and climate change targets, it would deliver very significant cost savings, improve the commercial performance of paid-for services and deliver operational benefits to both residents and businesses.

South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse District Councils have chosen not to partner with WESP and have taken the decision to award an outsourced contract for waste collection and street cleansing that will start on 29 June 2026 and run for eight years, with a possible break after four years. Upon vesting in 2028, Ridgeway Council will need to operate separate arrangements for waste

⁴⁶ WRAP UK Gate Fees Report 2024-25

collection and disposal across southern Oxfordshire in parallel with West Berkshire's existing contract with Veolia that runs to 2033. It is assumed that at this point Ridgeway would either choose to integrate the operations in its former South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse area with those covering West Berkshire, or to join WESP and integrate across the wider geography including Greater Oxford and Northern Oxfordshire. No modelling has been undertaken to assess the further efficiencies that either of these choices would likely deliver.

5.9 Council Tax

Council tax is integral to council finances for ensuring the financial sustainability of any new unitary council. Inevitably different Councils have different levels of council tax charge which is the result of annual incremental political decisions at the different councils over many years. Through the creation of unitary councils, bringing together areas which have historically different levels of council tax charge, result in the need to harmonise those council tax charges over time.

Harmonisation must take place by day 1 of year 9 from vesting day, although if you move too quickly some residents receive a high council tax increase whereas if you go too slow residents on the same council tax bands get charged different levels of council tax for a longer period. Ultimately the levels of council tax and speed of harmonisation will be a political decision for the Shadow Authorities. For the purposes of equity between Council taxpayers, it is preferable to have the shortest period of harmonisation possible. However, this must be taken in the context of affordability and the impact on Council Taxpayers of the annual increase. It therefore may be necessary to harmonise over a longer period than one year.

An additional nuance of the proposed Unitary models in Oxfordshire and West Berkshire is that there is a difference balance of service delivery between the district council and the parish council in different areas. For instance, the average parish Council band D charge in Oxford City is £21 but in the rest of Oxfordshire the average parish Council band D charge is £114. Differences in the provision of services between different areas must be adjusted using a mechanism of special expenses which is an adjustment between areas made in the council tax setting process.

Special Expenses

Special expenses are applied when a main precepting body i.e. a district or unitary Council, provides a service in a parish (or unparished area) which is provided in other parishes by a town or parish council. To avoid double taxation the cost of this service must be met by the council taxpayers of the town or parish where the service is being provided so a special expense is charged to the council taxpayers of that parish or area. It should be noted that special expenses are not additional spending over and above the budget set by the Council but a classification within the overall budget.

Legislation (Section 35 of the Local Government Finance Act 1992) specifies the items which are to be treated as special items for the purposes of calculating the Council Tax. These items include:

1. A precept relating to part only of the Council's area e.g. parish precepts;
2. The whole of the expenses (or only some) of those incurred by the Council in performing in a part of its area a function performed elsewhere in its area by a Parish Council; and
3. Any net expenses which arise out of the Council's possession of property held in trust for a part of its area.

It is item 2 in that list that needs to be considered in respect of the unitary proposals. The types of costs included in this item would normally include (not exclusively):

- Cemetery provision
- Community Centres
- Allotment provision
- Parks, Open Spaces and Recreation Grounds

5.9.1 Council Tax Harmonisation

Current Band D levels for each existing authority are:

Table 5.14: District/ Unitary Authority Band D Council Tax 2025-26

Billing Authority	2025/26 Overall Band D (excluding police) £
Oxford	2,252.70
South Oxfordshire	2,062.64
West Oxfordshire	2,040.78
Vale of the White Horse	2,073.09
Cherwell	2,069.90
West Berkshire	1,921.41
Highest Band D	2,252.70
Lowest Band D	1,921.41

As already identified, harmonisation of Council Tax in the shortest period possible within affordability and financial impact considerations is desirable to achieve equity across the new unitary authorities with all service users in a new council paying the same rate. In doing this, Councils will likely want to ensure that they maximise income to deal with financial pressures facing councils in both year one and every subsequent year. The new unitary authorities will also likely want to comply with the referendum limits. The choice of methods and timeframe for harmonisation will be a decision for the new unitary authorities; these options are provided therefore for indicative purposes, and the results have not been included in the overall costs and savings figures. The harmonisation analysis has been undertaken using 2025/26 council tax figures since these are a known factor; any projection to estimated 2027/28 council tax levels for analysis purposes would have the same overall results since consistent percentages would be applied to get to the estimated figures. 2025/26 council tax figures also have the benefit of being recognisable and published figures and are consistent with the use of 2025/26 budget information for baseline calculations.

There are four options for Council Tax Harmonisation that have been assessed:

1. Harmonising to the Highest Band D with a 4.99% increase
2. Harmonising to the Highest Band D without a 4.99% increase
3. Harmonising to the Lowest Band D with a 4.99% increase
4. Harmonising to the Weighted Average Band D

More detail on these options can be found in Appendix E.

Harmonising to the Highest band D with a 4.99% increase

Council tax referendum limits apply to the overall weighted average band D of an authority. Harmonising to the highest band D in each unitary area after applying the annual referendum limit would inevitably breach the referendum limit.

This option has issues for the following reasons:

- A Council cannot breach the referendum limit without undertaking a referendum, the results of which would be uncertain
- The councils will not be fully established when the Council Tax needs to be set, and a referendum would likely be an unpopular move and a poor start to the relations between the new council and their stakeholders.

Harmonising to the Highest band D without a 4.99% increase

Council tax referendum limits apply to the overall average band D of an authority. Harmonising to the highest band D in each unitary area but without a 4.99% increase would allow for harmonisation over a shorter period or with less adverse impact on those lower council tax areas.

Applying this option would result in a loss to all the Councils compared to applying rises based on a weighted average. This may be considered an acceptable cost to the new unitary authorities to ease the cost burden on individuals and / or to speed up harmonisation. Any council tax setting which does not take the maximum increase to the Band D charge will have ongoing year on year effects and the reduced council tax yield would roll forward from year to year and would be exacerbated by the loss of future percentage increases on the “lost” Band D charge.

Harmonising to the Lowest Band D with a 4.99% increase

Harmonising to the lowest band D in each unitary area would result in a lower council tax yield than the maximum increase that each council could levy without breaching the referendum limit.

If this option were to be chosen, the following would need to be considered:

- Councils generally are under increasing financial pressure and increasing demand for services and council tax is a key income stream for councils to deal with the costs of demands on their services
- Any reduction in the Band D charge will have ongoing year on year effects and the reduced council tax yield would roll forward from year to year and would be exacerbated by the loss of future percentage increases on the “lost” Band D charge.

Harmonising to the Weighted Average Band D

Council tax referendum limits apply to the overall average band D of an authority. Harmonising to the weighted average band D would move all Council taxpayers to the weighted average with some moving up and some moving down.

Although it is preferable from an equity perspective to harmonise over one year, it may be preferable to smooth the impact through an extended harmonisation period. This would reduce the year-on-year effect to individual council taxpayers. Potential phased harmonisation for Greater Oxford City Council could be as follows:

Table 5.15: Greater Oxford Council Tax Harmonisation

Greater Oxford	Over / (Under) the average £	Harmonisation effect over 3 years (per year) £
Oxford City	68	-23
South Oxfordshire Parishes	-122	41
Vale of White Horse Parishes	-112	37
Cherwell Parishes	-115	38
Maximum Variance	-122	41
Minimum Variance	68	-23

(N.B. a positive variance means the council tax would come down; a negative variance means that it needs to go up)

The difference between the highest and lowest Band D in the new North Oxfordshire and Ridgeway unitary authorities is not as large as that for Greater Oxford therefore the harmonisation could be undertaken over a shorter period:

Table 5.16: North Oxfordshire and Ridgeway Council Tax Harmonisation

	Years to Harmonise	Maximum Average Harmonisation upwards £	Maximum Average Harmonisation downwards £
North Oxfordshire	1	-15.00	14.00
Ridgeway	2	-44.00	32.00

Unitary status and need for additional special expenses calculations

Council tax charging in Oxford City is different to that in the non-City areas being brought into the greater Oxford area. This is because the non-Oxford City areas rely more heavily on services being provided by the parishes. Due to this there is a relatively large difference between the district council tax of the City area and the new areas brought into Greater Oxford.

Based on the 2025/26 council tax levels, the average council tax for the new Greater Oxford area would be £2,184.88 excluding the parish charge and existing Oxford City Special Expenses.

However given the amount of the difference between the district charge from the City and that of the parished areas brought into the new unitary, along with the differences in the parish related band D, this is likely to be due to a disparity between the services provided by parishes in the Oxford City Area and those provided by parishes in the parished areas being brought into Greater Oxford. When there

is a difference between areas for charging purposes there must be an adjustment called “special expenses” to remove double taxation. This would be in addition to the special expenses currently forming part of the council tax calculations for the current City Council. A rough estimate of the effect of this would produce the Greater Oxford harmonisation position as the following:

Table 5.17: Greater Oxford Council Tax Harmonisation Including Special Expenses Adjustment

Current Council	2025/26 Overall Band D (excluding police) £	Increase / (Decrease) to Weighted Average £	Increase / (Decrease) %	4.99% Increase on Weighted Average £	Total Increase £	Revised Council Tax £	Total Increase %
Oxford *	2,180.65	(41.27)	(1.89)	106.75	65.48	2,246.13	3.00
South Oxfordshire	2,062.64	76.74	3.72	106.75	183.49	2,246.13	8.90
Vale of the White Horse	2,073.09	66.29	3.20	106.75	173.04	2,246.13	8.35
Cherwell	2,069.90	69.48	3.36	106.75	176.23	2,246.13	8.51
Weighted Average = Total Council Tax Requirement divided by Tax base 2,139.38				Gap from largest to smallest 118.01			

* Excluding All Special Expenses

This would also influence the phasing of harmonisation that could be applied. This can be shown as follows:

Table 5.18: Greater Oxford Council Tax Harmonisation Modelling Including Special Expenses Adjustment

Greater Oxford	Over / (Under) the average £	Harmonisation effect over 3 years (per year) £	Harmonisation effect over 2 years (per year) £
Oxford City	41	-14	-21
South Oxfordshire Parishes	-77	26	39
Vale of White Horse Parishes	-66	22	33
Cherwell Parishes	-69	23	35
Maximum Variance	-77	26	39
Minimum Variance	41	-14	-21

Adult Social Care Premium

Districts and Borough Councils can only increase council tax up to their referendum limit of 2.99% without undertaking a costly and uncertain referendum. On creation of the unitary authorities, the district element of the precept would become part of the new unitary council precept to which the unitary cap of 4.99% would be applied. With increasing social care costs, it is assumed that the social care precept of the additional 2% will continue. This therefore would result in additional Council Tax income that is not included in existing financial projections.

The benefit would occur every year and compound on the previous benefit. A summary of this benefit by unitary of a single year effect is as follows:

Table 5.19: Estimated Financial Impact of Adult Social Care Premium

	Greater Oxford	North Oxfordshire	Ridgeway
Taxbase relating to District Area	75,437	99,143	104,446
Weighted Average Band D Council Tax (£)	2,184.88	2,055.58	N/a
County Council Element (£)	1,911.40	1,911.40	N/a
Weighted Average Band D District Element Council Tax (£)	273.48	144.18	156.21
District Element Council Tax (£)	20,630,237	14,294,778	16,315,463
Additional 2% increase (£)	412,605	285,896	326,309

5.10 The Oxford Model

The Oxford Model is an innovative approach adopted by Oxford City Council to enhance its financial independence, maintain high-quality services and support local employment. It involves "insourcing" services rather than outsourcing them to private companies. This model allows the Council to retain control over service quality, keeps more of its spend and employment local, and ensures that profits are reinvested back into the community rather than going to external shareholders.

As part of this approach, Oxford City Council owns two wholly owned companies:

- Oxford Direct Services (ODS): Responsible for waste collection, street cleaning, property maintenance HRA and GF, highways, and other direct services including fully commercial services.
- OX Place: Focuses on designing and building new homes for Oxford, contributing to affordable housing development in the city.

The model generates around £10 million annually, which supports frontline services and other Council activities. The profits made by these companies go directly back to the Council, helping to fund essential public services, reducing dependency on government funding, and enhancing financial stability. By keeping services in-house and more of its spend local, the Council creates high-quality local employment opportunities and maintains control over the quality and delivery of its services. This approach aligns services closely with local needs and expectations. The Council's companies are also empowered to bid for external contracts, providing additional revenue streams and reinforcing the financial sustainability of the model.

The Oxford model will also contribute towards delivery of the growth agenda that is proposed to be adopted by the Greater Oxford unitary council. OX Place is well placed to contribute to the delivery of housing across new sites released through a Green Belt review. These are by their nature likely to be less challenging or costly to develop than many of the small, constrained sites within the city that it has brought forward. ODS could relatively easily expand direct service operations it currently delivers within the to the wider Greater Oxford geography.

No assumptions are made about the nature of service delivery by the Northern Oxfordshire or Ridgeway unitary councils. Across the Northern Oxfordshire geography the existing West Oxfordshire and Cherwell District Councils have a track record of primarily Teckal company and in-house service delivery, while across the Ridgeway geography the existing West Berkshire Council and South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse District Councils have a track record of primarily outsourced service delivery.

5.11 Growth

Council Tax

Oxford City Council has a demonstrable track record of delivering strong growth even though the boundary of the authority limits land availability and provides additional difficulties due to the urban nature of the area. The new Greater Oxford unitary would look to continue the drive for growth both in dwellings to meet housing need and in commercial capacity.

The Council has identified areas of green belt to provide sufficient supply to build 40,000 new dwellings, 16,000 more than the Standard Method. For the purposes of providing an indication of the additional income arising from the growth, completions have been assumed to start from 2030/31. The council tax band D used for these indicative figures is the weighted average for the Greater Oxford unitary using 2025/26 council tax levels; this ensures comparability with the rest of the financial analysis within this proposal.

This growth would result in an increase in Council Tax income from the current baseline as follows:

Table 5.20: Financial Impact of Greater Oxford Dwelling Growth 2030-31 to 2040-41

	2030/31	2031/32	2032/33	2033/34	2040/41
Additional Number of Properties (Cumulative)	1,081	3,243	6,486	10,810	40,000
Band D Equivalent	900.3	2,700.8	5,401.5	9,002.6	33,312.0
Additional Council Tax (Cumulative) (£'s)	1,966,951	5,900,853	11,801,707	19,669,511	72,782,650

Business Rates

The Greater Oxford proposals would see the creation of up to 12.8m sq. ft of employment space. We have modelled potential Business Rate income based on an assumed 5.9 million – 9.6 million square feet of research and development and laboratory space and 2.1 million – 3.2 million square feet of other commercial space which is split between retail, hospitality and leisure accommodation and office space.

The calculation of Rateable Values varies depending on use, location and size. Since all of this additional growth would be outside the current City boundary, the rates have been taken to be out of town and then apportioned between the different size categories of properties based on the existing business rates profiles with the existing City boundary. Properties have been assumed to only start being completed from 2030/31 and then to follow a bell curve profile. The tables below show exemplifications of additional business rates income based on the lower end of the development area and the higher end of the development so that the range of potential additional income can be seen. The figures do not include any inflationary increases and so are at 2025/26 rates multiplier

levels and do not make any assumptions about future business rates resets. The expected total development area is in the following range:

Table 5.21: Estimated Development Area Growth in Greater Oxford

	Development Area (Million square feet)	Development Area (Million square feet)
	Lower End	Upper End
Research & Development Laboratory Space	0.27	0.44
	5.63	9.16
	5.90	9.60
Retail, Hospitality and Leisure	1.45	2.21
Office Accommodation	0.65	0.99
	2.10	3.20
Total Assumed Commercial Development	8.00	12.80

This results in the following business rates growth, shown below on a cumulative basis:

Table 5.22: Estimated Business Rates Income Growth in Greater Oxford

	2030/31 £	2031/32 £	2032/33 £	2033/34 £	2040/41 £
Additional Business Rates (Cumulative)					
Lower End	1,300,951	2,601,902	5,203,804	7,805,706	26,019,020
Upper End	2,096,828	4,193,656	8,387,309	12,580,962	41,936,539

The level of additional revenue from business rates, even at the lower level, is significant and, when combined with the additional council tax income, demonstrates that the Greater Oxford growth strategy would aid in the future sustainability of the new council in addition to benefits to the residents and the economy.

Other benefits of growth

There are direct benefits of this growth to housing need and the economy. If the new council follows Oxford City Council's current planning policies, 40% of the new homes (estimated total of 40,000) would be required to be social housing. These could then be brought into the Council's existing Housing Revenue Account, increasing the number of new council homes by over 16,000 and thus contributing significantly to dealing with the demand for low cost good quality housing.

For the affordable housing production that followed the model established within Oxford City of the City Council's wholly owned housing company developing affordable and social housing for the City, surpluses from the development of these homes would be retained in the public sector to improve

local services and to improve the financial position of the new Greater Oxford unitary council. The additional financial return from dividends paid by the company has not been included in the finances within this proposal since profit would be dependent on the specific schemes; the additional returns from the company would further improve the financial position and sustainability of Greater Oxford.

5.12 Housing Revenue Account (HRA)

Background

The Housing Revenue Account (HRA) was established under the Local Government and Housing Act 1989 as a ring-fenced account within the General Fund which must be kept separate from the rest of the General Fund. It records all income and expenditure relating to the ownership and management of a council's social housing stock. Typical income streams include rents from tenants and service charges. Expenditure covers housing management costs, repairs and maintenance, capital investment in the stock, and the servicing of housing-related borrowing. In many local authorities, the housing stock has been transferred to another registered provider but where the houses have been retained by the council, the HRA plays a central role in delivering local housing strategies: maintaining and improving existing homes, ensuring compliance with housing standards and decarbonisation targets, and in some cases funding the development of new council housing.

The Oxford City HRA

Oxford City Council has retained its housing stock and, unlike many authorities, continues to grow its housing stock each year. In 2024/25, the HRA dwelling stock increased by 193; 97 houses and 96 flats. For Greater Oxford the assumption is that Oxford City Council's HRA will be wholly subsumed into the new Greater Oxford unitary authority since the entirety of the current boundary of Oxford City Council will be within the Greater Oxford area. This means the HRA, and its financial trajectory, will directly underpin the new authority's housing strategy from vesting day.

Oxford City Council's HRA budget for 2025/26 includes £60.9 million income from rents and service charges and expenditure of £59.7 million. This expenditure includes £15.3 million net interest costs. The surplus on the HRA for the year needs to be taken in the context of the longer term; the HRA is managed using a 30 year business plan to ensure that the account is viable over the long term.

The current HRA position is summarised as follows:

Table 5.23: Oxford City Council HRA Financial Metrics 2025-26

	Revenue Expenditure Budget	Forecast Total Funding	Forecast Net position (Surplus(-) / Deficit)	HRA Allocated Reserves	HRA Unallocated Reserves	Total Long Term HRA Borrowing (Capital Financing Requirement)	HRA External Debt	Total HRA Dwelling Assets
	£ million	£ million	£ million	£ million	£ million	£ million	£ million	£ million
Oxford City HRA	59.7	-60.9	-1.2	4.3	10.9	345.8	288.5	865.2

There are pressures on the HRA, partly due to national policies:

- Rent Increase Restriction - Rent increases were capped at 7% in 2023/24, even though inflation (CPI) was 10.1%;
- Foregone Rental Income - The rent cap led to weekly rent foregone of an aggregate of £76,724 for the 7,134 properties below formula rent.
- For 2024/25, the total rental income foregone due to the caps amounted to £4.1 million.

These restrictions on rent restrict the resources available to the HRA to produce additional social housing.

The Oxford City Council HRA is managed using three key metrics to ensure long-term viability:

- Interest Cover Ratio (ICR) - Target Minimum of 1.25 (2024/25 actual was 1.27)
- Loan to Value (LTV) - Maximum LTV of 65% (2024/25 actual was 40%)
- Debt / Turnover - Guideline of 5.0 / 6.0 (2024/25 actual was 4.9)

Adherence to these metrics gives confidence that the HRA is viable and sustainable in the longer term. If these targets are not achievable then the Business Plan budgets can be adjusted until they are.

The HRA is asset and capital investment driven, backed by income from rents. A long-term view therefore must be taken of any investment in the HRA. The current HRA capital includes the following key investment areas:

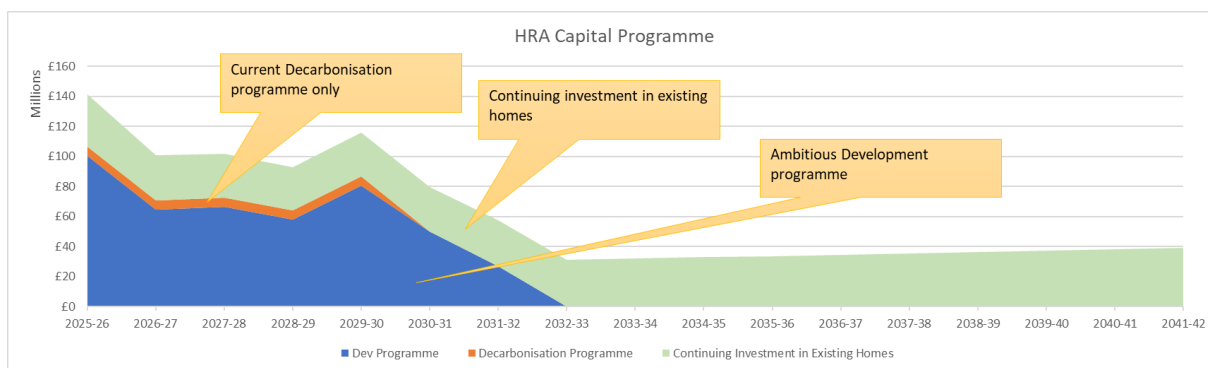


Fig 5.8: HRA Capital Programme

This shows that despite the financial pressures placed on the HRA through national policy, the Oxford City Council HRA has been well managed and is able to deliver new affordable housing. It is anticipated that a new Greater Oxford unitary council would continue to build on these achievements.

Delivery of new homes requires a high level of borrowing and to maintain the Interest Cover Ratio, the level of expenditure on new dwelling is necessarily limited. The current HRA business plan shows that the HRA will only just maintain the Interest Cover Ratio up to 2030/31 but will have additional capacity after that point:

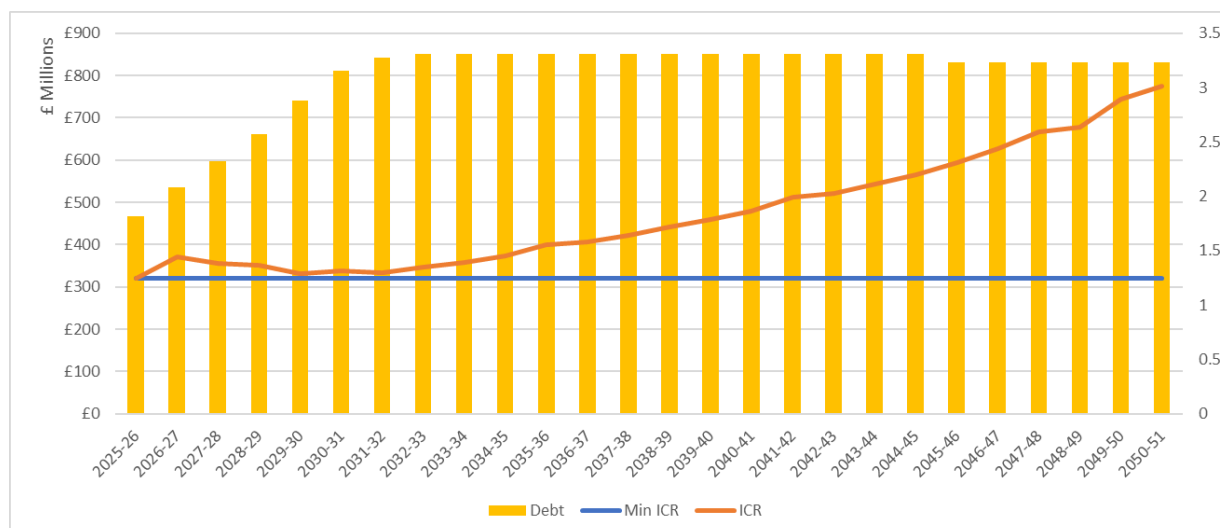


Fig 5.9: HRA Interest Cover Ratio (ICR) 2025-26 Business Plan

This profile aligns with the timing of the growth projections that could be achieved by the Greater Oxford unitary, demonstrating that the new unitary would have the capacity in the HRA to take additional dwellings arising from the growth agenda.

HRA Summary

The Oxford HRA contains some risks that will need to be managed, as Oxford City Council has done over the years, to ensure continuing sustainability. It also represents a major opportunity for the new Greater Oxford unitary. It brings with it a substantial income base, a large housing stock, and strategic capacity for new build. The capacity for new build will support the proposed continued growth agenda and be supported by the wholly owned housing company to deliver new stock and by the wholly owned company, Oxford Direct Services Limited, that delivers the maintenance and repair work on behalf of the HRA. Continuing the financial discipline currently employed in the HRA, the HRA could underpin the wider growth and regeneration strategy of the new authority.

Northern Oxfordshire and Ridgeway

Other than Oxford City Council only Cherwell District Council owns council housing across the proposed three unitary authorities' geography, with all other councils having previously transferred their stock to housing associations. Cherwell's 146 units include specialist assisted housing and general needs properties. This is below the 200-dwelling threshold required for an HRA. Therefore, it is assumed neither the proposed Northern Oxfordshire nor Ridgeway Councils would create an HRA.

5.13 Financial Conclusion

The opening position for the Greater Oxford unitary based on the disaggregated 2025/26 budgetary position is a deficit of £2.0 million and the other two unitaries have forecast small surpluses. While the shortfall in Greater Oxford would still require attention, all the forecast surpluses and deficits are relatively small in the context of local government and, given the size of the revenue expenditure for each new Council of between £396.3 million and £748.9 million, these variances would be manageable through routine financial management measures and the normal budgetary process.

Council tax harmonisation is one area that would have to be managed to balance between the financial impacts on the taxpayer and the equity between different council payers. Whereas the actual method chosen for harmonisation is a decision for the new unitaries, harmonisation could be achieved between one and two years. The challenge for the shadow authority will be to select an approach that secures long-term sustainability while distributing impacts fairly across communities.

The Housing Revenue Account (HRA) currently operated by Oxford City Council adds further weight to Greater Oxford's position, both from the perspective of showing how Oxford is different to its surrounding authorities, but also how a Greater Oxford unitary, in continuing the growth agenda currently adopted by Oxford City Council, could capitalise on the use of the HRA to take additional affordable housing stock. Oxford City Council's HRA currently manages over 8,000 homes and, along with the housing company, OX Place, provides an opportunity both to develop new housing and to manage that housing for the future on behalf of the citizens of the new unitary.

The balance sheet analysis shows that all three proposed unitary authorities have strong financial resilience when compared with relevant benchmark averages and there are no wide and unexpected variances in financial resilience measures between the proposed unitary authorities. Greater Oxford has a higher level of net assets and debt which is entirely consistent with being an HRA authority. Except for DSG deficits, which the Government has pledged to resolve, the key balance sheet measures are around or better than the average national position.

All authorities would start with above average levels of usable revenue reserves and strong balance sheets. On this basis it is anticipated that all three of the proposed unitary authorities will have the resources to finance the necessary transition and could also release capital resources to take advantage of the proposed flexible use of capital receipts.

The analysis of the costs and benefits of transition to unitary status and the transformation of service provision shows payback for the three unitary authorities is around year 4 after vesting day on 1st April 2028 for Greater Oxford and Northern Oxfordshire and year three for Ridgeway and that the with an ongoing financially sustainable position thereafter for all the three unitaries in this proposal. This position does not include the effect of the planned changes in waste collection and transfer, the additional council tax from the adult social care precept and the additional revenue from council tax and business rates growth. Combined with the strong balance sheet position this shows that none of the unitary authorities in this proposal will be looking for exceptional financial support. Additionally, this proposal will deliver growth which will benefit the citizens of the area and the wider national economy.

6 New Target Operating Model

This section sets out the proposed target operating model for the three unitary authorities (3UA). In this we will describe how services will be brought together to deliver better outcomes for residents across Oxfordshire. Grounded in the principles of early intervention and prevention, the model aims to anticipate need, reduce long-term demand, and support communities before challenges escalate.

The model uses place-based design to empower Oxfordshire and West Berkshire's towns and villages to support the priorities of their residents and businesses, while the city can provide for the city. Services will be co-designed and delivered through "right-sized" services, ensuring consistency where needed and flexibility where it matters.

6.1 Overview of New Unitary Authorities

One of the key opportunities of LGR is the ability to design authorities from first principles to address the distinctive challenge and opportunities of their specific place.

This is no mere administrative reorganisation – this is a once in a generation opportunity to create authorities that can efficiently and effectively meet needs and priorities of local communities. These councils will be focused on joined up delivery of services to provide integrated care and support to those who need it, ensuring that services are delivered in person-centric ways which respond to the specific priorities of each place. Through the prevention of crisis there will be savings to the cost of services through lower requirement for intensive interventions. But crucially more people will be supported before they require a statutory council service – including those most at risk of or already experiencing deprivation first hand.

The operating models for the new unitary authorities leverage fully the potential of unitarisation and devolution within their specific places. They provide a platform for deep transformation which improve outcomes while yielding optimal savings for services. The key to making savings for these new authorities will be through their preventative work.

Delivery of services will be tailored to meet the unique geographies and priorities of each place. This prevents services from being absorbed into larger authorities where the greater mix of needs will mean the complexities of each place would be lost in the scale of organisation. Working at this level means that Greater Oxford can deliver its full ambitions for growth of housing and businesses, enabling Northern Oxfordshire and Ridgeway to grow in the ways which work best for them in the context of their settlements and rural communities.

Bringing together social care, education, housing and public health functions sets the foundation strong public service reform. This will enable all three unitary authorities to achieve their ambitions to achieve healthier, longer, more prosperous lives for all.

6.2 Key Service Target Operating Models

6.2.1 Target Operating Model at a Glance

The three unitary approach sets out a bold ambition to unlock Oxfordshire's full future potential by delivering the best possible outcomes for our people, places, and economy. To deliver this, we have set out a target operating model that is both robust and deliverable, ensuring safe, legal, and effective services, while capitalising on this once-in-a-generation opportunity to design innovative, future-ready organisations that are built to meet the evolving needs of our communities.

At its core, the target operating model is driven by the six critical dimensions outlined in the Case for Three Unitary Authorities at section 4:

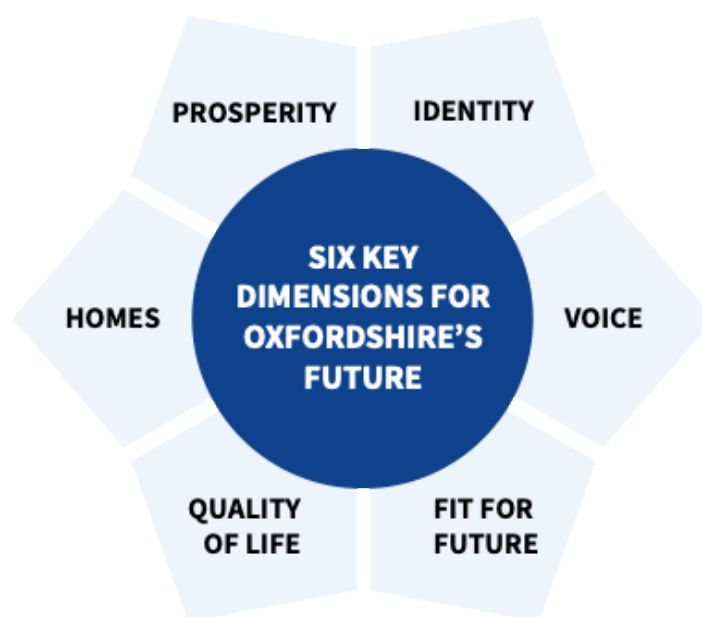


Fig 6.1: Six key dimensions for Oxfordshire's future

Each part of the operating model, from Place to Enabling Services, is intentionally designed to make the most of the opportunity LGR presents to build services from first principles that better meet the needs of the people they serve. Individually, each component builds on deep understanding of the local areas and communities, to innovate and reimagine how services are organised and delivered. Collectively, they form a coherent, future-ready system that gives each individual authority, and Oxfordshire as a whole, the strongest possible foundations for achieving its vision.

We will realise this vision by focusing on three transformative shifts:

- **Driving housebuilding and economic growth:** Enabling unitary authorities to plan and deliver the required number of homes where they are needed, promote growth and prosperity across the city region while protecting and enhancing access to Oxfordshire's countryside.
- **Putting residents at the centre:** Empowering Oxfordshire's towns and villages to speak for their residents and businesses, while the city speaks for the city. Delivering meaningful localism through an engaged community and a networked, prevention-led public sector that is responsive and supportive.

- **Focus on prevention:** Unlocking the strength of communities to create successful places, rooted in stable work and good homes, to work together to build resilience and tackle local challenges, reducing the need for council intervention, and enabling services to be delivered in a cost-effective, efficient and considerate manner.

We have outlined how the same principles apply consistently across Greater Oxford, Northern Oxfordshire, and Ridgeway. Each area has distinct priorities and profiles, and therefore place-based models will adapt to reflect local circumstances. It is our intention to collaborate with partners in these areas to design in consistency and join-up where beneficial, while enabling locally led delivery wherever possible.

6.2.2 Early Intervention and Prevention

The new operating model across each of the three unitary authorities will have, at its core, a focus on prevention. We do not propose to respond to the national demand and resource challenges across Adults, Children's, SEND and homelessness by delivering services in the same way across a larger footprint, but by purposefully pivoting to prevention-first, community-centred approaches.

We know that most people within Greater Oxford, Ridgeway and the Northern Oxfordshire unitary areas rely on support from friends, family, and local community networks, which helps them to thrive and navigate challenges before they escalate. For those with weaker community connections or more complex needs, public services are essential in providing additional support and supporting local connection.

A similar approach is already being implemented in organisations from London Boroughs and city unitary authorities to county unitary authorities, based on an understanding that investment in tailored prevention approaches results in improved outcomes and reduced costs⁴⁷.

Case Study: Rose Hill Community Centre, Oxford

Enabling community connection

Opened in 2016, Rose Hill Community Centre brings together community facilities, and personal support networks under one roof. The centre is home to the Rose Hill & Donnington Advice Centre, which works with residents to provide advice on benefits, debt and housing issues. It is also home to the Early Pregnancy Assessment Unit and the Thames Valley Police.

A well-used and vibrant community space, it serves a wide and diverse community. Facilities include a gym, a dance studio, a library and other rooms for hire – which serve groups from the Syrian Sisters, a refugee support group, to a weekly food larder. At the heart of the centre is the cafe, bringing diverse groups together.

Whether used for a cup of tea and a chat, or to attend a range of community events, Rose Hill Community Centre is a place that enables community cohesion, trust and a sense of belonging. These feelings help prevent isolation, reduce a risk of crisis and enable people to seek help early – reducing demand into statutory services and spend on long-term acute support.

⁴⁷ ICC work in Cheshire East, Fife, Swindon and Liverpool

The operating model of the new authorities will focus on a collaborative approach with residents, partners and with the other new unitary authorities. It will empower local community-led prevention, fostered through an enabling approach towards communities and partners to support residents. This will be supported through social infrastructure, community governance that centres resident voices and adaptive commissioning and grant processes.

This depth of understanding will be enabled by having three smaller, more responsive organisations, underpinned by a strong insight and data-led approach, that deeply understand their resident needs and communities, as opposed to being lost within a much larger footprint – as is the case in some current service delivery. The recent report from Collaborate CIC highlights that place-based, relational approaches – working locally, focusing on relationships and prevention – can deliver better outcomes as well as delaying and prevent demand.⁴⁸

There will be a single pathway into the prevention offer delivered by the three unitary authorities, which will be complementary to that offered within the community. It will focus on building resilience, through collaborating with partners, co-locating support and services and using shared insights to design better, and more connected, support pathways.

This pathway will bring together services currently delivered across different layers of government and within different teams – including housing adaptations, homelessness prevention and information and advice typically located within social care services. The ethos of early intervention and prevention will be felt within all the people-focused services across the three unitaries. This means that all statutory services will have a ‘no wrong door’ approach to residents starting their contact with the local authority and will enable a holistic approach to supporting resident need and resolving challenges.

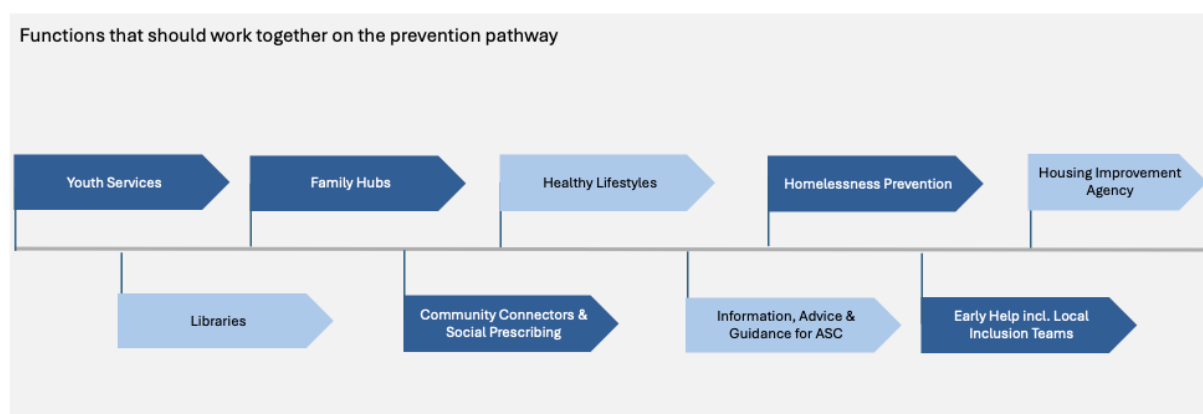


Fig 6.2: Recommended teams who would work together on the EI&P pathway

The early intervention and prevention approach will deliver effective early help through community-based support to enable everyday wellbeing, digital advice and guidance to give timely access to information and advice, and links to statutory services where a household’s needs are more complex. A coordinated, integrated approach will ensure that people get the right help at the right time from people they trust.

⁴⁸ [The case for putting place-based, relational approaches at the heart of local government reorganisation, Collaborate CIC 2025](#)

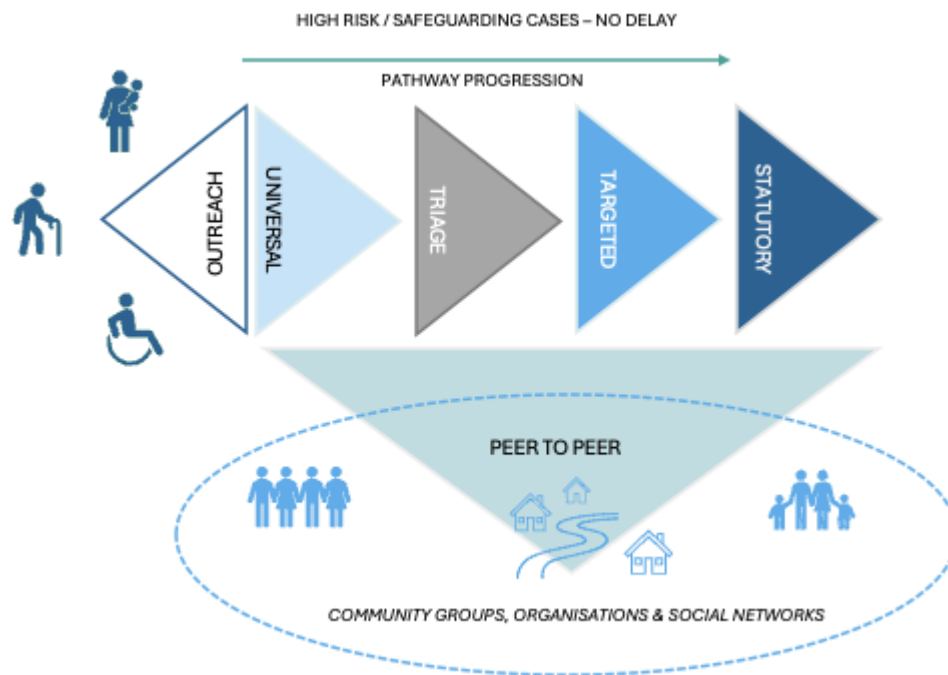


Fig 6.3: The Early Intervention & Prevention Pathway

Through co-design with residents and partners, each of the three unitary areas will have the opportunity to develop a response to their specific opportunities, rather than delivering a one-size fits all approach to service delivery.

This offer will be enabled by a newly developed Data and Insights function, which would bring together data from statutory services, nationally available data sets, and information on resident journeys, to be able to pinpoint both the root causes of demand and the moments where intervention is required to prevent someone from falling into crisis – either now or in the future, and enabling action.

This will provide the basis for proactive outreach to wrap around short-term support to residents and households to prevent a longer-term crisis – this may be a holistic approach to council tax arrears over a movement to punitive action, connecting a bereaved family who have used ‘Tell Us Once’ to update their status with community support or organising a Team Around a Child where school absenteeism has become a challenge.

Staff have the capacity to undertake this work through the new unitaries better utilising Artificial Intelligence and digital solutions for those who are digitally connected – using good practice such chatbots to connect residents instantly to further information or enabling the completion of self-assessments and referrals online.

Existing community assets, such as libraries, community centres, children’s centres and leisure centres, will be used as hubs for the early intervention and prevention pathway – bringing together a wide range of council and partner services. This way of working will align with the Family Hub and Neighbourhood Health approaches – which requires hubs that either contain or can connect to services ranging from early years play activities and health visiting, to debt and housing advice.

As an example, libraries could provide local face to face support for residents via drop ins and advice sessions; spaces for community-led activity such as parent/guardian-led homework clubs along with digital skills training and cultural programmes to combat isolation and free computers, digital support and Wi-Fi will be maintained in every branch. This enables the library and wider cultural offer to continue to play a part in developing thriving communities with a sense of belonging, whilst also playing an essential role in connecting residents to support.

Case Study: Westgate Library, Oxford

Improving service accessibility through a 'one stop shop' approach.

In January 2022, Oxford City Council relocated its face-to-face customer service offer into the Westgate Library, co-locating for the first time with Citizen's Advice Oxford. The space was developed further in September 2023, to provide greater privacy for people seeking advice and support.

Being in a central shopping area has increased accessibility and encouraged residents to engage with and receive advice in a non-threatening environment. The accessible nature of the space saw customer volumes increased by almost 8% compared to the previous year. Co-locating with Citizen's Advice has enabled more direct access to independent debt and housing advice, especially in the context of the rising cost of living. It has also enabled the service to be delivered in a more cost-effective way.

The library also hosts the Digital Cafe, a partnership with Oxfordshire County Council and the ICB, supporting residents to develop their digital skills, reducing isolation and exclusion.

The people who use the service rate their satisfaction at 97% - a testament to the impact of the wraparound support available.

Delivering services locally or through mobile options improves accessibility, especially for those on low incomes or with mobility challenges, while tailoring provision to local needs and strengthening community capacity and resilience.

We will embed close working with the Public Health function across the three unitaries, to ensure a focus on reducing health inequalities and improving overall wellbeing. Our proposal suggests a single Director of Public Health for Greater Oxford and Northern Oxfordshire, and one to cover Ridgeway – building on existing infrastructure in the two areas. Embedding public health approaches, and the close integration with health partners through strong governance will reinforce our commitment to truly partner-led ways of working.

A focus on health and wellbeing will be further enhanced by the embedding of the Active Wellbeing Offer approach across the three-unitary footprint, aligning with the direction of travel from Sports England and the LGA, as contract terms end and offer the opportunity for innovation and transformation. It is recommended that new services feature close partnerships and governance arrangements with community partners, including residents, the VCSE and health.

This not only enables the co-location of health, wellbeing, and prevention services presents a transformative opportunity but the embedding of the principles of the offer, unlocking long-term improved wellbeing for residents:

- **Preventative focus:** Leisure centres and services should help to prevent ill health, not just respond to it
- **Co-location & placed-based planning:** Bringing together leisure, health care and social services, in places people already use to address wellbeing holistically
- **Stronger health outcomes:** Leisure providers will be judged on health and wellbeing outcomes (such as improved mental health and social inclusion), as well as more traditional metrics like membership numbers
- **Sustainability & affordability:** With the market facing challenges following long-term impacts of Covid-19 and rising costs, there will be an emphasis on making leisure services both environmentally and financially sustainable
- **Equality, diversity & inclusion:** A drive to reduce inequalities in access to activity, especially for people and communities who have traditionally been less active or served by leisure facilities.

Our ability to deliver prevention-forward solutions to resident needs will also be supported by our wider commitment to housing growth from the three unitary model – with Greater Oxford delivering 40,000 new homes (of which 40% would be affordable), alongside the Heyford Park new town in Northern Oxfordshire and other settlements continuing to grow with home building appropriate to their local context and character. This will reduce demand for temporary accommodation, as well as providing the opportunity for other accessible housing that could provide lifelong independence for residents.

Greater Oxford

Greater Oxford is area of contrasts, with some of the most affluent areas in the country alongside neighbourhoods facing significant deprivation, health inequalities, and economic challenges. While the city benefits from world-class academic institutions and overall good health indicators in many wards, issues of deprivation continue to impact vulnerable populations. The pressure on services is intensified by complex needs that fall below statutory support thresholds and the high cost of living. Greater Oxford faces the most significant housing pressures, with high levels of both private and social rented housing, higher rents and significant amounts of supported accommodation.

An early intervention and prevention (EI&P) approach within the city region should consider how to build resilience within the population, with a particular focus on connecting residents to stable employment, support on debt management & benefit advice, rent and tenancy support & advice and mental wellbeing support.

At its core, the EI&P function will be focused on working alongside communities, bringing currently disparate functions together to provide a single seamless service. By concentrating on the strengths of households and therefore reducing the level of crisis that residents experience, it will also reduce the long-term support they would require from the council. The new unitary authorities will work alongside communities and partners taking a systems leadership role to support more resilient and better-connected communities.

Case Study: Oxford Hub Slow Cooker Project

Place-based community-led action

Oxford Hub is a place-based charity that connects people and organisations to create positive social change across Oxford. They support community-led projects that address local challenges such as inequality, social isolation and environmental sustainability. Through volunteering, training, and collaboration, Oxford Hub empowers individuals and groups to act on issues like education, mental health and food insecurity.

The recent Slow Cooker Project is a grassroots community that has promoted sustainable access to healthy, affordable food by teaching families to cook nutritious, diverse meals with minimal resources. Families have learned to create healthy meals using affordable ingredients, minimising food waste and energy use. The grassroots community now has 16 participants a week, feeding up to 90 people per week for under £2 per head.

Northern Oxfordshire

Northern Oxfordshire faces some of the opportunities and challenges that are typical of many rural areas with market towns, where communities are dispersed across a large geographical footprint. Areas of deprivation, with challenges around child poverty, can be found around the more urban area of Banbury – with affluent rural areas found elsewhere in the authority's boundaries. Increasing pressures around homelessness have been emerging in recent years, with a particular challenge around rough sleeping in the West of the unitary. This area had the highest self-reported level of middling health and wellbeing, alongside the largest population of adults with no qualifications, speaking to a need to meet a range of needs.

Across Northern Oxfordshire, a prevention approach should focus on enabling quality lives across the footprint. This should include targeted healthy lifestyle interventions to ensure lifelong wellbeing, support managing private tenancies, domestic abuse outreach and training and reskilling support for residents who wish to access employment.

Given the rurality of Northern Oxfordshire, delivery of this support will consider the use of social, digital and mobile approaches to provide services. This will mitigate against a postcode lottery of support and reduce the risk of rural isolation.

Ridgeway

Ridgeway will have the lowest levels of deprivation out of the three areas but have a comparative higher number of older adults living in the area. Whilst data indicates generally positive health outcomes in the area, a prevention approach should focus on ensuring people are able to age well and independently.

This approach will connect residents to community and peer support to establish and build upon social relationships, and ensure households have the information available to continue to manage finances into older age, including keeping homes safe and warm, especially given the prevalence of owner-occupiers in the area. Delivery of support will be sensitive to the rurality of the area, considering mobile delivery and mitigating risks of digital exclusion.

Further detail on local context and constraints across Oxfordshire that we have considered in the model development, as well as further blueprint detail on the recommended EI&P operating model can be found in Appendix G.1.

6.2.3 Adult Social Care

The three unitary authorities (3UA) model is the best way to achieve our vision for delivering Adult Social Care across the Oxfordshire and West Berkshire footprint. This is a vision that sees person-centred care, delivered locally and tailored to the demand and cost pressures that each of the three unitary authorities experience. Service delivery approaches will be rooted in a detailed understanding of local community strengths, assets and challenges, and partnership working notably with community partners and the NHS.

The recent Impower/DCN report ‘The power of prevention and place in new unitary councils’ highlights the opportunity local government reorganisation provides to develop a localised, place-based ethos into adult social care. The 3UA responds to this opportunity.⁴⁹

This vision also aligns with the government’s 10 Year Health Plan, with its focus on community support, digital opportunities to enable wellbeing and a focus on prevention. Building upon the role that districts already play in supporting the reduction of health inequalities in their local areas⁵⁰ the shift to neighbourhood working can be much more effectively delivered through a smaller and more local model of service delivery. In a social care context, this could include working in collaboration to avoid hospital admissions through embedding multi-disciplinary approaches in line with the early intervention and prevention approaches.

Building upon the existing ‘Oxfordshire Way’ strategy held at county level with an emphasis on community resilience, and work underway within the different districts, the unitary model will enable service delivery that is more closely connected to their communities, and that places their co-production at the centre of service delivery, enabled through being delivered closer to communities, in geographies that make sense to them.

Our proposed way of working also seeks to ensure Adult Social Care works alongside other areas of the local authority. This includes collaborative working on the prevention pathway, to ensure fewer residents require long-term support and engagement with housing pathways that ensure homes are safe and support independence. It also centres working with Children’s Social Care in delivering an All-Age Disability approach that stops young people feeling ‘in limbo’⁵¹ in their teenage years and instead is focused on enabling young people to build an independent life, whatever that may look like for them.

Both existing unitary services across this footprint have been noted by the Care Quality Commission as providing ‘Good’ services, with marked areas of strength. However, there were areas of critical improvement identified. For Oxfordshire, these included meeting complex & diverse needs, rushed hospital discharge, a lack of urgency in managing all safeguarding enquiries and varied support between urban and rural areas. West Berkshire had improvement areas highlighted in ensuring services are genuinely prevention-focused and developing a vibrant, modern care market. We believe

⁴⁹ [The Power of Prevention and Place in New Unitary Councils](#)

⁵⁰ King’s Fund & DCN, Delivering Better Health Outcomes

⁵¹ Quote from young resident voice in Oxfordshire’s Care Quality Commission report

all these challenges can be effectively met within a three unitary authority model and set up the organisations to be ready for any further reforms in the years to come.

Whilst having distinct service delivery models will enable the unitary authorities to tailor services to their local populations, we also see partnership working as being central to this model. We would envision retaining the close collaboration with Buckinghamshire, Oxfordshire & Berkshire West (BOB) ICB whilst they go through transformation. This includes exploring how existing strong collaboration at a county-wide level through Section 75 funding arrangements and innovative use of the Better Care Fund could continue across the 3UA footprint. Continued funding collaboration with Health may also support the unlocking of shared assets and joint working around specialist housing and health developments that would achieve preventative outcomes for the whole health and care system.

We would also propose working with the other two unitary authorities to collaboratively commission services that cross boundaries, to mitigate against localised competition for placements, and enable collaboration with the wider provider market.

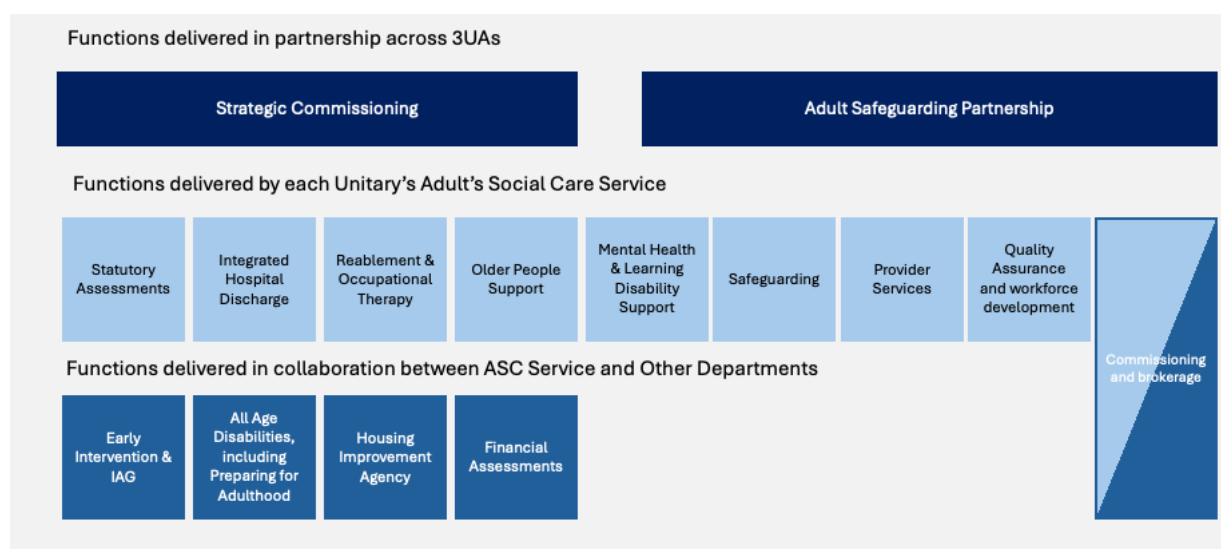


Fig 6.4: Functions of the future ASC model

Greater Oxford

Greater Oxford's adult population is markedly distinct from the wider Oxfordshire area, characterised by fewer older adults and a higher proportion of working-age residents, in part inflated by the presence of the university, but also typical of an urban region. This demographic profile means that adult social care in the city must deliver both preventative and long-term support to a diverse and growing community. This includes the highest proportion of adults with mental health needs (45% of Oxfordshire's current demand for support⁵²) an older population experiencing significant loneliness and a high rate of hospital admissions due to falls⁵³.

Social care support will focus on enabling independence for all age groups, especially through short-term support and meaningful employment pathways. The city's proven strengths, especially in innovative housing solutions, position it to pioneer a transformative approach to accommodation for

⁵² Oxfordshire JSNA

⁵³ Oxfordshire JSNA

both older adults and those with learning disabilities and mental health needs, shifting away from expensive residential placements.

Case Study – Oxfordshire Health & Homelessness Inclusion Team

Preventing homelessness and enabling independence after a hospital admission

This team was established in 2021, with the explicit aim of preventing rough sleeping, supporting planned, timely discharges from hospital and preventing (re)admissions where a person's needs can be better met in the community.

It brings together teams from health, housing, adult social care and the voluntary sector to deliver a person-centred approach to stepping a person out of hospital and into long-term housing with wrap-around transitional support.

The initial evaluation of the team's work found that in 2021/22 it had delivered savings across multiple systems, including: 89% reduction in hospital bed days, saving £657,00; £483,000 saved on preventing hospital admissions; and c£100,000 preventing rough sleeping and homelessness. In 2024-25 they supported 300 people out of hospital into settled accommodation, with only one person returning to rough sleeping and a 51% reduction in mental health readmissions. Community-based services supported 200 people to maintain or move into new accommodation.

North Oxfordshire

According to Newton analysis provided by the county, North Oxfordshire will see a 14% increase in demand for services by 2040 – rising to have the highest level of Adult Social Care demand in Oxfordshire under the current model of service delivery. North Oxfordshire also has a comparatively high disabled child population, that will need effective support as they step into adulthood. This will be a model case for the need for a collaborative approach between Adult Social Care and Children's Social Care, that will be designed into the ways of working for the service.

The new unitary should consider how it can develop hyper local methods of support for residents in rural areas to tackle risks around isolation and long stretches of time spent travelling to physical support services, including considering how technology can be used to maintain relationships and enable self-management of conditions.

As part of the new unitary authorities' approach to service delivery and market management, there is an opportunity to review the comparatively high number of bed-based care schemes in North Oxfordshire and the wider market with a focus on enabling people to live and age well at home.

Ridgeway

On vesting day, Ridgeway will have the largest population of residents drawing on support from Adult Social Care – aligned with both the unitary authorities' size and the larger number of older adults living across the area. With around a third of districts within the footprint experiencing geographical deprivation – being at a distance from social or health physical infrastructure – there is an opportunity to ensure that residents are enabled to live well at home for as long as possible, in partnership with the Early Intervention & Prevention offer.

The new unitary will have the opportunity to design new models of service delivery, that connect communities to access support independently (via travel training and investment in rural transport networks) and to develop localised community-led methods of support, building upon local community assets.

There will also be a focus on delivering person-centred, independence-focused care for all residents, and particularly those on mental health pathways. Multi-agency teams will be utilised to support residents leaving hospital to support them into safe and secure housing, employment and to enable management of ongoing mental health needs.

Existing county wide partnerships where there is a strong case for continuing (e.g. the Adults Safeguarding Board) should be retained to bring together statutory and non-statutory organisations and support these through their connection to a more localised service delivery model. Precise arrangements will need to be agreed by all affected unitaries. Market sustainability will be addressed through a joint commissioning function.

Further detail on local context and constraints across Oxfordshire that we have considered in the service model development, as well as further blueprint detail on the recommended operating model for Adult Social Care can be found in Appendix G.2.

6.2.4 Children's Social Care, SEND and Education

Children's Social Care

The three unitary authority model is optimal to deliver Children's Social Care across the Oxfordshire and West Berkshire footprint through establishing individual sovereign services. This provides an opportunity to deliver services on a smaller footprint, strengthen local leadership, partnerships and integration, and create greater alignment to place-based priorities. The Staff College notes the importance of local leadership in delivering children's services⁵⁴. The creation of three sovereign services ensures clear accountability and improved local leadership.

This local offer will encompass local land-use to boost placement sufficiency and enable adoption of housing-led innovations to improve outcomes for children and young people including better preparation for their transition into adulthood. This will translate to more local in-house provision predicated upon hyper-local insights, enabling children and young people to remain closer to their communities and family networks; engagement with children and young people to ensure their voices shape services will continue, building on the success of Oxford's Children and Young People Partnership.

The three unitary authorities will be committed to implementing the Family First Partnership Programme reforms and principles to ensure that early intervention and crisis prevention is at the heart of service delivery, enabling families to remain together.⁵⁵ Each unitary Children's Social Care Service will build on the existing Family Solutions model delivered through children and family centres and locality-based multi-disciplinary teams across Oxfordshire. This enhances existing

⁵⁴ [New Handbook Launched to Support Local Leadership of Children's Services in Unitary Councils, Staff College 2025](#)

⁵⁵ The Families First Partnership Programme Guide

workforce structures, partnerships and practices (i.e. team around the family and family group decision making) to establish a seamless continuum of support services that families can receive at the earliest possible point. The Children's Wellbeing and School Bill will also strengthen the role of education in multi-agency safeguarding arrangements to better protect the welfare of children and young people. These system changes will reduce family break down and prevent children and young people entering the care system.

Families across the three unitary authorities will have access to locality hubs and community venues across Oxfordshire that will be based closer to home and in areas of high need, encompassing co-located Family Help Teams and partners who operate on an integrated, shared practice model; overseen by qualified Family Help Lead Practitioners (FHLP). This will benefit families through proactive identification and engagement at the earliest point of need, with minimal handoffs and consistent support throughout social care in the form of an FHLP, who will foster and build trusted relationships with families and remain their lead point of contact. FHLPS will engage Lead Child Protection Practitioners (LCPP) and Multi-agency Child Protection Teams (MACPTs) to reduce the number of children and young people subject to child protection plans and prevent escalation of needs. MACPTs will also take ownership of achieving permanence for children in care.

Case Study: Youth Hub

Successful preventative work through co-location of activities and co-design with young people

The City Council's Youth Ambition Service has worked in collaboration with the County Council's Targeted Youth Support Service to build a state of the art Youth Hub within the Leys Leisure Centre which opened in July 2025.

The aims are to deliver a strong prevention-based model that provides young people with new opportunities to improve their mental and physical wellbeing, build skills for life and work and deliver a space to enjoy themselves and boost their confidence.

The Hub is designed to expand and diversify the current youth offer and includes social areas, quiet rooms, a teaching kitchen, a music/ media studio, a digital space and a climbing wall. Community partners and stakeholders have all been invited to collaborate and work in supporting our young people in this inspiring and safe environment.

The space has been co-designed with young people, and they have even supported in recruitment.

The Hub development has been funded by the Youth Investment Fund and has also been awarded a full 3 years of revenue funding to underpin its sustainable evolution.

Each of the three unitary councils will assess its own unique context and design reforms based on local priorities and the voices of families and communities. Critical strategic and operational considerations will be evaluated including deprivation levels, the urban versus rural distribution and existing local initiatives. This will ensure service configuration and workforce capabilities are best suited to address identified and anticipated needs, allowing national reforms to maximise its intended impact. For example, expertise possessed by LCPPs will vary based on local factors contributing to the requirement for initial child protection conferences. Further local initiatives and innovations based on best practice from Families First for Children pathfinder authorities will also be

considered. This includes using funding for family network support packages to allow family networks to step in, reducing dependency on children's services and preventing care entries.

Collaboration will continue across the county to maintain shared benefits and economies of scale on critical areas including joint commissioning of specialist provision, provider market engagement and development, foster carer recruitment and safeguarding partnerships, whilst retaining the ability to innovate and develop policies, practices and procedures based on local challenges and improvement levers. Precise arrangements will need to be agreed by all affected unitaries.

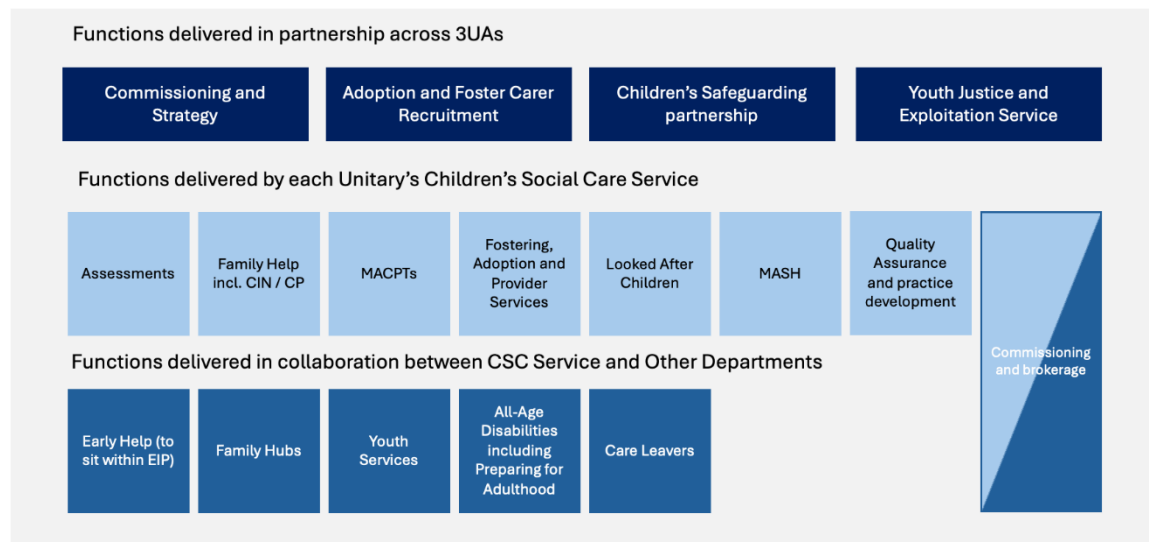


Fig 6.5: Functions of the future CSC model

Greater Oxford

For Greater Oxford this will mean developing a bespoke offer for its residents who inhabit an urban-city geography which presents its own set of challenges that adversely impact family resilience and contribute to its breakdown. This includes significant deprivation, long-term unemployment, complex mental health needs and substance misuse issues. Locality-based data and insights from partners will be harnessed to proactively meet need and respond rapidly to household requirements. Non-statutory assessments and functions including Early Help will be embedded within the early intervention and prevention function to coordinate appropriate support services, addressing concerns as they emerge. This will enable areas around the city region to benefit from existing strong good practice they may not currently be available to children and families.

North Oxfordshire

North Oxfordshire has the lowest number of children in care out of the three unitary areas, however it has the second highest proportion of children and young people subject to early help (32%), child in need (33%) and child protection cases (35%). This requires a bespoke local strategy to manage demand and prevent escalation of needs which could contribute to a significant number of children coming into care. Root causes contributing to family breakdown including poor health and housing instability (North Oxfordshire has the highest level of demand for secure suitable and permanent or long-term temporary accommodation for eligible cohorts) will need to be addressed.

Child poverty rates are higher in North of Oxfordshire compared to the South, alongside significant levels of social housing and unemployment (North Oxfordshire has the largest proportion of adults with no qualifications out of three unitary authorities). This context can lead to children coming into care as it contributes to relationship breakdown and child neglect. Areas where deprivation is prevalent (i.e. Banbury) experience particular risks to children including criminal exploitation (county lines).

Ridgeway

Ridgeway has the largest population out of the three unitary authorities which correlates to it having the highest number of service referrals (42%), early help assessments (45%), child in need (42%) and child protection cases (43%) across Oxfordshire. Given the rural geography of Ridgeway, more services are required within communities with access enabled through affordable transport infrastructure.

Whilst Ridgeway has the lowest level of deprivation out of the three unitary authorities and the highest level of owner-occupiers - the unitary is a mixture of affluent and deeply deprived areas. This requires services to be placed in areas of high need to ensure wider social determinants (i.e. parental mental health) that dictate child vulnerability are addressed through multi-agency ways of working; the EIP function will be critical to coordinating and providing this response. Service design and staff expertise will also be aligned to local requirements, including deployment of Specialist Lead Child Protection Practitioners who are adept in addressing the types of harm more prevalent in rural geographies (i.e. intrafamilial).

West Berkshire's existing CQC and Ofsted 'Good'- rated Children's Services team forms a strong foundation for extending provision across the southern Oxfordshire geography. This also mitigates potential risks around disaggregation of Oxfordshire County Council social services, with several operational staff being TUPE'd across from one existing Children's Services structure into another.

The existing safeguarding arrangements in the form of the Oxfordshire Safeguarding Children Partnership should be retained and expanded to include West Berkshire. Precise arrangements will need to be agreed by all affected unitaries.

Further detail on local context and constraints across Oxfordshire that we have considered in the model development, as well as further blueprint detail on the recommended Children's Social Care operating model can be found in Appendix G.3.

SEND and Education

The three unitary authorities model provides an opportunity to best deliver on the UK Government's ambition to create a more inclusive and accountable national system, that enables early identification of need and provides evidence-based support that helps children and young people with SEND to fulfil their potential and be set up for long-term success.

It is acknowledged SEND services across the country have experienced rising demand - Oxfordshire saw a 14% increase in the number of children and young people with EHCPs from 2023/24 to 2024/25, with key gaps in provision and limited capacity across critical areas including special school placements and specialist resource bases. These pressures have been further compounded by

widespread systemic failing across Oxfordshire's SEND Local Area Partnership as found by the Ofsted and Care Quality Commission assessment in 2023, including low parent and carer confidence, a disconnect between strategy and practice and sufficiency of provision; it is hoped that improvements have since been made and will be assessed part of the inspection, undertaken in October 2025 with no published report available at the time of writing.⁵⁶ Findings from this report will be incorporated into the design of the three unitary authorities, during the implementation period.

The 3UA proposal is best placed, with its strong local ethos, to land the significant systems reset needed with the children, parents, education and care providers of the wider SEND community. Many of the failures in the inspection can be seen as characteristic of a larger remote authority, something the 3UA would be able to address.

The County Council has reached a fiscally unsustainable position with its high needs block deficit to reach a £100m by March 2026. The deficit is primarily driven by expensive private and independent (out of area) placements due to an insufficient number of special schools. Home to school transport expenditure has also steeply risen because of the rural geography and dispersed placement of services. Most importantly, this has contributed to a negative experience for children and families, who have found the current system difficult to navigate and insufficient capacity has meant that children and young people are not able to continue their development in settings most appropriate for their needs. Data from March 2023 showed 33.5% of children were placed out of county and more than 20 miles from home. Home to School transport costs have risen significantly (around £40 million per annum in 24/25)⁵⁷ and now exceed annual expenditure to place children in Maintained Special Schools across Oxfordshire (£35m per annum in 23/24).⁵⁸ This money would be much better spent on supporting the provision of SEND education.

The three unitary authorities' model will establish sovereign SEND services built on local delivery with control over SEND budgets to design and deliver services based on each area's unique geography and needs profile. This model will enable enhanced integration and strengthened partnerships which can be coordinated effectively on a unitary footprint to drive operational efficiency. Each Unitary will work collaboratively with schools and education providers including Multi-Academy Trusts (MATs) to support early identification of needs and development of inclusive learning environments. Early intervention will also be further supported through multi-disciplinary Teams Around Schools and Inclusion Support Teams to improve outcomes for children and young people. This includes avoiding exclusions (Greater Oxford made up 65% of all exclusions in 24/25).

Central to the three unitary proposal is the expansion and acceleration of delivering SEND provision – each unitary will have control over its capital programme planning to develop better alignment between housing and school growth plans, enabling the ability to rapidly identify and release sites for special schools and resource bases.

In Greater Oxford, the opportunity to repurpose space and capacity created by falling rolls to build bespoke provision for the SEND cohort will be explored. This will contribute to the critical strategic objective of mobilising more local provision that enables children and young people to thrive within and remain close to their communities, maximising their time on developmental activities.

⁵⁶ [Area SEND inspection of Oxfordshire Local Area Partnership, OFSTED 2023](#)

⁵⁷ [Home to School Transport Update July 2024](#)

⁵⁸ [County LGR Briefing](#)

Operational staff will focus on building trust with parents to ensure the system is not perceived as being ‘adversarial’ but rather designed to meet the current and evolving needs of their children, ensuring that they are being set up to live independent lives as they enter adulthood. To meet this aim, SEND case workers will play a pivotal role in school transport decisions to boost independent travel where it is safe to do so, and wider improvement levers including procurement and commissioning will be identified to reduce spend. Improving the overall transport infrastructure to address transport poverty across the three unitary authorities, particularly Ridgeway will be a county-wide priority. Unitary authorities will also work closely with education partners to improve education, employment and training outcomes.

The SEND white paper which will outline a blueprint for system recalibration will be welcome and align to the ambition of the three unitary authorities proposal as the fundamental vision is to deliver high-quality support, strengthen mainstream schools to be more inclusive, restore parental faith in the system and better manage demand and expenditure through reducing reliance on costly provision that is contributing to the national crisis.

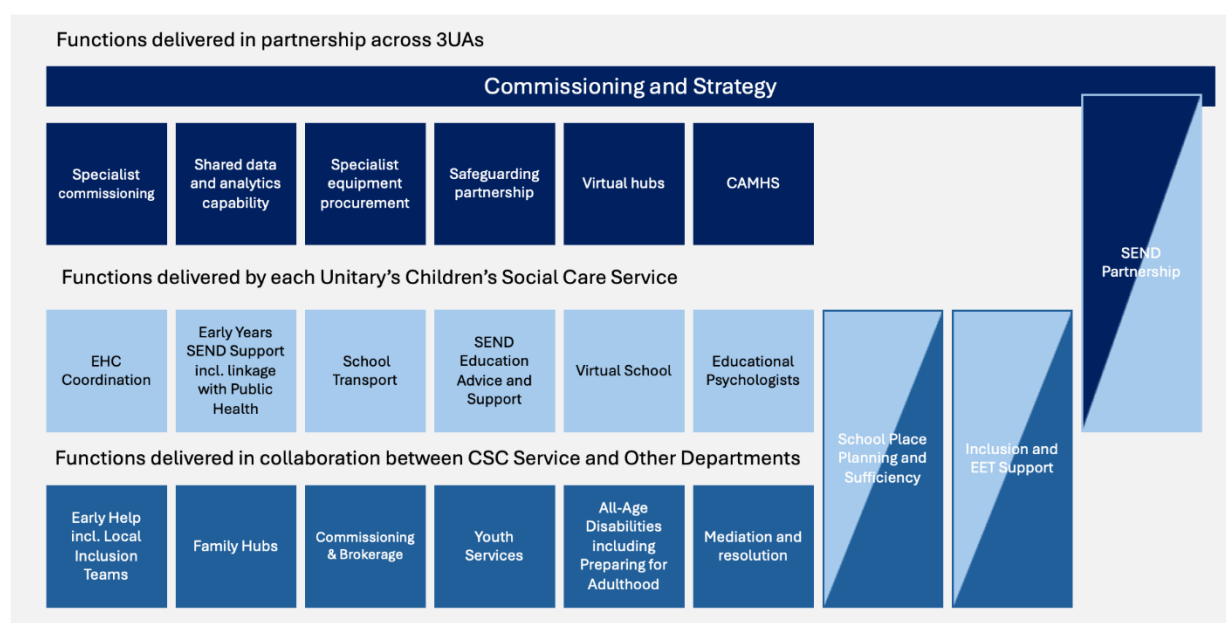


Fig 6.6: Functions of the future SEND model

Case Study: River Learning Trust

Providing better support by working locally to meet specialist needs

Oxfordshire's largest MAT, River Learning Trust, has demonstrated the success of smaller, locally embedded units that cater for the specialist needs of around a dozen children near to where they live. Its enhanced provision for deaf pupils at the Willows, is located on the site of the mainstream New Marston Primary School in Oxford, catering to children aged 5 to 8 with a specialised curriculum led by a qualified teacher and supported by experienced staff. This provision helps children who are not yet placed in specialist settings access the national curriculum and develop essential personal and social skills.

Since opening in September 2024, The Willows has helped students achieve significant milestones in communication, attention, and learning. As proved popular with pupils that may struggle in other settings, and with their parents, it delivers enhanced learning for children with SEND at a cost only just above mainstream, and a fraction of the cost of out of area special school's provision.

Further detail on local context and constraints across Oxfordshire that we have considered in the model development, as well as further blueprint detail on the recommended SEND & Education operating model can be found in Appendix G.4.

6.2.5 Place

The three unitary authorities (3UA) proposal maximises the growth in homes and jobs across Oxfordshire in the years ahead, allow housing and jobs growth and agglomeration around Oxford, while ensuring that smaller towns and villages retain their local character and natural environment. The outcomes this would deliver are outlined in detail at 3.2 and 3.3 above.

With strategic planning, strategic transport planning and delivery, skills and inward investment all shifting from the County Council to the new MSA, it is clear that when it comes to Place services, devolution undermines the case for larger more strategic unitary authorities, while underlining the case for place-based authorities. As such the 3UA proposal will work to complement, not duplicate the work at the MSA across the Place services, by bringing together planning, development, economic growth, skills and transport briefs into single authorities routed and responsive to the needs of the places they represent.

Improving infrastructure across Oxfordshire is the only way to achieve the levels of growth required to sustain the level of growth for business and homes which is proposed over the next 30 years. Growth and associated infrastructure can be controversial, and the implementation of plans needs to be down with, not to, local communities. As such, it is essential that the authorities responsible for implementing strategies in this space are representative of those areas, whether that be Greater Oxford, the market towns, or more rural areas.

Placemaking requires deep understanding of and engagement with the area. Each unitary in the 3UA is of a suitable size and scale to be able to tailor Place services at a neighbourhood level and represent efficient use of resources. Delivering at this local level will keep these serves rooted in the

communities they serve, ensuring that local priorities are met and ensuring clear connection with each unitary authority's engagement functions which engages with local voices.

The increased scale for services which would move from the current arrangements of up to six separate councils into three would provide notable advantages. This would enable some efficiencies for streamlining of management structures and rationalising systems. Moving to a larger scale of service would also support greater resilience for services such as Planning.

However, consideration must be given to the existing arrangements and contractual commitments. These would present challenges for the new unitary authorities. For services such as Waste in Ridgeway, Highways for West Berkshire and car park enforcement, there are existing contracts in place which would need to be continued. In these cases, councils would need to take longer-term approaches to rationalising services. There may be opportunities in the shorter term to unlock benefits such as coordinating operations, rationalising depots across new unitary authorities and optimisation of routes.

Development / Delivery of Homes

We need a delivery model across the 3UA geography which reflects the ambition to do better in terms of delivering homes, and affordable homes in particular, to all our residents.

We have set out above that we believe a modest level of green belt release is vital to delivering 40,000 new homes within a Greater Oxford geography, 16,000 more than the standard method will deliver. Additionally, the other two unitary authorities will deliver homes in line with the standard method.

We recognise that to achieve this ambition, we need a robust delivery model for Greater Oxford. We already have the appropriate vehicles in place to achieve these goals and a strong track record of housing development albeit within a much tighter and more constrained boundary. This provides a foundation for delivering a more ambitious programme across a wider Greater Oxford geography. This will allow the other two unitary authorities to focus on meeting housing need for their areas in line with standard method targets rather than needing to make additional sites available for Oxford's needs.

Oxford City Council has a substantial Housing Revenue Account (HRA), is a registered provider (RP) and a Homes England Investment Partner. We have a wholly owned housing company established in 2016 (OCHL trading as OX Place) that undertakes much of the direct delivery of affordable housing (itself or as the development agent for the HRA).

Our affordable housing team undertakes a clienting and commissioning role with OX Place; operates acquisition and small sites programmes to meet housing needs; operates the 'strategic housing and enabling' function – working strategically with RPs and providing housing supply expertise re s106s; manages funding and grant applications & tracking (including Homes England; Retained Right to Buy Receipts (RRTBRs); One Public Estate/Brownfield Land Release Fund, & LAHF); leads capital tracking & programme management; promotes CLH; and works with adjacent districts on strategic housing sites to meet unmet housing need.

Oxford City Council also has a strong record of demonstrating its commitment to place as a steward as well as a landowner through joint ventures with Nuffield, Grosvenor and Peabody in some of the

largest and most successful developments in the city. The benefits of being a developer as well as a facilitator means that Oxford City Council understands the nuances and commercials of development allowing Oxford to seize and leverage opportunities for the maximum wider benefit.

Within Oxford we have a target of delivering 1,600 affordable homes over a rolling four years and are on track to do so, albeit via some extremely challenging sites. Around 50% of the four-year programme is direct delivery by OCHL/HRA, 7% through the acquisition of small sites and the remainder through a 40% target on private schemes which come forward.

Sites across the rest of Oxfordshire are brought forward through the current district authorities housing delivery teams, and we expect this to continue.

In Ridgeway this includes a Temporary Accommodation (TA) landlord function. Large strategic sites including those in the Kennington/ Radley to Abingdon area (currently planned to mostly meet unmet need from Oxford), plus growth in Didcot and market towns. Ridgeway does not have an HRA and has few Council land holdings with functions predominantly focused on enabling and partnerships.

North Oxfordshire (through West and Cherwell), also undertake key enabling functions with partners RPs and developers. In West this is focused on large strategic sites including Salt Cross, Witney and Carterton. In Cherwell large strategic sites include Kidlington, Yarnton, Bicester and Banbury. Cherwell benefits from a small number of wholly owned development companies delivering individual sites.

Applying the new Standard Method across all authorities in Oxfordshire will represent a significant leap in delivery, with an intention to go further still in Greater Oxford. To ensure the capability and capacity is in place we expect all three unitary authorities to consider working with the new Mayor and/or central Government to create one or more Mayoral Development Corporation(s) (MDC) (or similar vehicle) to assemble land and capture the wider benefits. An MDC would also provide a basis to ensure land value capture across green belt release sites, which would allow for infrastructure-first development strategies, and a level of co-production and wealth retention in the local area to support work with local communities to effectively plan and deliver development to works for both existing and new residents.

Transport

There is near universal acknowledgement that the transport system in central Oxfordshire is in crisis – there is a clear priority to get people and traffic moving and to better connect surrounding areas as well as continuing to address air pollution. The County Council approach has not been a success in addressing this challenge.

Improving infrastructure across Oxfordshire and particularly those networks serving Oxford itself, as well as addressing congestion in surrounding market towns, is vital to achieving the levels of growth required to sustain the region over the next 30 years and to achieving agglomeration within Oxford, by supporting maximum growth in locations closest to the city.

In proposing a Greater Oxford unitary, we state that we must play a leading role in delivering transport change for our city. Poor quality transport infrastructure is currently a fundamental barrier

to growth. We will immediately undertake a review across all areas of transport policy. Over the last decade, various schemes have come forward through the County Council on an ad hoc basis. These have been well meaning but have lacked detail and an understanding of the interdependencies which exist between all parts of our transport ecosystem. We are clear that we must have a well thought out approach to reducing congestion in the city, and that doing nothing is not an option, but this must lead to a strategy which is fair to residents and does not penalise those living in our most deprived wards.

For Greater Oxford there is an opportunity to connect the area through a focus on transport policy and delivery of sustainable transport. The area's geography, the existing commercially viable bus services, high level of walking and cycling and work to improve rail services and station capacity provide a strong foundation to build upon. The approach will bring together transport with the approach to growth, community and health.

Oxford City Council has a strong track record in delivering significant improvements to the local transport system. This includes bringing forward the upgrade of Oxford Station and reopening of the Cowley Branch Line, introducing the UK's first Park and Rides and being a national leader in Electric Vehicle Infrastructure delivery. The Council also provides Taxi Licencing, maintains minor roads in the city using its LATCO Oxford Direct Services and provides verge maintenance for the whole city, so it is experienced in delivering operational work for transport. It has also led on successful changes to streets in the city: including temporary pedestrian-friendly experiments on George Street and Broad Street as well as more substantial resurfacing and public realm transformations of Market Street and St Michaels' Street. Oxford City Council has a good reputation as a supporter of active travel through involvement in projects such as Oxford Greenways and ZCOP – with 26% of commuting journeys made by bike (the second highest in the UK) thanks to the improvements to cycle infrastructure.

Case Study: Prioritising rail investment in the city - the Cowley Branch Line and Oxford Station

Working between government and the private sector to deliver transport infrastructure which will unlock up to 10,000 new jobs and homes⁵⁹

The Cowley Branch Line (CBL) was closed to passengers in the 1960s and it has long been an ambition locally to have it reopen to serve the communities of Blackbird Leys, Greater Leys, Cowley, and Littlemore, as well as the many businesses at ARC Oxford (formally Oxford Business Park) and The Oxford Science Park.

Oxford Station was built in the 1970s as a temporary station that has never been fit for purpose. Its replacement is a major priority to improve the arrival into the city. As part of the development of the DfT-led Oxfordshire Rail Corridor Study (ORCS) in 2020, a long list of projects for interventions across Oxfordshire was produced with both Oxford Station and the Cowley Branch Line flagged as priority projects. However, DfT and Network Rail were clear that local funding was needed to move any projects forward.

⁵⁹ [23 October 2025 HM Treasury Press Release](#)

The County Council (as transport authority) were not in a position to take forward either the station masterplan or the Full Business Case (FBC) for the Cowley Branch Line as priority projects, either in terms of leading the projects, or providing substantive funding. This is part of the understandable compromises that a larger authority is required to make with its capacity. The City Council therefore took the decision to step up, take the lead, and secure necessary funding to take forward these key priorities for the city. The County Council subsequently prioritised funding outside of the city, on a much longer-term opportunity, funding and leading the development of a Strategic Outline Business Case for the Witney-Carterton-Oxford rail corridor. Oxford City Council's ability to focus and prioritise the city's needs was key. Moving forward, this place-based delivery and partnership role will be vital, while strategic initiatives such as implementation of OxRail Plan will be for the MSA to take forward. For both the station and CBL, an innovative partnership led approach was needed to move this forward. The City Council was well placed given its close networks with local landowners and businesses to use its convening power to secure funds, alongside ensuring a close working relationship with County Council officers. Working with local landowners it secured funds to part fund 2 City Council officers, over £100k contribution to a masterplan for Oxford Station, and the bulk of the £4.7m needed to fund the Full Business Case (FBC) for the reopening of the Cowley Branch Line. The City Council commissioned Network Rail to complete the FBC, led the lobbying across Government departments, and secured at least £15m of contributions from the private sector. On the back of the strong business case, the City Council has approved additional funds to help deliver the scheme, and the County Council has now also come forward with substantial funding from the county's Enterprise Zone to fund the delivery phase.

On the strength of the FBC, the government has now announced £120m to fund the reopening of the Cowley Branch Line. Without Oxford City Council's leadership, ability to prioritise the needs of the city, and to use its networks to work in partnership over 4 years, we would not have got to this position. Furthermore, Network Rail has now announced it will be bringing forward the redevelopment of Oxford Station, with design work building from the initial masterplan starting in November, to take them through to a planning submission.

The re-opening of the Cowley Branch Line and creation of station at the Oxford Science Park has been praised for its improved and sustainable connection of these areas to the city and the wider Oxford Cambridge Growth Corridor. This was coupled with the announcement of a £10 billion expansion of the Ellison Institute of Technology in Oxford Science Park, which noted that the line would "help us attract world-class talent to EIT by linking up key innovation hubs with Central London via direct train services.⁶⁰

⁶⁰ [23 October 2025 HM Treasury Press Release](#)

Linking with the MSA

The specific challenges which face Oxford require a dedicated approach to delivery. However, this will form one part of a wider approach which provides support to the leading transport functions of the proposed Thames Valley MSA. The Strategic Authority will take on responsibility for publishing a comprehensive local transport plan. One unitary authority (1UA) and two unitary authority (2UA) models would not add value to that process – they would offer neither a local nor strategic perspective.

The 3UA model will complement that strategic role. Under the three unitary authorities approach, focus will be given within each unitary to the transport priorities of the city and market towns in those areas. This localised approach will allow listening to stakeholders and ensuring that proposals for development are accompanied by clear proposals for how infrastructure will serve communities and create improvements. This will mean a stronger relationship with communities, with deep partnership work seeing meaningful engagement and co-design around changes to transport. Overall, the three unitary authorities model can oversee transport in each of its specific areas - as well as linking to the wider strategic transport work of the MSA.

The reduction to bus services in 2016, which led to the loss of many services linking Oxfordshire villages to the towns and city, has resulted in an increased reliance on the car. Bus operators have confirmed that densification and agglomeration of housing around the Oxford will enable improved public transport services connecting surrounding villages into the city. The three authorities will work with the MSA to lobby central government to subsidise public transport initiatives across the geography to tackle road congestion generally but with a clear ambition for the longer-term delivery of a mass transit system for Greater Oxford.

North Oxfordshire and Ridgeway Council geographies are very different from Greater Oxford, with market towns and large rural hinterland dominating. They face challenges related to congestion and environmental impact of traffic within the market towns and villages, whilst much of the recent growth in the surrounding rural areas remains primarily car based with much of the public transport that remains requiring subsidy. Unitary Councils are therefore required to address these considerable challenges.

The countywide Milestone highway maintenance contract will continue to run beyond the formation of the unitary authorities. This will be managed for each unitary area on a collaborative basis. As this contract comes to an end there is the opportunity for the contract approach to be renewed, either based on successful working that has taken place or reshaped to focus on the priorities and needs of the areas.

The population growth and densification around Oxford proposed by the three unitary authorities model requires reducing the number of car journeys per household. There is also an advantage to the model of growth around Oxford rather than spreading this across the smaller villages: higher density growth in these areas creates a clear demand for improved bus services.

Crucial to further reducing reliance on cars will be planning and strengthening how towns and villages across Oxfordshire link together, working at a local level to best understand local priorities for transport. The three-authority model gives the best option to be able to develop deep

understanding of local demands and develop solutions which are reliable and meet the requirements for movement in these areas.

Oxford and West Berkshire both have contractors providing maintenance on local roads. There will be opportunities to explore how these current arrangements can benefit the 3UA model through an expanded model to provide locally based responsive maintenance of the highway network to the whole of the Greater Oxford area.

Skills

Greater levels of jobs and sector growth expected in the 3UA, alongside significant new employment space, close to where people live, should then allow for a co-ordinated approach to the development of Community Employment and Procurement Plans, to support a joined up approach to the training and employment of local people at both construction and end user phases of developments, as well as support for the local supply chain. All with the aim of retaining more wealth and prosperity, locally.

County wide approaches to skills development over the last two decades have failed to deliver the interventions needed for all of Oxfordshire's residents to benefit from growth. New jobs have been created but remain out of reach for too many residents. Nowhere is this clearer than in Oxford itself, where a city of world-class innovation and prosperity also has 10 of its 83 neighbourhood areas ('Super Output Areas') among the 20% most deprived areas in England, causing deep polarisation. For a significant minority of residents, especially in our most deprived wards, the pathways into emerging opportunities remain closed. Without a new approach, the gap between those who benefit from Oxford's growth and those who are left behind will only widen.

This is why the emerging proposals for a Mayoral Strategic Authority (MSA) matter. An MSA will provide the regional oversight once held by LEPs, but with far greater accountability, devolved decision-making, and the budgets needed to act at scale.

Our delivery model will mean that top-down strategic approaches will combine with bottom-up delivery, ensuring both sides of the labour market equation are addressed: meeting employer demand and tackling the barriers faced by residents.

Oxford's prosperity masks the reality that for many residents, opportunity feels out of reach. Too many people grow up believing that the jobs and industries shaping the city's future are "not for them." Low aspirations combine with real and practical barriers: limited English, weak literacy and numeracy, and a high proportion of residents in some communities with no formal qualifications.

Even when people want to work, they are too often trapped in low-paid sectors such as care, leisure, or entry level roles, with few chances for progression.

In our most deprived wards, critical skills gaps persist. Non-native speakers face language barriers. Access to digital devices can be patchy, and digital literacy including use of AI is low. Pupils in some deprived wards struggle with overcrowded classrooms and weak GCSE attainment in English and maths. For too many, a lack of qualifications or confidence has left them disconnected from the knowledge economy on their doorstep.

Oxford's employers consistently report that they cannot recruit the skills they need from the local labour pool. The result is high vacancy rates, reliance on bringing workers in from outside Oxfordshire, and growth that risks bypassing local residents.

The skills gaps are clear: digital capability, green skills, specialist technical expertise in advanced manufacturing, life sciences and R&D, alongside customer service, hospitality, and the "soft skills" of communication, teamwork, and work readiness. Employers also face pressing skills shortages in construction, STEM, health and care, hospitality, and advanced manufacturing, roles that are critical both to Oxford's economy and to the daily functioning of the city.

The MSA will allow us to deliver change through joined-up model in each 3UA area.

With devolved powers each area can act as a commissioner for outcomes through a Procurement Framework, taking control of the Adult Education Budget locally and funding providers based on results such as moving people into jobs, progressing in work, and lifting their pay.

Key elements of each local delivery model would include:

- **One system, one pathway:** Create **one front door** (a single-entry point online and in community hubs) for residents and employers to access skills and jobs support; integrate community hubs, schools, and colleges into a single programme. Provide clear pathways from primary and secondary education through to FE, HE, and employment.
- **Data, evidence and market shaping:** Establish a Skills Observatory in each unitary to publish live labour market intelligence. Use employer feedback and real-time data to steer investment and commissioning. Grow training in priority sectors: digital, green, construction, health and care, advanced manufacturing, life sciences. Embed green and digital skills across all sectors.
- **Skills Compact:** Establish a Skills Compact with anchor institutions including schools to pool levy funds and guarantee apprenticeships, interviews, and Living Wage jobs and contracts for local businesses: Co-design training pathways with schools, colleges and businesses to match recruitment needs.
- **Planning and procurement:** Strengthen developer contributions to skills development (for example using the CEPP model as currently being delivered in Oxford) so every major development delivers training, apprenticeships, and local jobs: Pool developer contributions and align with community hubs and sector academies.
- **Sector academies and flagship projects:** Deliver dedicated training routes in growth sectors, supported by national programmes like Connect to Work. Expand Oxford Works, Green Skills Centre, and new apprenticeship hubs.
- **Place-based delivery:** Focus support in each unitary's most disadvantaged wards (in Oxford that would include Barton, Rose Hill, Blackbird Leys, Littlemore for example). Tailor training and outreach to meet the needs of residents who face the highest barriers to work.

We have developed a full delivery model for a Greater Oxford. Our proposal would be for each unitary to develop its own model to ensure the effectiveness of delivery through the MSA is maximised. The 1UA and 2UA models will fail to deliver this as they will simply replicate the regional oversight provided by the MSA.

Planning

Currently the Development Management function is split into geographic areas, with an additional Team focussed on Major Schemes, concentrating skills and knowledge of dealing with complex and significant schemes in the city. In a 3UA model the geography-based team model will continue, and Majors team would retain their focus on (principally) employment sites with an additional team developed to focus on the delivery of the housing growth that will be enabled by our proposed green belt release.

Unitarisation provides benefits to the planning system by bringing disparate parts of the system (e.g. highways, education) as well as a single legal team and these benefits will be present at all scales. However, with strategic issues being elevated to MSA level, the 3UA ensures that greater focus can be given to local issues at an appropriate scale.

Heritage and design are critical issues in a historic city, and this team is complemented by the Oxford Design Review Panel – an independent design panel co-ordinated by the city, available as a paid service during pre-application discussions. This panel is unique in Oxfordshire and in the 3UA option will continue to provide an invaluable tool to ensure the highest quality of design in the new developments proposed across Greater Oxford.

Oxford's Planning Policy team have a track record of delivering pro-Growth Local Plans to address the need for housing, facilitating the employment growth potential of the city, whilst ensuring environmental sustainability. The immediate focus of the team in a Greater Oxford would be to deliver a comprehensive and robust green belt review, building on our high-level analysis identifying areas that should be released for the development the city needs, and an accompanying Plan that ensures releases deliver the local, regional and national benefits that a Greater Oxford can deliver.

Sustainability and Climate Action

Action to tackle climate change and protect and enhance the natural environment must be both strategic and local to be successful. The city of Oxford in particular - and Oxfordshire more widely - are already recognised as beacon areas for their work on environmental sustainability.

Oxford City Council has had a top 5 Climate Scorecard ranking for the last 3 years and was winner of the national LGC and MJ awards for Climate Leadership in 2023 and has a reputation for delivering innovation and major decarbonisation projects.⁶¹ Oxfordshire County Council leads the Climate Scorecard rankings for county councils.

The climate teams across the proposed three unitary geography already work closely together. The City and District Councils each cover their own regulatory, core and relevant project functions suited to their demography and location, with Oxfordshire County Council providing a strategic function, particularly as the main funding recipient. West Berkshire Council combines both elements in its existing delivery.

The Zero Carbon Oxfordshire Partnership (ZCOP), established by Oxford City Council in 2021, links public, private and third sector organisations and successfully delivers significant environmental sustainability programmes.

⁶¹ [Council Climate Scorecards](#)

These strong foundations will ensure all three unitary authorities are well equipped to continue to demonstrate leadership in environmental sustainability work. It also ensures continuity in effective partnership working across the three unitary councils, and with the planned Thames Valley MSA geography.

The three unitaries have the resources, skills and expertise to manage key unitary workstreams including:

- **Regulatory functions:** air quality, land quality, flood mitigation, biodiversity & ecology (nature recovery, trees and canopy cover etc
- **Core functions:** local area energy planning, net zero delivery (own assets and area wide), electric vehicle infrastructure, energy efficiency and retrofit, climate adaptation
- **Project functions** (bespoke to area): such as Partnership working, nature recovery, innovation, heat networks, carbon off setting, community energy.

Given the scale of economic growth envisaged, Greater Oxford will require a specific focus on achieving sustainable outcomes. It also has additional unique challenges because of high levels of fuel poverty and high levels of ageing, poor energy efficient properties. Unitarisation will enable a focus on tackling buildings emission and working with the MSA to ensure that devolved funding (via Warm Homes etc) is targeted where it makes the most difference.

A three unitary approach will benefit local people. Enabling the right local focus of action and appropriate use of devolved funding, in relation to emissions and ability to influence. Climate leads across the Unitaries will continue to work together where there are shared areas of focus.

Regional and MSA work on environment

The climate teams in Oxfordshire have significant skills to support a wider local and regional strategic approach via the empowered Mayoral Strategic Authorities (MSAs), on an overarching ES Strategy, bringing the following expertise:

- Close climate partnership working through ZCOP which already involves the most influential organisations across Oxfordshire to act on carbon emissions and could readily be expanded to cover the Thames Valley.
- A track record of involvement in developing and delivering complex projects including Electric Vehicle Infrastructure delivery, Biodiversity Net Gain, flood mitigation and retrofit.
- Close links with regional, national and government organisations, such as Greater Southeast Net Zero Hub, DfT, DESNZ and with energy stakeholders (SSEN, NGET and RESP) working with them to unlock the grid constraints, restricting growth in Oxfordshire.
- Development of District Heat Network options for Oxford with key Partners (Universities, Hospital Trust & County Council) in preparation for heat zoning.
- Enabling the delivery of pipeline renewables schemes by supporting the MSA with strategic planning for solar farms and linking with energy infrastructure providers. A collective approach will also be taken to maximise community benefits via Great British Energy.

Waste Services

Waste & recycling services are both a District and County function covering collection and disposal respectively. However, work to finalise a business case for integrating these operations is already well advanced, and involves four of Oxfordshire's six councils (City, WODC, CDC and County). Integrating and transforming waste operations across this geography offers the opportunity both for significant cost savings and increasing the proportion of recycling, even though Oxfordshire already has the highest rate of domestic recycling in England.

Under the three unitary councils' proposal, £63.5m of net benefit will be delivered in the first five years (by 2032/33), with an ongoing benefit of £14m per annum. This would be shared between Greater Oxford and Northern Oxfordshire Councils which would jointly own and operate the LATCo that delivers waste and environmental services across both council areas. More detail is outlined in Appendix F: Oxfordshire Waste & Environmental Services Transformation Programme (WESP).

Building Control

Building Control is already a district responsibility, and there are no direct county-level functions that lend themselves to integration in the way other areas do (i.e. Environmental Health and Trading Standards). The service does, however, work with county teams such as Highways and Fire & Rescue as statutory consultees. These partnerships are essential to the delivery of safe and compliant development, but they are distinct points of coordination rather than overlapping responsibilities.

The establishment of three new unitary councils nevertheless creates an opportunity to strengthen Building Control by consolidating services within larger, more resilient authorities. Each unitary will be able to deliver a single, locally accountable service with clearer oversight of building safety, access to a broader pool of professional expertise, and more consistent application of national building regulations. The three unitary model also secures Building Control remains closely connected with planning, housing and environmental services whilst being locally focussed. Crucially, this structure keeps Building Control rooted in the communities it serves, ensuring that local development needs and priorities are met while maintaining the capacity to respond to increasing regulatory demands and safeguard public confidence.

Regulatory Services (including Environmental Health and Residential Licensing)

The establishment of three new unitary councils in Oxfordshire provides a clear opportunity to align Environmental Health with Trading Standards, creating services that are both more efficient and more responsive to local needs. At present these functions are divided between tiers despite significant areas of overlap. For example, Environmental Health regulates food hygiene while Trading Standards covers food composition and labelling. Both investigate unsafe products, scams and unfair trading practices; and both work directly with businesses on compliance. This separation can create duplication, multiple points of contact, and the potential for gaps in enforcement.

Unifying these functions within each new unitary would deliver clearer accountability, streamlined processes, and better outcomes. For residents, this would mean a straightforward route for reporting concerns and stronger protection from unsafe housing, rogue traders or counterfeit goods. For businesses, it would provide a single source of advice and regulation across food law, product safety,

licensing and fair trading. The result would be reducing bureaucracy, supporting compliance, and ensuring that services reflect local circumstances and priorities.

Importantly, the three unitary structure allows each council to shape its service around the needs of its communities. This closer link to local priorities strengthens accountability and ensures that resources are directed where they will make the greatest difference. The wider advantages are equally significant. A locally rooted, combined service would be well placed to work with community safety and public health teams, as well as the Police and Crime Commissioner, on issues such as age-restricted sales, fraud prevention, air quality, tobacco control and infectious disease management.

Regeneration and Capital Programmes

At present, districts have distinct and individual approaches to delivering capital projects and regeneration more generally and for bidding for funds to progress schemes.

It is proposed that these remain unitary functions. The 3UA is the right geography for this approach – with each unitary having high aspirations for change backed up by strong regeneration proposals whether through new towns, science campuses, public realm programmes, transport infrastructure and housing and commercial schemes. Each of the proposed authorities has the scale and ambition of projects to benefit from in house Project Management function (PMOs) with local knowledge of regeneration and capital opportunities. Whilst we do not foresee this approach including a shared service across the three unitary authorities, we do see an opportunity for dialogue between services to make best use of resources.

Property

The City Council manages its extensive property portfolio in house with the use of agency/consultancy services where appropriate. The portfolio includes significant investment assets which are managed on a very commercial basis to maximise income. The three unitary authorities largely adopt this approach (but possibly with a reduced commercial emphasis) and can continue to do so.

The adoption of a unitary approach will doubtless bring opportunities to streamline the number of corporate assets such as community centres with inherent value created by way of capital receipt and development opportunities. The unitary model allows for shared services within buildings which means that properties are truly able to provide for the needs of different communities in a truly place based approach.

Green and Blue Spaces

OCC manages all its green and blue spaces internally with grounds maintenance and maintenance of facilities carried out by its wholly owned company. Although across the three unitary authorities some green spaces will be managed by parish councils, it is envisaged that each of the authorities would manage its other green and blue spaces in house. and there may be opportunities for savings through economies of scale across the authorities, particularly if ODS could expand its remit.

Facilities Management

The Council provides FM services to all its corporate buildings and expects that the unitary approach supports this model across all options and that there may be opportunities for narrative with the other two authorities to reduce space and procure joint systems (booking for example).

6.2.6 Housing Services

The new unitary authorities' model would bring together a wide range of services into a comprehensive, system-wide solution with "no wrong front door" which would enhance the prevention-focused model. This would significantly drive efficiency and improve service delivery to prevent homelessness, avoiding cost to the public purse and ensuring better outcomes.

Our vision for a three unitary authority (3UA) structure would see housing, homelessness and commissioned based services rooted in prevention, building on examples of good practice that are well established and embedded across Oxfordshire. It will focus on early, targeted intervention – using data sources to effectively triage and then then better support single adults and families to ensure a person centric service across a wide range of activities including housing, mental health, substance misuse and adult and children social care services. Operating statutory homelessness over three unitary councils, on enlarged footprints from the current five teams (South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse already operate with one team), would deliver efficiencies and increased resilience with larger more specialised teams.

Case Study: Oxfordshire Homelessness Alliance

Cross-sector collaboration to end rough sleeping

The Oxfordshire Homelessness Alliance was established in 2022, in partnership between Oxford City Council, Oxfordshire County Council, the district councils and six leading providers: Homeless Oxfordshire, Connection Support, Elmore Community Services, Aspire, St Mungo's and A2 Dominion. The Alliance is a collective commitment to delivering integrated, person-centred support that breaks down silos across housing, health and social care to drive system-wide change to end rough sleeping.

Through this partnership, essential transformation work is underway across supported accommodation, outreach, and homelessness prevention services. This includes a shift from the traditional 'pathway' model of supported accommodation toward a housing-led approach, prioritising stability, long-term independence, and wraparound support. Rough sleeping levels in Oxford have remained steady, bucking the national trend, reflecting the strength of cross-sector partnerships, shared knowledge, and joint commissioning across the system.

Since the Alliance's formation, over 50 individuals have been successfully accommodated through Housing First across Oxfordshire, enabling some of the most vulnerable and entrenched individuals to access secure housing with holistic, multi-agency support.

Whilst the three areas have differing housing pressures the ethos of the service design will be consistent across the three authorities, whilst allowing for a more tailored approach responding to the different levels of demand and complexity of need.

Oxford has a different housing market to the wider county. It faces the most significant housing pressures, with high levels of both private and social rented housing, higher rents, greater areas of

deprivation and significant amounts of supported accommodation. Northern Oxfordshire and Ridgeway are in comparison more rural and have housing markets dominated by owner occupiers. For example, 144 households were accepted as homelessness in Oxford between January and March 25, compared to 23 in South Oxfordshire. 733 families and other households live in temporary accommodation across Oxfordshire and West Berkshire (June 2025), having a significant impact on these families and their children, at huge cost to local government. Oxford City Council holds the largest cost and has been recognised nationally as a beacon authority in developing programmes to mitigate the rise in temporary accommodation demand and costs, delivering £8.5 million in cost avoidance. Nonetheless, the annual pressure of TA costs are expected to rise up to £5.7m in two years, without further mitigation.

This approach to prevent demand would be coupled with an increase in housing supply from the three unitary authority model – with Greater Oxford delivering 40,000 new homes (of which 40% would be affordable), alongside the Heyford Park new town in Northern Oxfordshire and other settlements continuing to grow with home building appropriate to their local context and character. This supply side increase will help to meet housing demand and ensure, as Oxford's economy grows and produces more jobs, that there are enough homes to meet need, helping ensure affordability for local people and preventing further increases in homelessness .

In terms of private sector housing, the service will align/interface with key private sector housing functions such as selective licensing and Houses of Multiple Occupation (HMO) standards to drive good quality private sector homes, critical to meeting the housing demand.

In line with the corporate focus on prevention, this service will work in close collaboration with the HRA (where relevant) and social housing landlord functions to manage any further increases in stock with a particular focus on reducing number in temporary accommodation and those waiting for permanent homes.

Greater Oxford Unitary will be a large social landlord with over 8,000 dwellings. The council will be a tenant focused landlord, continuing to invest in tenant's homes and services, ensuring compliance with the Social Housing Act and Consumer Standards. Services will be shaped by a strong, empowered tenant voice, helping ensure the council is a responsive and transparent social landlord.

Northern Oxfordshire would be a predominantly rural area, with larger owner occupier housing sector, and smaller private and social rented sectors. It would however contain the larger town of Banbury, and the rapidly growing urban area of Bicester. Homelessness pressures have been growing in both West Oxfordshire and Cherwell Councils in recent years, with increasing numbers in temporary accommodation, and higher rates of rough sleeping in Cherwell than the other Districts (excluding the City). Pockets of deprivation exist in Northern Oxfordshire, particularly in Banbury where three areas are in the top 20% most deprived nationally.

Ridgeway Council would also be a largely rural area, with larger towns being Abingdon, Didcot, Newbury and Thatcham, and includes the western Reading suburbs. The housing market will also be dominated by owner occupiers, but with some concentrations of deprivation in areas such as Didcot, Newbury and Calcot. South and Vale Councils have historically had lower levels of homelessness and rough sleeping, but West Berkshire has more homelessness pressures and higher temporary accommodation use.

Northern Oxfordshire and Ridgeway also both have higher levels of renting from a housing association than Greater Oxford, but Greater Oxford has higher levels of renting from the council. Census data also shows that Greater Oxford has higher levels of overcrowded housing than both Northern Oxfordshire and Ridgeway.

Whilst demand in Northern Oxfordshire and Ridgeway for housing services is not of the scale of Greater Oxford the preventative and holistic service design would be a constant across the three areas.

Table 6.1: Housing indicators by unitary

Housing Indicators	No. of households	Indices of Multiple Deprivation – Average Score*	Private rented	Social rented	HHs in Temp. Accommodation	Housing Benefit claimants
Greater Oxford	87,780	12.74	27%	17%	-	5%
Northern Oxfordshire	103,890	11.90	19%	14%	-	4%
Ridgeway	168,050	9.87	16%	14%	-	4%
Cherwell	65,890	12.65	20%	13%	82	4%
Oxford	55,225	14.42	32%	21%	299	7%
South Oxfordshire	61,480	8.55	16%	12%	50	3%
Vale of White Horse	57,490	9.47	16%	14%	73	3%
West Oxfordshire	47,990	10.15	18%	13%	79	3%
West Berkshire	66,650	11.05	17%	14%	150	4%

*higher score indicates that an area is experiencing higher levels of deprivation. Indices of Multiple Deprivation 2025.

Case Study: Temporary Accommodation

Working holistically to prevent homelessness

Oxford is facing a housing crisis, with a shortage of homes driving up private sector rents by 11.7% annually (ONS), this is leading to growing homelessness acceptance rates, more than doubling in 2 years, and putting increasing pressure on temporary accommodation. Oxford City Council has responded with a comprehensive and holistic strategy to meet rising homelessness demand, focused on prevention, better quality temporary accommodation, and faster move on to a permanent home

This has led to an expansion of the Council's homelessness prevention service focused on keeping people in their home when possible, a multipronged approach to increasing temporary accommodation stock through purchases and working in partnership with private and social housing providers, and a focus on moving people on into affordable private rented homes. The team has

delivered impressive results: 241% increase in homelessness prevention, doubling of temporary accommodation stock, and over 100 successful private rental lets in a year. Their work provides a blueprint for other local authorities striving for effective, forward-thinking solutions to homelessness.

6.2.7 Citizens Services

Public Health

Public Health functions in England are defined by the Health and Social Care Act 2012, assigning local authorities the statutory responsibility to improve health and reduce inequalities. Core statutory responsibilities include promoting healthier lifestyles, preventing disease, and addressing wider determinants such as housing, employment, and education. The public health data-led preventative approach supports the wider operating model. The three unitary authority (3UA) model proposes bringing together wider public health services such as housing, leisure, revenues and benefit services to ensure it is easier for people to get the help they need earlier.

A key requirement is appointing a Director of Public Health (DPH), who leads strategy and produces an independent Annual Public Health Report. Health protection duties involve preparing for infectious disease outbreaks and environmental hazards in collaboration with UK Health Security Agency (UKHSA) and Local Resilience Forums. As currently, there will be two DPH's, one for Ridgeway and a joint post between Greater Oxford and Northern Oxfordshire.

Public health leadership integrates with council governance via the Health and Wellbeing Board, Joint Strategic Needs Assessment, and Joint Health and Wellbeing Strategy, while collaborating closely with Integrated Care Systems (ICS).

Services focus on health improvement (e.g., smoking cessation, mental health promotion), health protection, children's services, sexual health, substance misuse, and NHS commissioning support. Delivery is through a mix of in-house teams, NHS providers, commissioned external partners, and voluntary sector organisations, with strong cross-sector collaboration to address social determinants of health.

Physical activity, exercise or activity related community rehabilitation is recommended in 98 NICE clinical and condition specific guidelines and quality standards. 72% of people with Long-Term Health Conditions (LTHCs) say that the NHS is the most trusted source of physical activity advice however only 16.6% of GPs are broadly to very familiar with the CMO physical activity guidelines. Joining services and supporting a holistic view of Public Health is an opportunity to create a system which better supports wider determinants of health to both improve long term health conditions and reduce their onset.

Case Study: Move Together

Joint regional activity pathway improving health and reducing health service pressures

Move Together is a nationally recognised physical activity pathway for adults living with long term health conditions, and a joint venture between Oxfordshire County Council Public Health, Buckinghamshire, Oxfordshire and Berkshire West Integrated Care Board, County Sports Partnership and City and District Councils. During the 24/25 reporting year Move Together continued to show a critical role in not only improving people's health but reducing pressure on the health system with a reported 43% fewer GP appointments, a 22% reduction in 111/Out of Hours demand and a 15.11 Quality Adjusted Life Years (QALY) gain across all participants.

Leisure Services

Leisure Services form part of the 3UA early intervention and prevention understanding that leisure centres can have a wider role in wellbeing and should help prevent ill-health through inclusive offers, social prescribing and location of services.

Sport England are promoting a vision in which local authority leisure moves beyond simply offering gym/swim classes to taking a broader in supporting people's overall wellbeing. This means integrating physical activity with health, social care, mental health, prevention and community outcomes. The 3UA preventative and community-focused model would continue this approach across all three unitaries.

Greater Oxford is in year two of a new 10-year Leisure Services contract in 2024 with Serco and More Leisure Community Trust. Provision across the other authorities is mixed across inhouse and external provision, including Greenwich Leisure Limited, Everyone Active and Parkwood Project Management. Length of contract varies across each council but within a reasonable timescale each unitary would be able to enjoy a single leisure offer. Each new footprint will be able to offer a greater range of services.

There will be good potential for longer term savings after re-contracting at end of each contract term. There could also be savings through the use of alternative delivery models. Investment in concessionary access for those on the lowest incomes can have a significant impact on health and wellbeing.

Culture and Heritage

Building on the strong current cultural, arts and heritage offer the 3UA proposal will support direct service delivery but also support cross-sector joint working, especially with the voluntary and community sector.

Cultural and heritage services will be delivered in each area, with models adapted to the needs of urban and rural populations and making best use of available assets, including outdoor venues. Using established locality-based working that is rooted in communities and already part of the Voluntary and Community Sector network, they will continue to grow community capacity and a sustainable cultural offer that is flexible, modern and relevant to the communities being served.

Inclusive access, whether through peripatetic offerings to rural areas or reflecting demographic diversity in urban areas, will be at the heart of the service. Identity and belonging will be reflected in the service priorities, ensuring continuity for traditions like May Morning, St Giles Fair and Abingdon bun throwing that bring people together with a positive sense of place. The established Cultural Partnership and Cultural Education Partnership will continue across all three councils, led by Greater Oxford, with an aim to set up a Cultural Compact for the Combined Mayoral Authority. Ultimately, boosting economic success and well-being, improving community cohesion and integrating culture into regional and local planning.

A small core shared library service will be maintained across the three councils for book depository, library care and management ICT systems. The assets and teams that run the libraries would transfer to each council. The central library at Westgate will be accessible to all citizens and reciprocal

arrangements would be made to enable Ridgeway and Northern Oxfordshire citizens to use other Greater Oxford libraries and vice versa.

The Museum Service would be led by North Oxfordshire Council with their base at the Oxfordshire Museum in Woodstock and there would be service level agreements, as there are currently, with other local authorities to share collections, storage and expertise.

6.2.8 Community Safety

The three unitary model will enhance the work of the Community Safety Partnership, a statutory partnership brought together by the Crime and Disorder Act 1998 to identify local community safety priorities and developing plans to address them. Oxfordshire and Berkshire local authorities work closely with Thames Valley Police and the Thames Valley Police and Crime Commissioner on setting priorities and plans for Community Safety Partnership (CSP) area. This statutory arrangement would continue in each unitary area.

There is an important intersection between community safety and child and adult safeguarding, and homelessness. As the area within the three unitary geographies with both the highest level of homelessness and with a largest proportion of residents in council housing, Oxford has enjoyed strong partnership arrangements with organisations and teams involved in managing behaviour and providing the right support. This close collaboration will continue under a Greater Oxford Council, with parallel arrangements in each of the other unitary councils, though proportionate to their lower levels of need.

Overview of the service model

The establishment of three new unitary councils creates an opportunity to strengthen the Community Safety Service aligning a wider range of linked services:

- The Community Safety Partnership
- Anti-Social Behaviour Investigation Team
- Community Response Team and environmental enforcement
- Trading Standards
- Taxi and Alcohol Licensing Team
- Emergency Planning
- Modern slavery and adult exploitation coordination
- CCTV system management
- Corporate safeguarding policy and practice, supporting the Multi-Agency Safeguarding Arrangements (MASA)

The Community Safety Service will build on its work with local Parish Councils to implement interventions to reduce crime and disorder in neighbourhoods and local communities. The well-established collaboration between Oxfordshire local authorities and local Neighbourhood Policing Teams will be enhanced in all the three unitary council areas, recognising the differing community safety challenges in each area.

Trading Standards, Licencing and Environmental Health

Trading Standards would be brought into the Community Safety Service, enhancing the opportunities with our licensing and environmental health officers to focus on the local issues of most concern to our communities. This would include more activities targeting underage sales of cigarettes, alcohol, vapes and knives and greater join-up of our regulatory powers to disrupt those that trade in counterfeit goods or sell to children.

The taxi, alcohol, gambling, late-night entertainment and other licensing authority functions will be extended to incorporate applicants in the Greater Oxford area. The well-established NightSafe partnership approach to managing the night-time economy will roll-out into neighbouring towns, addressing alcohol-related crime and disorder.

Joint Oxfordshire-wide approach

A pan-Oxfordshire Prevent Delivery Board will deliver the Prevent Duty and support partners and businesses in meeting the requirements of the Terrorism (Protection of Premises) Act 2024, “Martyn’s Law”. The Channel Panel safeguarding arrangements would be administered by social care teams within the authority.

The emergency planning function will build upon and strengthen the existing Thames Valley Local Resilience Forum and single Oxfordshire Joint Oxfordshire Resilience Team. A shared resource among the three unitary councils will ensure the continued integrated and effective response to regular emergencies experienced across Oxfordshire and the wider Thames Valley, such as flooding events. Emergency planning lead officers would remain within the two other unitary councils.

Domestic abuse and drug and alcohol services are currently commissioned jointly in Oxfordshire. A lead unitary authority will continue this partnership approach, ensuring local needs are recognised and addresses whilst attaining efficiencies from commissioning at scale.

Multi-Agency Safeguarding Arrangements (MASA) will continue with the current Oxfordshire Adult Safeguarding Board and Oxfordshire Children Safeguarding Partnership providing multi-agency oversight and governance as set out in statute. A lead authority will provide business unit support to these partnership arrangements. Lead safeguarding policy officers within each authority will represent the authorities in the boards and their subgroups, and lead on the implementation of policy and practice within each area.

Impact on Staffing

Overall, existing resource levels will be maintained across the three unitary authorities for the community safety functions, due to the specialist and often professionally accredited nature of different roles. However, efficiencies will be achieved through linking complementary activities such as environmental enforcement, statutory nuisance, business regulation and licensing, as well as through the integration of systems used to identify risks and manage responses. This will lead to an overall increase in community safety capabilities deployed.

Fire and Rescue Services

Fire and Rescue Services in the Thames Valley are currently run by three separate Fire and Rescue Authorities: Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes Fire Authority (combined fire authority); Royal Berkshire Fire and Rescue Service (combined fire authority); and Oxfordshire (county council fire and rescue service). Swindon forms part of the Dorset and Wiltshire (combined fire authority).

While the different Thames Valley fire services operate independently, with the current exception of Swindon the geography shares a strong programme of collaboration which includes the handling of 999 calls, mobilising of fire engines, procurement, fire investigation and operational response, with a joint control room that has been operational across Berkshire, Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire since 2015

Oxfordshire Fire and Rescue Service deliver effective operations throughout Oxfordshire which link with the Oxfordshire Police area.

The English Devolution White Paper and accompanying Bill are clear that Mayors are accountable for the exercise of Fire and Rescue Authority functions where fire and rescue service and MSA boundaries align. At the time of drafting this proposal Oxfordshire, Berkshire and Swindon councils are developing an Expression of Interest proposal to Government for the creation of a Thames Valley MSA. Therefore, while there is not yet an agreed path to the establishment of an MSA, arrangements for Fire and Rescue Services are proposed in anticipation of its creation.

Under the three unitary authorities' proposal a Combined Fire and Rescue Authority would be established on a temporary basis to cover the Oxfordshire geography, providing oversight for an unchanged Oxfordshire Fire and Rescue Service. This would ensure a firm foundation in which to offer a straightforward transition to a future Thames Valley Fire and Rescue Service.

Local experience in neighbouring Berkshire and Hampshire demonstrates how Combined Fire and Rescue Authorities covering several council areas can operate effectively.

No changes to the operation of Oxfordshire Fire and Rescue Service are put forward within the unitary proposal, other than those already being developed to improve its operational effectiveness.

6.2.9 Enabling Services

The proposed model sees many of these services delivered separately by each unitary council to give flexibility and efficiency. A shared service approach could be considered where this enhances customer experience and financial efficiency. This approach balances efficiency with local responsiveness, ensuring services benefit from the right systems, expertise and governance, while providing clarity for residents and making it easier for them to access services.

Within each unitary council, a unified ICT and Digital infrastructure will underpin a single digital workplace, enabling collaboration, standardisation, and innovation. HR and Organisational Development will lead cultural integration and workforce transformation, embedding a shared identity and high-performance culture. Strategy, Policy, and Data functions will support evidence-based decision-making and strategic alignment across the new authorities.

Customer Services will combine a digital first approach with community-based touch points, improving access and experience for residents while reducing costs, supported by a digital-by-design Communications team to enable and improve access to services.

Legal, Audit, and Democratic Services will ensure robust governance and accountability, with consistent support for elected members and statutory functions.

There will be opportunities for shared services, service alignment and other efficiencies in areas including library depositary and lending functions, and museum and cultural services.

This model will deliver financial benefits through streamlined management, shared systems, and improved purchasing power. It will also enable the new authorities to manage contractual transitions effectively and take advantage of commercial opportunities.

The transformation of enabling services will support the delivery of high-quality, resident-focused services, close budget gaps, and ensure the new councils are equipped to meet the challenges and opportunities of the future.

Further detail on local context and constraints across Oxfordshire that we have considered in the model development, as well as further blueprint detail on the recommended Enabling Services operating model can be found in Appendix G.5.

6.3 Council Size and Structure

Portfolios and responsibilities

The blueprint for the governance of the new unitary authorities will be based on the government's preferred Leader and Cabinet model. This is already proven effective within all the councils across Oxfordshire and West Berkshire.

Under this model, executive authority will be concentrated in a Leader supported by up to nine Cabinet Members, each responsible for a coherent cluster of functions designed to reflect the full span of single-tier responsibilities.

Decision-making and delegation

Governance arrangements are already broadly similar among the existing councils across the Oxfordshire and West Berkshire geography, and so the approach to decision-making and delegation within each of the three unitary councils is expected to follow a common model:

A regular meeting of full Council to determine budgetary and policy decisions will be held every two months, with a meeting in May for the annual election of the Chairs and Vice-Chairs. Under its city charter, Oxford elects Civic Office roles including the Lord Mayor, Deputy Lord Mayor and Sheriff. These civic and ceremonial functions will be retained and clearly defined under any new Greater Oxford Council arrangement to safeguard the city's historic identity and continuity of tradition. Emphasis should be placed on preserving the symbolic continuity of civic leadership while ensuring it becomes more inclusive and representative of all communities across Greater Oxford.

Ceremonial and symbolic functions across the wider Oxfordshire area will be safeguarded through charter trusteeship or equivalent provisions, ensuring that historic rights, insignia, and civic property are maintained. These roles are non-political and focus on promoting civic pride, community engagement, and the preservation of local heritage.

The Lord-Lieutenant, as a county-level Crown-appointed role, would need to be hosted by one of the successor councils, most appropriately Greater Oxford, as a shared ceremonial function across the county. This arrangement would maintain continuity in representing the Crown and align with precedents established following other local government reorganisations.

This proposal recognises the important role that the Lord Lieutenancy plays in the ceremonial county of Berkshire, and will seek to continue with the existing arrangements there as well.

Meetings will be held in February to determine Council's annual budget. These meetings will also be an opportunity for Members to introduce motions and ask questions to the Cabinet outside of their regular meetings.

A detailed scheme of delegation will be developed for each Cabinet Member to support agile and proportionate decision-making. This will ensure that decisions can be taken within their remit between Cabinet meetings.

Cabinet itself will be reserved for matters of cross-cutting or strategic significance, enabling it to operate as a genuinely collective body. Regular meetings will be held on a monthly cycle, supplemented by joint shareholder and partnership groups where commercial ventures or shared services require oversight. The combination of clear delegation, visible leadership, and a forward plan of Cabinet business will give residents a transparent understanding of who is responsible for what and will allow scrutiny committees to target their oversight accordingly.

Scrutiny and accountability

Balanced against strong executive leadership, the councils will embed a comprehensive and multi-layered system of scrutiny and accountability.

A primary scrutiny committee will meet monthly, complemented by two standing committees focused on Education and Young People, and Health and Wellbeing. Each will meet on a bi-monthly cycle. These committees will be supported by working groups established to examine specific areas in greater detail, such as housing and homelessness, finance and performance, or climate and environment. The system will retain the power to call in executive decisions, commission reviews, and draw evidence from residents and partners. Importantly, scrutiny will not only be backward-looking but also proactive, engaging with policy proposals at an early stage, commissioning reviews, and linking directly with local area committees to ensure that community voices are embedded in the decision-making process rather than consulted after the fact.

Alongside scrutiny, the councils will retain the statutory regulatory committees needed for planning, licensing, audit, standards, and appointments. These will be reviewed to ensure that schemes of delegation and call-in thresholds strike the right balance between workload management and robust oversight, particularly in planning, where councillors are often heavily involved. Proposals will also be developed to ensure that NACs can feed into planning processes earlier, strengthening engagement at a very local level and building legitimacy. Where services are shared across unitary authorities,

joint committees will provide democratic oversight, avoiding duplication and reinforcing accountability across boundaries.

Democratic Support

Given the move to a single tier of local government, councillors must be able to respond to a wider range of elector interests and needs than under the current two-tier system. To ensure members can continue to provide effective representation, the councils will invest in enhanced democratic support.

The Committee and Member Services team would be serviced by up-to 8 full time officers, comprising of a Committee and Member Services Manager, to have oversight and responsibility of the service, a Scrutiny and Governance Manager, to lead the Scrutiny function of the Council, and to act as a formal deputy for the Committee and Member Services Manager. Three Scrutiny and Governance Advisors will support the enhanced Scrutiny function, including supporting the committees, working groups and commissioned reviews. Three Committee and Member Services Officers will clerk and support all other committees. The whole team would have responsibility for Member Support, including being a first point of contact for IT, Councillor development, expenses and any committee guidance.

Given the consolidation from seven to three separate Democratic Services structures across the new unitary councils, efficiency savings are likely compared with current resourcing levels, subject to detailed design considerations.

Councillor numbers and interim boundaries

Administrative boundaries and councillor numbers have been proposed in accordance with the Local Government Boundary Commission for England's statutory criteria of electoral equality, community identity and effective governance. In addition, proposed councillor numbers for Ridgeway and Northern Oxfordshire are based on discussions with council leaderships across the entire geography of Oxfordshire, and represent the expressed democratic preferences of neighbouring authorities.

While the precise number of councillors will be centrally determined, the authorities anticipate that one councillor will represent between 2,117 and 3,525 electors, broadly consistent with comparator authorities Slough, Swindon, Milton Keynes, Dorset, and Nottingham.⁶² To ensure that a reduced cadre of councillors does not result in a democratic deficit, members will be made more visible and better supported. Enhanced casework support will be matched with fair remuneration that reflects the scale of the role, and clear pathways will be established for councillors to progress into leadership or specialist non-executive positions. Emphasis will be placed on encouraging applications from underrepresented groups, including younger people and women, with measures such as flexible meeting times, hybrid and digital participation, and development opportunities designed to make the role accessible and sustainable, whether undertaken on a full-time or part-time basis.

⁶² [North Yorkshire Council: Council Size Submission](#)

Table 6.2: Baseline Cllr. Numbers

Current Authority	Current Councillor Numbers
Oxford City Council	48
South Oxfordshire District Council	36
Vale of White Horse District Council	38
Cherwell District Council	48
West Oxfordshire District Council	49
West Berkshire Council	43
Oxfordshire County Council	69
Total	331

Table 6.3: Proposed Cllr. Numbers ⁶³

Emerging Authority	Current Councillor No. Equivalent	Cllr: Electorate Ratio (Baseline)	Emerging Authority	Cllr: Electorate Ratio (Proposed)	Proposed Councillor No Equivalent
Greater Oxford	92	1:1657	Greater Oxford	1: 2,117	72
Northern Oxon	112	1:1653	Northern Oxon	1: 3,428	Up to 54
Ridgeway	127	1:2442	Ridgeway	1: 3,525	88
Total	331				Up to 214

In accordance with Government and LGBCE guidance, the three proposed unitary councils for Oxfordshire will initially operate under interim warding arrangements. These arrangements are designed to ensure democratic continuity from vesting day, while providing a clear and flexible framework for refinement through a comprehensive boundary review to follow.

The LGBCE advises that, where local government reorganisation occurs before a full review can be completed, interim arrangements should be based on existing county divisions, district wards, and parish boundaries. This approach ensures that early elections take place on familiar, administratively workable geographies, maintaining broad electoral balance and reflecting the structure of existing communities.

In line with this guidance, the following interim arrangements are proposed to preserve local identity and community coherence while ensuring effective and proportionate representation:

- **Greater Oxford** will build upon the existing Oxford City structure, maintaining two-member wards and extending the footprint to incorporate adjacent suburban and peri-urban communities such as Kidlington, Botley, and Wheatley. This approach seeks to preserve community cohesion while accommodating growth within a coherent metropolitan geography.
- **Ridgeway**, comprising South Oxfordshire, the Vale of White Horse, and parts of West Berkshire, will adopt a flexible hybrid model derived from existing county boundaries and

⁶³ The proposed councillor numbers have been developed jointly with the teams working on the 1UA and 2UA models, ensuring shared assumptions and a consistent approach.

unitary wards. Specifically, South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse councils have indicated a preference for using current county divisions, while West Berkshire would utilise a mix of single- and double-member wards to reflect local geography and representation needs. This pattern balances effective representation across large rural areas with the distinct identities of market towns such as Didcot and Wantage.

- **Northern Oxfordshire**, covering Cherwell and parts of West Oxfordshire, will use a hybrid model based on existing county divisions. Urban areas such as Banbury and Bicester will be represented by multi-member wards, while smaller rural settlements will retain single-member divisions, ensuring both accessibility and local accountability.

Following vesting day, the LGBCE will be invited to undertake a comprehensive electoral review, rationalising boundaries across parish and community lines, incorporating updated population data, and confirming long-term arrangements consistent with its statutory criteria of electoral equality, community identity, and effective governance.

In the interim, the proposals outlined above provide a stable, equitable, and locally grounded framework, aligned with the expressed democratic preferences of neighbouring authorities, for the first elections to the new unitary councils, while laying firm foundations for a refined electoral map through the full LGBCE review.

Electoral Cycles

For Greater Oxford, the current system of biannual elections will be retained to preserve continuity and stability, to reflect a councillor demographic drawn from diverse backgrounds and full-time employment, and to enhance accountability by allowing residents to respond to the authority's performance in near real time.

There is strong local political will and clear justification for maintaining this cycle. Retaining elections by halves aligns with the proposal's core principles of inclusivity and growth ambition, ensuring that public service as a councillor remains accessible to those balancing professional and community commitments. Importantly, there is no legal barrier to continuing this arrangement, as the relevant legislation does not prescribe electoral cycles and allows flexibility for locally justified approaches.

For Northern Oxfordshire and Ridgeway, an all-out election model will be adopted, in line with the practice of many comparable unitary councils, including Cumberland, Somerset, and North Yorkshire.

Together, these arrangements represent a balanced and pragmatic approach combining regular democratic renewal and responsive local accountability in Greater Oxford with the stability and strategic focus needed for the larger and more rural areas of Oxfordshire to deliver effectively on long-term priorities.

Outside appointments

Finally, the role of councillors as representatives beyond the chamber will remain central to the governance model. Members will continue to serve on outside bodies, including community associations, local trusts and charities, and strategic partnerships. Appointments will be guided by

clear principles: they must support the council's corporate policy objectives, preserve important community or historical ties, meet statutory requirements, or allow the authority to influence policy at regional and national levels. Strategic partnerships will typically be represented by Cabinet Members, while ward councillors will take on community-level appointments, ensuring that both strategic influence and local presence are maintained.

Taken together, this model of governance, scrutiny, and representation provides a long-term structure that is both efficient and resilient. It balances strong executive leadership with robust accountability, ensures councillors are well supported to represent larger electorates, and embeds local community voices within the decision-making process. It reflects the government's preferred approach, is consistent with LGBCE guidance, and builds on proven practice from Oxford and comparable unitary authorities.

Community engagement and neighbourhood empowerment

A more empowered decision-making role for portfolio holders, in addition to increased support and capacity building for members, will enable them to fulfil their community leadership and representative function more effectively. But we recognise that re-thinking the scale and function of local government requires a considered and embedded approach to local engagement and community empowerment, which doesn't begin and end with elected councillors in a unitary authority.

West Berkshire already has well-established and close partnership working with its 62 parish councils facilitated by a twice-yearly District Parish Conference. Certain powers are available to be devolved to Town and Parish Councils if requested. This successful partnership working model can be extended across the rest of the new Ridgeway unitary area.

Scaling up Greater Oxford to a size that will allow it to effectively make strategic decisions for the benefit of the city and neighbouring towns and villages, necessarily means considering stakeholders over a wider geography. Similarly, the creation of new unitary authorities across Northern Oxfordshire and Ridgeway will need a direct link to the already-existing local councils and community organisations already active in service delivery and community engagement. Ensuring that the very local voice can be heard effectively in decision-making and service delivery needs to be part of the institutional design of the new authorities.

This is to support meaningful localism, but also because we know that communities and local partners have a key role to play in embedding preventative ways of working in the new authority from the first day. We know that collectively working towards community-centred solutions is the best way to unlock the best outcomes for our people, and the new authority needs to bake this into its design.

We also know that creating a new unitary authority doesn't mean starting from nothing. We recognise the importance of already existing local organisations, ways of working, and social connections that underpin civic and community life across Oxfordshire. We know that local communities care deeply about their places and want to be more involved. Our approach will be to strengthen relationships where they already exist and build them where they don't.

The way we propose to do this, across all three of the proposed new unitary authorities, is through the government's preferred vehicle of Neighbourhood Area Committees.

Neighbourhood Area Committees

We envision NACs as having a dual role: as an enabler of local community activity for preventative ends, and as a body with some formal democratic role and power in and of itself, that gives voice to the interests of distinct communities within each unitary area.

Joining these core functions in the same vehicle brings some challenges, which will need to be carefully considered. The NACs will need to interact with local communities in ways that complement and support existing activity and capacity, rather than crowding it out. They must also provide a consistent framework that works across different places and communities, recognising that each will bring its own strengths and challenges. At the same time, they will have to integrate participatory and relational practices with the representative democratic structures of the council and with the legal and bureaucratic processes that underpin decision-making.

We recognise that creating a new body that will be an important focus for local community and partnership working will require meaningful input from stakeholders and residents to ensure it is fit for purpose. At this stage, we are proposing a set of design principles which will guide the design of this new vehicle, subject to detailed stakeholder input at the appropriate time.

Democratic representation and engagement Design Principles

Table 6.4: Assessment against Demographic Representation and Engagement Design Principles

Principle	Rationale
NACs should act as a link between local community activity and the new authority	Building and deepening relationships between actors at a very local level and the new authority could be facilitated through a dedicated link body. Having a clear and consistent approach across the new authorities would help community partners (including town and parish councils) navigate the system and build relationships. A link with scrutiny and into other decision-making bodies will enable community voice to be brought into council processes.
NACs should build on and support what already happens in places	Community activity is 'messy' in that it coalesces around particular individuals and organisations – trying to generate it based around a structure imposed from top down won't work. It needs to respond to already existing energy. In this way some of the functions of the NAC will be driven by community priorities. Already existing local partnerships will be key links to established networks.
NACs should act as an enabler and incubator of community activity	Unlocking latent community capacity can act as the gateway to community-based solutions to local challenges. Bringing community partners and actors together through the NAC can maximise what is already happening through, e.g. mapping activity and information sharing, capacity building and strengthening local partnership working. This will require dedicated resourcing to become meaningful.

NAC's enabling function should be paired with a formal governance role

To provide a direct link between community engagement and strategic governance, and to generate credibility and an incentive to engage, NACs should have *some* formal decision-making power over matters affecting the local area. This should include an element of expenditure. Ensuring that communities are not tangled up in governance requirements will be a key consideration for detailed design and implementation.

NACs formal governance role should support participation in local decision-making and service delivery

While not assuming direct responsibility for local service delivery, NACs should enable participation in local service delivery and decision making. Acting as the key link organisation between communities and the authority will facilitate this. This could include, but not be limited to, facilitating co-production and co-design of council services, facilitating engagement in spatial planning or placemaking, playing a scrutiny and advisory role by holding service providers to account and making sure delivery is well-coordinated.

Embedding and empowering NACs

To embed NACs and make them a meaningful vehicle for community engagement and empowerment will require answering several key questions, to be developed in a collaborative process with communities and partners, including town and parish councils, during the shadow authority phase aligning to the principles proposed:

Scale and geography

An appropriate geography and scale for NACs will need to be defined. They will need to be close enough to the ground to have deep insight into granular community issues, while recognising that the three unitary system inherently increases local voice by virtue of its scale.

At the same time, there needs to be a number that is manageable and not an administrative burden on the new authority. There will need to be a coherent relationship with existing ways of working and networks, preserving what matters most to residents, as well as their relationships.

Oxford City Council's current neighbourhood-based way of working, the Locality Approach, aligns its geographies with local Primary Care Networks (PCN). This creates a consistent geography among healthcare providers and council services involved in community outreach, building partnership networks with deep local knowledge and relationships. The government's aspirations to move towards community-based services, delivered at a neighbourhood scale defined around PCN geographies, mean this is a natural starting point for defining our NAC geographies, as it reinforces already-existing local networks and preventative ways of working. Government's intentions to establish Neighbourhood Health Centres as a one-stop-shop in every community which co-locates NHS, local authority and voluntary sector further bolsters the case for proposing a geography at this scale.

As such, our starting point for proposing NAC geographies will be in line with this, serving a population of c. 50,000 people each. On the current PCN footprints in Oxfordshire, this gives a working assumption of c.21 NACs across the county area. We propose this as a scale which strikes the right balance between consistency of approach across partners and networks, very-local connection, and light-touch administration. As the new governance arrangements are developed throughout the

implementation process, the scale of the NACs will be kept under review to ensure that this balance is indeed the right one.

Formal governance

Governance arrangements for the NACs will need to be carefully considered. Ensuring that NACs are constituted with some decision-making power, with the authority to influence local priorities and spend is important to make them more than tokenistic. As a genuine decision-making body, they will need some formal checks and balances to ensure democratic safeguards are in place. The right balance between elected and co-opted members in any formal decision-making function will need to be carefully considered.

Checks and balances should not be so onerous as to create a barrier to participation by community groups. Opportunities for participation which are informal and don't require stringent qualifying criteria should also be part of the design. An 'informal' function should enable, not restrict, broad and diverse community involvement.

Resourcing

To make NACs effective and sustainable, they will be provided with sufficient resources for both capacity building and direct investment in local priorities. Early identification of funding sources and establishing fair, transparent budgeting will be key parts of their design, enabling communities to act with confidence and ambition.

7 Implementation Map

7.1 Future state

Implementing LGR in Oxfordshire is a complex and ambitious undertaking. It presents a rare but vital opportunity to reshape local government around the real geographies of how people live, work and move, creating three distinct unitary authorities (3UA) that are better placed to deliver growth, prevention and innovation. Through doing this the new authorities will be able to create new relationships with their communities and partners to work together on local priorities collaboratively.

Change of this scale demands strong leadership and vision, firmly grounded in a realistic and practical approach. The councils leading implementation must balance ambition with discipline, protecting critical services while creating the conditions to realise the full benefits of reform. This implementation map sets out how the three unitary authorities will prepare, resource and deliver the transition, guided by a clear vision and design principles.

The roadmap to delivery includes designing services focused on residents and local needs, with flexibility to reflect the varying priorities of Greater Oxford, Northern Oxfordshire and Ridgeway. It will reimagine how services are delivered through a total place approach, digital by design, and smarter use of public assets, including opportunities for colocation with health, police and other public services enabling the release and disposal of properties no longer needed. Operating models will be cost-effective and prevention-led, driving better value and long-term outcomes.

The programme will be built on a clear and compelling vision for change, supported by targeted investment in workforce capability and robust, empowered governance. Together, these foundations will ensure each new authority has the leadership, capacity, and structures needed to deliver transformation effectively from the outset.

7.2 Implementation roadmap

There is a lot of work to do by April 2028 to establish three safe, secure and solid unitary councils, and to set the foundations to deliver on the benefits and ambitions for the people of the three unitary authorities. It will be crucial to establish governance structures, including the Programme Management Office (PMO) and other enablers, to drive the change and identify the essential elements and priority areas of focus across the implementation timetable.

This transformation is underpinned by core principles that connect our vision for the three unitary authorities with a clear approach to ensuring a safe, legal, and seamless transition for both residents and staff:

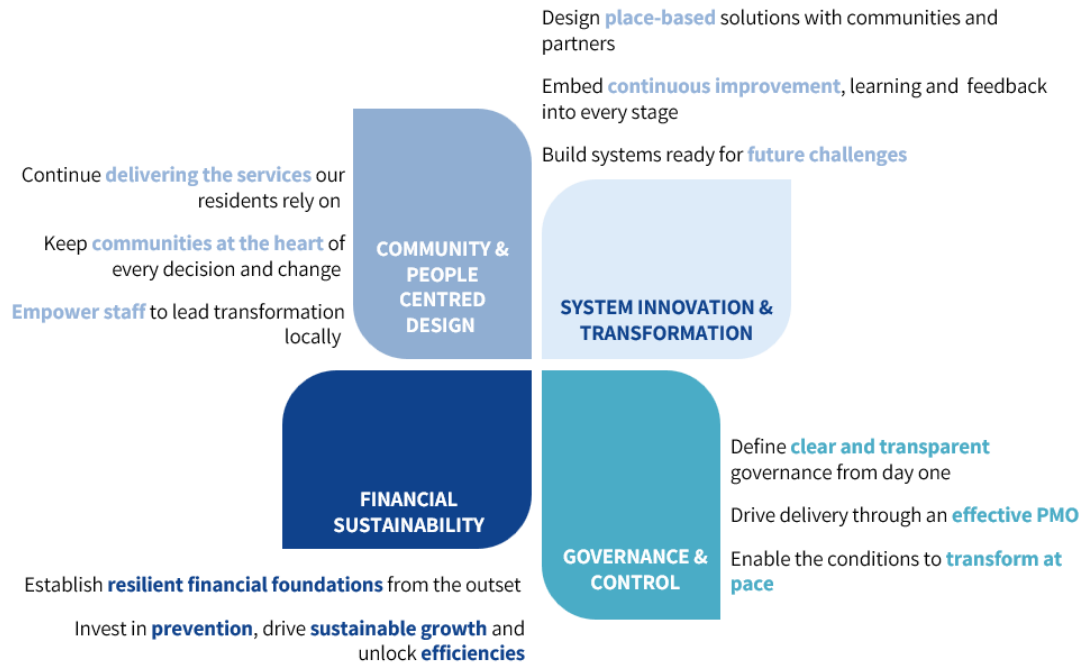


Fig 7.1: Principles for Three Unitary Implementation

Implementing LGR will bring about more change than can realistically be delivered by the anticipated vesting day in April 2028. To manage this, we have developed a high-level implementation approach that ensures the creation of three new unitary councils that are safe, legal, and operational from Day 1, while also laying the groundwork for a bold and ambitious programme of reform that delivers lasting benefits with residents, communities and partners across Oxfordshire.

This transformation will comprise three layers of change. First, the essential elements required to establish fully functioning councils on Day 1, such as constitutions, safe transfer of services, and staffing structures.

Second, the foundational components that enable the new authorities to begin transformation immediately, such as programme governance, the Programme Management Office (PMO), partnership working and other key enablers.

Third, the longer-term reforms that - while not critical for vesting day - will be instrumental in unlocking the full potential of the three unitary model. Crucial reforms to unlock growth in Greater Oxford will include establishing devolution and structural links with a Thames Valley MSA, which it is hoped will vest at the same time, and setting in motion the Green Belt review process.

These layers of change are embedded within the four phases of our roadmap (laid out below), which align with the Government timetable and provide a structured framework for transition and transformation.

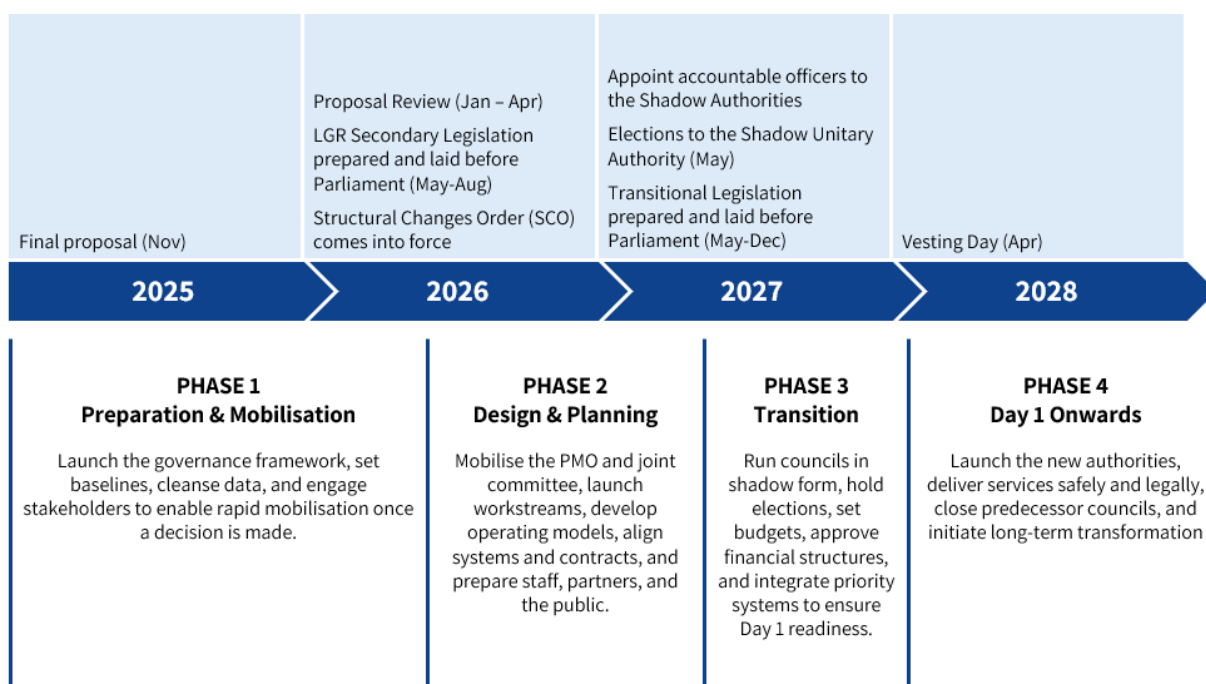


Fig 7.2: The Implementation Roadmap & Government Timetable

Phase 1 - Preparation & mobilisation

From submission of the proposal to the formal announcement of the preferred LGR option, with a focus on laying the foundations to be ready for Day 1 should the 3UA option be approved. We will continue to engage widely with our communities and partners, establishing robust programme management and governance arrangements. A detailed inventory of service data, structure, contracts, assets and systems across all will be established involving all seven local authorities in Oxfordshire and West Berkshire. This is needed to enable the design of new unitary authorities, strengthen service delivery, remove duplication, assess opportunities for shared services, maximise transformation opportunities and minimise risks as we move into the design phase.

By the end of this phase in July 2026, working with the other local authorities we will have:

- Established arrangements to continue to engage and collaborate with colleagues, communities and partners.
- Created a roadmap for transition for each service area.
- Built up readiness across the system to implement the unitary proposal for Oxfordshire chosen by Government.

Phase 2 - Design & planning

Following announcement of the chosen option, authorities will establish the programme infrastructure and embark on detailed design, alongside planning for the transition period.

We recognise that all aspects of Oxfordshire’s local government and its services are vital. Our implementation approach proposes balanced governance, ensuring equal input from both current local government tiers, which encourages collaboration and reduces risks during transition. No single authority will dominate; every voice will be heard, with final governance arrangements determined by ministerial decision.

Whilst upholding the independence of each new council, we are committed to ensuring that Oxfordshire’s new unitary authorities collaborate closely to fully harness the benefits of LGR. As has been mentioned, this is far more than an administrative reshuffle; it is a unique, generational chance to create councils capable of efficiently and effectively responding to the priorities and requirements of local communities.

To deliver a clear and compelling vision for transformation, we must articulate clearly and consistently what a transformed Oxfordshire looks like, with strong and stable leadership guiding the organisations through the change. The structural foundations must enable the new unitary authorities to operate at a sufficient scale to deliver services effectively, including the capacity to invest in modern systems and to attract and retain a skilled workforce. At the same time, these new authorities must remain deeply rooted in their communities, maintaining strong connections to both place and people.

Table 7.1: Guiding Design Principles for Implementation and Our Approach

Principle	Challenges and issues	Our approach
Community & people centred design		
Continue delivering the services our residents rely on	Transitioning to new structures may disrupt essential services, especially where legacy systems are outdated or fragmented.	We will map critical services and embed continuity plans. Ahead of vesting day, we will ensure accurate, complete data is safely transferred to the correct unitary to enable the safe and legal continuation of services and mitigate any disruptions to residents and service users.
Keep communities at the heart of every decision and change	Establishing new governance structures may risk disconnecting communities from decision-making.	Our vision is to develop future operating models that reflect the distinct needs of Greater Oxford, Northern Oxfordshire, and Ridgeway, enabling services to raise living standards, reduce demand, and connect residents to opportunity. We will embed community voice into our governance and design by using local forums, place-based engagement, and stronger partnerships with the voluntary and community sector.
Empower staff to lead transformation locally	Staff may face uncertainty and cultural disruption during transition to new authorities.	We will support the existing officer workforce through transition and staff transfers, with clear plans for consultation, union engagement, and redeployment. We will manage change for all staff transparently and

fairly, while building a new organisational culture rooted in place-based leadership, innovation, and resident-focused practice.

The design and delivery of the transition to new authorities will include broad engagement with all employees and consultation with trade union representatives to secure successful outcomes for individuals and the new organisations. Each new authority will develop and establish an organisation identity and purpose and a values-based culture that builds unity, supports effective change and innovation and puts local resident needs at the heart of all service delivery.

System innovation & transformation

Design place-based solutions with communities and partners	Public services often operate in silos and do not reflect how people experience their communities and challenges. Current service boundaries may not align with community needs or local geographies.	Early on in our transition roadmap, we will establish collaborative leadership arrangements that reflect unitary ambitions, fostering coordinated delivery and shared responsibility for outcomes across the region. We will maintain and deepen partnerships with local organisations, anchor institutions, and regional bodies.
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We will confirm detailed baselines for each unitary and use local data to inform place-based service design.

Embed continuous improvement, learning, and feedback into every stage	Without structured oversight, transformation efforts may lack coordination and adaptability.	We will ensure data and feedback is used to drive evidence-based decision-making, seamless service delivery, and innovation tailored to local priorities. We will establish implementation boards and programme teams to guide transition and embed learning.
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Build systems ready for future challenges	Legacy systems and contracts may hinder integration and future scalability.	We will review and allocate contracts across the new authorities, negotiating variations and preparing for decommissioning or re-procurement over a 3–5-year plan.
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Our aim is to coproduce commercial arrangements with communities within the new geography to unlock financial and social value, and the ability to respond to local needs.

Our vision is to design in flexibility to our operating models, to build structures and services that are fit for the future.

Financial sustainability

Establish resilient financial foundations from the outset	Fragmented financial systems and legacy challenges may impact transparency and readiness on vesting day.	<p>We will apportion budgets fairly and transparently across the new unitary authorities, while harmonising council tax and aligning financial policy with local priorities.</p> <p>We will work together to navigate legacy financial challenges, such as unclear savings rationales or fragmented data systems, while building resilient financial foundations that support growth and prevention for the future we will agree on shared service arrangements and establish a savings tracker for each unitary to monitor efficiencies.</p>
Invest in prevention, drive sustainable growth and unlock efficiencies	Short-term pressures may limit capacity to invest in long-term prevention and growth.	Our target operating model embeds prevention in design and delivery of services. To support this we will modernise systems to support digital by design using ai to improve user interfaces.
Governance & control		
Define clear and transparent governance from day one	New authorities require robust governance to ensure accountability and clarity.	<p>Our plan will establish the democratic foundations of the three new authorities, including constitutions, leadership structures, elections, and governance systems.</p> <p>We will embed strong local voice, balanced regional influence, and governance rooted in place, supported by effective partnerships across communities and sectors. We will establish joint leaders committees, oversight boards, and shadow elections.</p>
Drive delivery through an effective PMO	LGR is too large and complex of a programme to deliver in silos or within existing portfolios. Without dedicated and disciplined programme management, transition activities may become fragmented, delayed, or ineffective.	We will form a joint programme team and allocate tasks to SMEs across authorities to ensure coordinated delivery.
Enable the conditions to transform at pace	LGR implementation is a serious undertaking with clear timelines set out from central government. We will need to move at pace in order to meet key delivery milestones.	We will put in place a comprehensive transition plan supported by a joint risk register and escalation process. These mechanisms will help manage risks effectively and ensure the programme delivers against the timelines set for implementation.

By the end of this phase, we will have:

- Established robust governance arrangements, including the Oxfordshire Joint Leaders Committee and Leaders Oversight Board, as well as a Chief Executives/Programme Board, to provide clear leadership and oversight throughout the transition process.
- Advanced the devolution twin track, ensuring alignment with broader regional ambitions and preparing for simultaneous progress alongside the new unitary authorities.
- Set up the Implementation Board or design committee, with representation from each existing local authority, and form a Joint Programme Team to coordinate all transition activities effectively.
- Agreed on and allocated key tasks and responsibilities across the system, drawing on subject matter experts (SMEs) from each authority to ensure comprehensive engagement and specialist input.
- Developed a detailed operational plan to ensure readiness for Day 1, covering all essential services, systems, and processes, prioritising functional design to address statutory requirements, particularly safeguarding processes
- Reached agreement on shared service arrangements, identifying opportunities for efficiency and collaboration across the new authorities.
- Established and agreed the design principles that will underpin the future operating models and guide the transformation journey.
- Agreed the design of future operating models based on agreed principles and the organisation of shadow elections in preparation for the new governance structures.

Phase 3 – Transition

Following the Structural Changes Order (SCO) being passed, Shadow Authorities or Implementation Executives will be established to guide the preparation of authorities in readiness for vesting day.

By the end of this phase, we will have:

- Established Implementation Executives for each new unitary authority to oversee the transition process, and appointed officers to the top three tiers of leadership across the new authorities.
- Developed, in collaboration with employees and unions, distinct cultural values for each new authority and completed the workforce strategy, including creation of each authority's brand and visual identity.
- Secured agreement at the shadow council level on Day 1 operational plans, target operating models, transformation plans, and the workforce strategy.
- Ensured the devolution twin track is prepared, so that the new MSA is ready to vest at the same time as the new councils are established.
- Completed comprehensive system and user testing, agreed the year one budget and Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS), and achieved Day 1 operational readiness for buildings, systems, data, and staffing.
- Conducted the initial co-design of service areas through shadow authorities in partnership with local residents.
- Developed a comprehensive recruitment and retention strategy for social care staff, including the appointment of senior positions such as Director of Adult Social Services (DASS), Director of Children's Services (DCS), and Principal Social Worker (PSW) within Northern Oxfordshire and Greater Oxford.

- Confirmed detailed baselines for all three unitary authorities, covering disaggregated functions such as systems usage, asset management, grant funding, partnerships, contracts, and care package specific details).
- Agreed pooled budget (section 75) arrangements with Health Partners
- Identified and commissioned specialist external capacity in social care.
- Novated existing care provider contracts to the new authorities, engaging with the market prior to vesting day to minimise potential disruptions.
- Ensured alignment of CQC registration for provider services according to the footprints of the new authorities.

Phase 4 - Day 1 onwards

The new unitary authorities will go live with foundations in place to ensure safe, secure and solid services can be provided, and with each authority positioned to deliver transformation in line with the benefits and ambitions set out.

From Day 1, we will have:

- Established a robust savings tracker for each new unitary authority, ensuring clarity and transparency as we monitor financial efficiencies throughout the transition.
- Designed a comprehensive plan for integrating systems and contracts over the next three to five years, removing duplication, streamlining processes, and maximising savings opportunities.
- Launched proactive and inclusive information and engagement programmes for employees, stakeholders and the public, fostering strong communication and participation at every stage.
- Commenced a review of the Greater Oxford Green Belt, balancing environmental stewardship with future development needs and community aspirations.
- Introduced clear steps to support the operationalisation of the new Mayoral Combined Authority (MSA), aligning new unitary functions to deliver on devolution priorities and maximise local opportunities.
- Statutory roles in place, such as DASS, DCS, PSW, and DPH, and each supported by dedicated teams, with staff transferred from the county as appropriate (subject to any relevant TUPE considerations).
- Convened or refocused committees, including the Health & Wellbeing Board and Safeguarding Partnerships.

This roadmap is based on the data and time available at this stage. Further detailed design and planning will be required, in close discussion with staff, unions, and other representatives, to refine and validate the approach. For further details on the risks, assumptions and dependencies of the implementation plan, please see Appendix H.

7.3 Creating the conditions for success

Successful delivery of LGR depends on creating the right conditions for change. Ahead of launch, we will establish robust governance and reporting arrangements that meet national requirements and reflect local accountability. A dedicated Programme Management Office (PMO) will drive delivery,

coordinate workstreams, and embed the tools, controls, and agile methodologies needed to manage change effectively.

A detailed programme plan will be developed, grounded in shared design principles and a clear roadmap. This plan will reflect our commitment to place-based transformation, ensuring that delivery is tailored to the distinct needs of Greater Oxford, Northern Oxfordshire, and Ridgeway. It will be insight-led, using data to inform decisions, track progress, and target interventions where they will have the greatest impact. Innovation will be embedded throughout, enabling us to design prevention-led, responsive services that anticipate future needs and improve outcomes for residents.

Governance will be established to ensure political oversight, strategic leadership, and operational delivery are aligned and effective. Building on the joint working established during the business case, our framework will become progressively more formalised through mobilisation, design, and the Shadow Authority period. A Leaders Oversight Board will provide collective political direction and assurance, while a Programme Board comprising current Chief Executives will oversee strategic alignment, risk and interdependencies. This will transition into Implementation Boards or Joint Committees once the Structural Changes Order takes effect.



Fig 7.3: Programme Governance Structure

We are committed to engaging with other LGR programmes as proposals are approved, adopting good practice and applying lessons to our local context.

These foundations will ensure the programme is well-managed and rooted in our shared ambition: to deliver better outcomes, smarter services, and a stronger voice for every community.

8 Criteria Assessment

8.1 Government LGR Criteria Assessment

The below table provides an overview of the key strengths of our proposal in line with the criteria, highlighting why the three unitary authorities model is the best option for the future of Oxfordshire.

Table 8.1: Assessment against Government criteria

LGR government criteria	How the three unitary authorities proposal meets each of the criteria	Relevant section of the proposal
Unitary local government and our approach		
A proposal should seek to achieve for the whole of the area concerned the establishment of a single tier of local government.	Within this proposal, a single tier of three new unitary authorities are created from the current two-tier, seven authority system, a Greater Oxford, Northern Oxfordshire and Ridgeway.	3.1.3 Three Unitary Councils
Proposals should be for sensible economic areas, with an appropriate tax base which does not create an undue advantage or disadvantage for one part of the area.	Each of the three unitary areas have ensured a sensible economic area with balanced tax bases and designed to recognise the different needs, demands, challenges and economic strengths across Greater Oxford, Northern Oxfordshire and Ridgeway. They all share a common ambition to build a more prosperous future for all of those in Oxfordshire. They link to existing economic geographies – particularly in expanding the boundaries of the city of Oxford to cover the places where people look to the city for work, leisure and services and feel the impact of decisions made by the city.	5.3 Financial Disaggregation and Aggregation Process of Baseline Appendix A Development of Boundary Proposals

Proposals should be for a sensible geography which will help to increase housing supply and meet local needs.

The three unitary model will deliver on the Government's mission to increase housing supply in responding to local need and with local coordination. It will allow for the building of up to 40,000 homes over the next 15 years through release of green belt land around Oxford – significantly ahead of Government housing targets, which alternative proposals cannot match.

3.1.3 Three Unitary Councils
4.3 Homes

Proposals should be supported by robust evidence and analysis and include an explanation of the outcomes it is expected to achieve, including evidence of estimated costs/benefits and local engagement.

The proposed service delivery models have been informed and developed through thorough engagement with council members, key stakeholders and wider engagement groups including businesses and residents. The financial implications of reorganisation - including costs, savings and income – have also been assessed for the three unitary model.

4 Case for Three Unitaries
5 The Financial Case
6 New Target Operating Model

Proposals should clearly describe the single tier local government structures it is putting forward for the whole of the area and explain how – if implemented – these areas expect to achieve the outcomes described.

Each area proposal sets out how the new unitary councils will have the required leadership and capacity at the optimum scale and proximity to residents to respond to the needs and challenges of each place.

3.1.3 Three Unitary Councils
6 New Target Operating Model
7 Implementation Plan

Unitary local government criteria

Unitary local government must be the right size to achieve efficiencies, improve capacity and withstand financial shocks.

The modelling suggests that payback of transitional costs is within 4 years and there are then ongoing savings of around £48.6 million per annum for the aggregated position of all 3 unitaries going forward. The suggestion therefore is that this three unitary proposal is the right size.

5 The Financial Case

As a guiding principle, new councils should aim for a population of 500,000 or more.	The total population of the three unitary areas currently is 935,000. Greater Oxford has 240,000 residents, Northern Oxfordshire has 265,000 residents, and Ridgeway has 430,000 residents. Rapid housing delivery in line with Government targets will see significant population growth by 2040 to 370,000 in Northern Oxfordshire and 545,000 in Ridgeway. Housing delivery in Greater Oxford will exceed Government targets leading to a population of 345,000 by 2040. Rationale for population sizes set out below.	3 Options Appraisal 4.1 Prosperity 4.2 Homes 4.3 Quality of Life 4.4 Identity 4.5 Voice 4.7 Engagement Unitaries 6 New Target Operating Model Appendix D Engagement Detail
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There may be certain scenarios in which this 500,000 figure does not make sense for an area, including on devolution, and this rationale should be set out in a proposal.	This proposal sets out why the areas proposed are smaller than 500,000 based on the specific and distinct geographies and demographics of each unitary, the need to represent each area distinctly as part of devolution, as well as being required for suitable levels of green belt release to maximise and support growth. This is necessary to deliver the economic growth and levels of housing outlined across this proposal.	3 Options Appraisal 4.1 Prosperity 4.2 Homes 4.3 Quality of Life 4.4 Identity 4.5 Voice 4.7 Engagement Unitaries 6 New Target Operating Model Appendix D Engagement Detail
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Efficiencies should be identified to help improve councils' finances and make sure that council taxpayers are getting the best value for their money.	The 3UA proposal will deliver efficiency savings in aggregate and in the individual new unitaries arising from ICT, support services, managerial, democratic processes, the disposal and rationalisation of property transferred and external audit costs. Additionally, savings will be driven from transformation of early intervention, adult social care and children's services, as well as waste collection and disposal. In the Greater Oxford proposal, in addition to increased council income for all new unitaries arising from the ability to levy the Adult Social Care Premium, significant increased income will arise from	5 The Financial Case
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	growth in dwelling numbers and new businesses. Payback of additional one-off costs for all unitaries will be approximately 4 years.	
Proposals should set out how we will seek to manage transition costs, including planning for future service transformation opportunities from existing budgets, including from the flexible use of capital receipts that can support authorities in taking forward transformation and invest-to-save projects.	Payback of initial costs for each new unitary authority is an estimated 4 years from investing. The balance sheet financial strength analysis suggests that each unitary should be able manage these transitional costs with some of the authorities such as Oxford already making early provision of costs in the current round of medium-term financial planning. Where possible, use will be made of the flexible use of capital receipts to support transformation projects.	5.6 Transition Costs and Longer-Term Transformation Savings
For areas covering councils that are in Best Value intervention and/or in receipt of Exceptional Financial Support, proposals must additionally demonstrate how reorganisation may contribute to putting local government in the area as a whole on a firmer footing and what area-specific arrangements may be necessary to make new structures viable.	West Berkshire was granted one off Exceptional Financial Support of £16m in 2025. This was noted as a one-off measure and the authority has a clear path to securing a balanced financial position in the immediate future. The strong balance sheet position shows that none of the unitary authorities in this proposal will be looking for exceptional financial support.	5.2 Existing council budgets and pressures 5.3 Financial Disaggregation and Aggregation Process of Baseline position
Public service delivery		
Unitary structures must prioritise the delivery of high quality and sustainable public services to citizens.	The proposals will ensure services are tailored to local circumstances and will be developed collaboratively with local communities and partners. The focus will be on the development of a transformative, preventative model that links growth to improved outcomes and reduced inequality. Independent assessment has shown all three unitary authorities would be able to provide sustainable services. Each unitary will be able to take a single coordinated approach to addressing priorities for their	4.6 Future Fit 6 New Target Operating Model

area. Decisions can focus on the needs of specific areas and the integrated model allows for more agile service delivery.

Proposals should show how new structures will improve local government and service delivery and should avoid unnecessary fragmentation of services.

The proposal shows how three unitary authorities will be more agile, connected to their local communities and able to work collaboratively with partners. Services will be commissioned and delivered at the most appropriate level, some across multiple authorities. For example, each authority will have its own sovereign children's services, but Safeguarding Boards will operate across all three unitary authorities. Services will achieve better outcomes for the lives of residents by being explicitly designed to respond to local circumstances, with a mix of direct delivery and shared services. It will achieve this through the creation of efficiencies from consolidation while also investing in new capacity, digital capability, and innovative service models to underpin long-term viability.

4.3 Quality of Life
4.6 Future Fit
6 New Target Operating Model

Opportunities to deliver public service reform should be identified, including where they will lead to better value for money.

The proposals align with the wider public sector reform agenda including the NHS ten-year plan, and devolution. They focus on data-led place-based and integrated early intervention and prevention, tailoring collaborative service delivery to respond to community needs effectively in each unitary area, ensuring better value for money organisationally and at a systems level.

4.3 Quality of Life
4.6 Future Fit
5.7 Transformation Savings
6 New Target Operating Model

Consideration should be given to the impacts for crucial services such as social care, children's services, SEND and homelessness, and for wider public services including for public safety.

The proposal for three unitary authorities has considered the impact of a range of crucial public services and how the new unitary authorities can deliver better public services that improve outcomes for residents, through identifying and addressing needs in a timely manner. This includes:

4.3 Quality of Life
4.6 Future Fit
6 New Target Operating Model

	<p>Localised approach to Children’s Social Care, Adult Social Care and SEND – the three unitary authorities will deliver their own sovereign services with collaboration on critical areas with other unitary authorities to effectively fulfil statutory duties, maintain economies of scale and avoid unnecessary disaggregation</p> <p>Community-based early intervention and prevention model boosting community networks and resilience</p> <p>In-house statutory homelessness services rooted in prevention</p>	
Local engagement		
Proposals should show how councils in the area have sought to work together in coming to a view that meets local needs and is informed by local views.	Collaborative work with the five other Oxfordshire councils, and West Berkshire, took place to develop proposals for reorganising local government. Collective agreement was made to a shared data protocol to ensure consistent baseline comparisons, and a series of teach-in sessions were delivered across the councils. As a proposer of a three unitary model for Oxfordshire and West Berkshire, Oxford City Council’s Leader, Chief Executive, and Leadership Team actively worked with the other councils, and West Berkshire, to shape the proposal.	4.7 Public Engagement Appendix D Engagement Detail
It is for councils to decide how best to engage locally in a meaningful and constructive way, and this engagement activity should be evidenced in your proposal.	A comprehensive and inclusive engagement programme was delivered across Oxfordshire and West Berkshire to support the proposal for Local Government Reorganisation. A diverse range of methods and strategies were carefully designed to ensure meaningful, constructive, inclusive, and representative participation throughout the process.	4.5 Voice 4.7 Public Engagement Appendix D Engagement Detail
Proposals should consider issues of local identity and cultural and historic importance.	The proposal protects Oxfordshire’s historic and cultural identity while aligning governance with natural community boundaries. It gives residents more say in local planning	4.4 Identity 4.5 Voice 4.7 Public Engagement Appendix D Engagement Detail

	and ensures services are tailored to urban, rural, and market town needs. Development is directed to less sensitive areas, balancing growth with housing, heritage, and environmental protection. It strengthens local representation and delivers smarter, place-based decision-making.	
Proposals should include evidence of local engagement, an explanation of the views that have been put forward and how concerns will be addressed.	Feedback indicated strong support for smaller, locally responsive councils, alongside concerns regarding transport, housing, respecting local identity, and representation. Feedback has been used to tailor approaches and respond to green space protection, urban – rural balance, financial sustainability and improving services and access.	4.7 Public Engagement Appendix D Engagement Detail
Boundary change		
Existing district areas should be considered the building blocks for your proposals, but where there is a strong justification, more complex boundary changes will be considered.	<p>The proposal is based around creating a scale and geography for each unitary authority that allows them to respond to the distinct strengths and challenges of each distinct place. These are based on coherent economic areas and housing markets.</p> <p>In the case of Greater Oxford, we are proposing to create a new unitary authority that encompasses the full existing urban conurbation together with already planned urban extensions, rather than an under-bounded city authority. Encompassing the contiguous urban area and surroundings will allow the city to coherently plan for meeting the significant under supply of housing in Oxford, as well as providing sufficient space to meet ambitions for growth which are nationally significant in their impacts. This has used parishes as the building blocks of the proposed boundaries.</p> <p>Redrawing the city boundaries will at the same time allow rural areas and towns in Oxfordshire to govern themselves based on their distinct</p>	<p>3 Options Appraisal</p> <p>4.1 Prosperity</p> <p>4.2 Homes</p> <p>Appendix A Development of Boundary Proposals</p>

local needs and priorities, as opposed to having to respond to the gravitational pull of the city into existing districts.

Devolution support

New unitary structures must support devolution arrangements.

This proposal for unitary structures was developed concurrently with preparation of an Expression of Interest for devolution to create a Thames Valley Mayoral Strategic Authority.

4.5 Identity

Where no Mayoral Combined County Authority is already established or agreed then the proposal should set out how it will help unlock devolution.

This proposal sets out how it will provide constituent authorities which provide a balance of three voices for Oxfordshire to the Mayoral Strategic Authority, representing its distinct places and suitably balancing representation of the urban and rural populations.

4.1 Prosperity

4.5 Identity

3 Options Appraisal

Proposals should ensure there are sensible population size ratios between local authorities and any strategic authority, with timelines that work for both priorities.

The creation of three unitary authorities across Oxfordshire and West Berkshire will help ensure there is closer parity in scale among the constituent unitary authorities within a Thames Valley MSA than a single Oxfordshire unitary council which would be over two and a half times the size of the others, and at least 37% the population size of the MSA itself.

3 Options Appraisal

4.5 Identity

6.3 Council Size and Structure

Community engagement

New unitary structures should enable stronger community engagement and deliver genuine opportunity for neighbourhood empowerment.

Three unitary authorities will allow for governance that is more tailored and representative. This proposal will support local leaders better understand and tackle the unique challenges and opportunities within their areas. Explicit within this proposal are arrangements that will support increased community engagement in democratic processes, but also the design of local authority services and community empowerment more generally.

4.5 Voice

6.3 Council Size and Structure

Proposals will need to explain plans to make sure that communities are engaged.	A community place-based approach will see enhanced neighbourhood engagement and delivery models. The three unitary authorities will co-design with residents and partners neighbourhood governance arrangements to support local requirements. This will deliver decision making at the lowest effective level to speed up delivery and growth, tailored to each community's circumstance.	4.5 Voice 6.3 Council Size and Structure 7 Implementation
Where there are already arrangements in place, it should be explained how these will enable strong community engagement.	Parish and Town Councils will retain their independence and functions. Where present, they will be invited to participate in NACs. Our approach supports local decision-making building on existing networks understanding the Oxford speaks clearly for the city, while towns and villages across Northern Oxfordshire and Ridgeway are empowered to speak for themselves.	4.5 Voice 6.3 Council Size and Structure

8.2 Devolution Criteria Assessment

Devolution is a key criterion in considering Local Government Reorganisation; the two must be complementary. There are currently no devolution arrangements in place that cover the Thames Valley area, but an expression of interest (Eoi) is being developed jointly by all 13 councils across Oxfordshire, Berkshire and Swindon for the proposed creation of Mayoral Strategic Authority (MSA).

Reports by Inner Circle Consulting and Metro Dynamics, working on behalf all 13 councils across Oxfordshire, Berkshire and Swindon have produced an evidence base to enable a better understanding of the sectoral and economic complementarity of the Thames Valley geography. These show there is significant opportunity for the region and scope for it to contribute even further to UK plc. They find the region's economic success has masked persistent challenges, including a rural-urban divide, housing pressures, fragmented infrastructure and skills misalignment with businesses' needs. They also find that the area does not sufficiently act as an integrated economic whole, but there are many overlaps in terms of sectoral composition and economic potential. The proposed MSA is needed to overcome this fragmented approach, strengthen connections across the main economic centres and unleash the region's growth potential in a way that both increases inclusivity and supports UK global competitiveness.

Establishing a Thames Valley MSA with Level 3 powers will unlock high-value, innovation-driven growth by integrating fragmented labour markets, accelerating economic recovery, and enabling the region to contribute even more to national prosperity through coordinated investment, infrastructure, and skills development. Subject to the councils' approval, the EOI will be submitted in

December 2025, with the ambition that a Thames Valley MSA could be established to vest in April 2028 at the same time as the new unitary council's vest.

The new unitary structures proposed for Oxfordshire and West Berkshire sit within the same geography as the planned MSA and directly support the devolution arrangements. A strong Oxford is good for Oxfordshire and UK plc. Three unitary councils will ensure there is a distinct voice for the city region of Oxford at the MSA table alongside those of Thames Valley's other economic engines – Reading, Slough, Bracknell and Swindon. Working together with an elected Mayor, we will help relight the fire of our economy and ignite growth – the Government's number one mission – and share prosperity.

Three unitary councils will also provide distinct voices for interests of northern Oxfordshire and Ridgeway areas that form part of the knowledge spine and part of the Ox-Cam Corridor. Oxford forms just 22% of Oxfordshire and so either a single unitary council or two unitary councils would see Oxford's needs and voice competing from a minority position among wider council interests. Under these circumstances the interests of the rural majority, not the urban growth engine will likely be represented at the MSA table.

LGR proposals must also ensure that there are appropriate population size ratios between local authorities and strategic authorities. We consider that this condition is better met by three unitary councils than by two or one unitary authorities. The mean average population of the existing Berkshire unitary authorities and Swindon is 174,000, while an Oxfordshire unitary would be 763,000 - creating a clear size imbalance. Three unitary councils would have a mean average size of 312,000, providing a more equitable balance.

The table below provides further evidence of how the proposal meets these criteria and provides detail on how model will support the future success of our MSA:

Table 8.2: Assessment criteria for Local Government Reorganisation Criteria

Strategic benefits of Multi-Unitary authorities	Opportunity
Representation of Place	<p>The proposed authority will cover a large geographic area which, while not yet formally defined, is likely to have a population in the region of 2 million residents. The area is predominantly rural but contains several highly productive urban centres including Oxford, Reading, Slough, Bracknell and Swindon. It is vital to ensure that the complexities of this combined area can be appropriately represented within the MSA.</p> <p>Three constituent authorities closely linked to the distinct places across Oxfordshire and West Berkshire will provide strong voices which can represent place and champion their priorities and strengths at a more local level than one single voice representing a single county – or by a two unitary model where the voice of urban Oxford is diluted by the rural priorities of the current West Oxfordshire and Cherwell.</p> <p>Smaller businesses and community groups will have a better vehicle to advocate for them to be heard by the MSA by having a more locally available unitary which</p>

is working closely with them to build relationships and actively represent their views.

Across the region, our past achievements and successes through collaboration have always been built on having several voices and constructive challenge which ensures enhanced scrutiny as well as local stakeholder representation. A multi unitary model will ensure that this approach is continued.

Capacity and Capability

Three unitary authorities present the opportunity to ensure there is the capacity, skills and capability across the wider system to deliver on the strategic priorities of the MSA. They will bring diverse skillsets and local knowledge to effectively respond to the proposed model and enable wider joint investment and coordination on key issues such as transport, housing and skills. This will ensure that the strengths of working together at a MSA level will combine with the local knowledge and capabilities of three distinct authorities.

Governance, enhanced local representation and democratic legitimacy

Thames Valley is a large region with a population of around 1.9 million, but with constituent parts that include current West Oxfordshire – the second most sparsely populated area in south east England with less than 5% ethnic minority population, and Oxford – the fifth most densely populated area in south east England and 29% ethnic minority population. Three unitary authorities covering such diverse places and populations will provide more effective local representation and democratic legitimacy than a single unitary or two unitary authorities could. Multi-unitary authorities will ensure these voices are heard in balance at the MSA and presents a distributed leadership and delivery model. This will ensure a fair, inclusive and democratic approach to decision making is achieved. It will also see more ideas introduced, more challenge to status quo decision-making, and ultimately more positive change.

In particular, given the importance of the Oxfordshire knowledge spine and the wider Ox-Cam Corridor, the businesses and universities that drive innovation and growth across the wider geography will be better heard and their and their interests and needs championed at the MSA.

Spreading decision making across multiple unitary councils encourages ownership of outcomes across those areas. It also ensures that the authorities are suitably representative of and hold strong relationships with their local communities. This means that they can suitably cascade messages and key priorities from the MSA down to their local area and secure buy in through deep knowledge of and trusted relationships with their local communities.

Scrutiny

A mayoral combined authority which contains multiple unitary authorities enhances the ability of the governance structure to scrutinise policy and performance effectively. Multiple unitary authorities contribute layered and diverse oversight, as well as bringing the unique perspectives from local experience. This strengthens transparency and ensures decision making at the MSA level is subject to robust, evidence-based review which drives continuous change. It enables clear escalation routes, peer accountability and strengthens public confidence in how they are being governed.

Scrutiny functions within the three authorities will be better resourced and diversified, which will ensure that each authority is able to suitably scrutinise decision making at the MSA level.

Risk (including financial) The strengths of governance and scrutiny offered by the three unitary authorities also reduces the risks which are associated with poor governance. The strong oversight and reduction of political bias or status quo thinking will improve decision making and the management of risks.

The strong and shared scrutiny across multiple authorities makes it harder for risky or one-sided decisions to pass without appropriate checks and brings the advantages of adding different perspectives for identifying, assessing and mitigating against risks.

Additionally, multi-authorities will be able to spread financial risks which the constituent authorities may have to absorb if there is a lack of financial management within the MSA itself. This would reduce the risk of a severe financial impact on a single authority.

Trust in Institutions Public and businesses confidence will be fostered by a balanced multiple unitary structure which engages with them at the local level and has a deep understanding of local priorities and requirements. Their trust will be built by seeing their communities and business interests reflected in the make-up of regional governance and their experience of services which understand and respond to their local context. The visible local leadership present in their local area and fairer representation across diverse places assures both communities and commerce that their area is well represented, listens to them and their priorities are being advocated for in a way which suitably balances with other voices across the MSA.

Public and business confidence in institutions is not simply a result of good governance, it is required to give long-term democratic legitimacy, civic engagement and compliance with policy. A model of three unitary authorities will feel accessible, equitable and responsive – which will help to create the conditions for shared ownership of regional priorities and a stronger public backing for change.

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