

Council Report



Listening Learning Leading

Report of Deputy Chief Executive – Corporate and Communities

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Wards affected: All

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To: FULL COUNCIL

Dates: 6 November 2025

Full proposal for Local Government Reorganisation (LGR)

Recommendation(s)

Full Council:

1. Notes that since the statutory invitation to all councils in two tier areas, significant work has been undertaken by all Oxfordshire Councils and that South Oxfordshire and the Vale of White Horse District Councils' officers have engaged with officers across Oxfordshire and West Berkshire.
2. Notes and supports the submission of a full proposal for a two unitary model based on one new unitary council covering the entire existing boundaries of South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse District Councils and West Berkshire Council, with the working title of 'Ridgeway', and a second new unitary covering the entire existing boundaries of Cherwell and West Oxfordshire District Councils and Oxford City Council, with the working title of 'Oxford & Shires'.
3. Notes that two other proposals will be submitted, one proposed by Oxfordshire County Council covering the Oxfordshire area and one from Oxford City Council covering the Oxfordshire and West Berkshire area.
4. Notes that should Cabinet agree to submit the full proposal for a two unitary model, Cherwell District Council, South Oxfordshire District Council, Vale of White Horse District Council and West Oxfordshire District Council will submit the full proposal directly to Government in line with the Oxfordshire invitation letter.

Cabinet Report



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<p>South Cabinet member responsible: Cllr David Rouane, Leader</p> <p>E-mail: david.rouane@southoxon.gov.uk</p> <p>Vale Cabinet member responsible: Cllr Bethia Thomas, Leader</p> <p>E-mail: bethia.thomas@whitehorse.gov.uk</p> <p>To: CABINET</p> <p>Dates: SODC 13 November 2025</p>	

Full proposal for Local Government Reorganisation (LGR)

Recommendation(s)

Cabinet:

- (a) Notes that since the statutory invitation to all councils in two tier areas, significant work has been undertaken by all Oxfordshire Councils and that South Oxfordshire and the Vale of White Horse District Councils' officers have engaged with officers across Oxfordshire and West Berkshire.
- (b) Notes that two other proposals will be submitted, one proposed by Oxfordshire County Council covering the Oxfordshire area and one from Oxford City Council covering the Oxfordshire and West Berkshire area.
- (c) Approves the submission of a full proposal for a two unitary model based on one new unitary council covering the entire existing boundaries of South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse District Councils and West Berkshire Council, with the working title of 'Ridgeway', and a second new unitary covering the entire existing boundaries of Cherwell and West Oxfordshire District Councils and Oxford City Council, with a working title of 'Oxford & Shires'.
- (d) Subject to (c) being approved, notes that Cherwell District Council, South Oxfordshire District Council, Vale of White Horse District Council and West Oxfordshire District Council will submit the full proposal directly to Government in line with the Oxfordshire invitation letter.

Implications (further detail within the report)	Financial	Legal	Climate and Ecological	Equality and diversity
	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Signing off officer	Simon Hewings	Nick Bennett	Jessie Fieth	Mark Minion

Purpose of report

1. On 16 December 2024, the Government published the Devolution White Paper. The paper sets out the most significant reforms to local government since the Local Government Act 1972. It indicated the Government's aim to reorganise and simplify the structures of councils in England by replacing county and district councils with unitary authorities (LGR – local government reorganisation) and devolve more powers and funding from national to local government (devolution).
2. On 5 February 2025, the Government wrote to the Leaders of all principal authority two tier Councils in England, including those in Oxfordshire. This was a formal invitation to those Leaders to develop a proposal for local government reorganisation and provided guidance on the development of proposals. The government invited the submission of Interim Plans by 21 March 2025, followed by Full Proposals by 28 November 2025.
3. Following submission of an Interim Plan by 21 March 2025, this report proposes the submission of a Full Proposal for a two unitary model based on one new unitary council covering the entire existing boundaries of South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse District Councils and West Berkshire Council, with the working title of 'Ridgeway', and a second new unitary council covering the entire existing boundaries of Cherwell and West Oxfordshire District Councils and Oxford City Council, with a working title of 'Oxford & Shires'.

Strategic priorities

4. Any decision on local government reorganisation will impact on all of the council's strategic priorities.

Background

5. The Government has set out its intention to significantly reform, at great pace, local government structures and implement devolution across England. The Government wishes to see successor councils emerge from the current two-tier system of district and county councils and that those successor councils and the existing unitary structured councils of England must join a Strategic Authority.
6. All Oxfordshire councils and West Berkshire Council support the Government's vision for simpler and more sustainable local government structures, where councils are empowered to respond to the needs of their communities and deliver value for money, efficient and high-quality services.
7. At its meeting on the 19 March 2025 South Oxfordshire District Council resolved to support, alongside Cherwell District Council, Vale of White Horse District Council, West Berkshire Council and West Oxfordshire District Council, the submission of an interim proposal for a two unitary model covering the area of Oxfordshire and West Berkshire.

Since March 2025, significant work has been undertaken by officers across multiple teams to develop the Full Proposal.

Proposal

8. The Government has set out criteria and guidance within the statutory invitation to support local government reorganisation. That guidance includes:
 - a) A single tier and sensible geography avoiding creating (dis/)advantaged areas;
 - b) The right size to achieve efficiencies, improve capacity and withstand financial shocks – new Councils must be a minimum of 500,000 with exceptions on a case-by-case basis;
 - (b) Meet local need and be informed by local views;
 - (c) Support devolution arrangements; and
 - (d) Deliver genuine neighbourhood empowerment.
9. Whilst four of the six local councils in Oxfordshire and West Berkshire Council support and have developed the two unitary model proposed in this report, it should be noted that two other proposals will be submitted in Oxfordshire. Oxfordshire County Council will be proposing a one unitary model covering the whole of the current Oxfordshire county area, leaving West Berkshire Council unchanged. The proposal can be read in full [here](#). Oxford City Council is proposing a three unitary model covering a 'Greater Oxford' area which would cover the existing Oxford City council area expanded to encompass most of the area currently designated as greenbelt that is currently in neighbouring districts, a 'Northern' council area covering the remaining parts of the existing Cherwell and West Oxfordshire district councils and a 'Southern' council covering the remaining part so the existing South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse district councils and the West Berkshire unitary area. The proposal can be read in full [here](#).
10. The two unitary model for Oxfordshire and West Berkshire proposed in this report, sets out a clear, evidence-based plan to deliver better, more efficient and more locally accountable public services. It will create two new councils that offer the right balance between efficiency and local identity, each servicing around 450,000 – 500,000 people, meeting the Government's criteria and being large enough to be efficient and stable, but small enough to stay connected to communities. The full proposal developed by Cherwell District Council, South Oxfordshire District Council, Vale of White Horse District Council, West Berkshire Council and West Oxfordshire District Council is attached as **Appendix 1**.
11. The Government has outlined that Full Proposals need to be submitted by 28 November 2025. They anticipate that statutory consultation could be launched in the New Year and would likely close after the local elections in May 2026. Following this, decisions on which proposal to implement could be announced before the summer recess. Secondary legislation would then be prepared, to be laid in the House after the summer recess. The legislation could then be made, subject to Parliamentary approval. This would allow for shadow elections to the new unitary authorities on 6 May 2027. The new authorities would then go live on 1 April 2028.

Financial Implications

12. Local government reorganisation will have financial consequences and require a significant funding commitment from councils to deliver. Whilst it is possible that the

Government may make a financial contribution towards council costs, it is more likely that local areas will be required to meet the costs of transition themselves as indicated in the invitation letter. The Government has indicated that in its view, savings from unitarisation in line with its criteria, will be more than sufficient to address these costs. Notwithstanding that view, the councils have indicated in their two unitary model proposal, that should government funding be available to support transition costs it will enable the councils to begin with a firmer financial footing, thus aiding long-term sustainability.

13. The financial implications of progressing LGR will be considered as part of budget setting for 2026/27, which will be considered by Cabinet and Council in February 2026.
14. It should be noted that the two unitary model proposal includes a full financial case based on work undertaken by PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC), PeopleToo and supported by analysis undertaken by the Section 151 officers from across the five councils supporting the two unitary model.
15. Additional work will be required going forward, and it should be noted that the process of local government reorganisation coincides with the fair funding review, resulting in a lack of clarity over future levels of government funding for all councils.

Legal Implications

16. The Government has invited any principal authority in the area of the county of Oxfordshire, to submit a proposal for a single tier of local government under Part 1 of the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007 ('the 2007 Act'). The submission of an Interim Proposals by the 21 March 2025 was an essential first step towards developing this Final Proposal, with the requirement of submission to MHCLG being before 28 November 2025.
17. The Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007 (the '2007 Act') is the legislative basis for the creation of unitary councils. Under section 2 of the 2007 Act, the Secretary of State may invite either a county council or district council to put forward a proposal for a single tier of local government. This proposal can comprise:
 - A single tier of local government for the whole of the county (Type A proposal);
 - A single tier of local government for a district (or more) within the county (Type B proposal);
 - A single tier of local government for one of the above that also includes one or more relevant adjoining areas (e.g. all or part of an adjoining county area) (Type C Proposal);
 - A combination of the above Types B or C proposals.
18. Until 25 January 2008, the Secretary of State (SoS) was able to direct principal councils to bring forward a proposal, which meant that the SoS could effectively force unitarisation where proposals were not made voluntarily. However, this provision expired on 25 January 2008. The indications in the White Paper are that the Government will reintroduce this power of direction in due course – although the 2007 Act will need to be amended or replaced to enable this. This outcome is likely to be delivered in the English Devolution Bill, which is expected to come into force sometime in 2026.

19. Proposals under section 2 of the 2007 Act do not require a consensus from every authority affected by it. However, where a proposal is made jointly by every authority, the requirements on the SoS to consult are reduced to exclude consultation with every authority affected.
20. Subject to consultation requirements, following the receipt of a proposal under section 2 of the 2007 Act, the SoS may implement the proposal, with or without modification under section 7 of the 2007 Act. They may also seek advice from the Local Government Boundary Commission for England ('Commission') who may make an alternative proposal which the SoS may implement with or without modification.
21. There are no other specific timescales which the SoS must adhere to when taking a decision, but the SoS must consult with authorities affected by the proposal (other than those which made it) and such other persons as they think appropriate before reaching a decision.
22. Proposals regarding the creation of a new authority (unitary) are executive functions. There is a statutory presumption that all local authority functions not reserved to the Council in Regulations will be the responsibility of the executive (section 9(D)(2) Local Government Act 2000).
23. Based on the criteria within the invitation letter and White Paper on what proposals must include and what should be avoided, the two unitary model proposed in this report meets the criteria for submission.

Climate and ecological impact implications

24. As agreed with the climate team, the use of the Climate Impact Assessment Tool is not appropriate for a high-level strategy set out in this report. The climate and ecological impacts of each project within the programme as it moves to the transition phase will be assessed using the Climate Impact Assessment Tool as they come forward.
25. There will be significant climate and ecological impact implications associated with LGR. To date, these have been in relation to the need to pause or cancel projects, including those for significant decarbonisation and renewable electricity generation works, which will limit the council's capability to meet operational net zero targets.

Equalities implications

26. In making decisions the council is required to have regard to its equalities duties and in particular to those set out in section 149 of the Equality Act 2010 to eliminate discrimination, harassment, victimisation and eliminate any other conduct that is prohibited by or under the Act, to advance equality of opportunity between persons who share a protected characteristic namely age, disability, gender reassignment, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, sex and sexual orientation, and persons who do not share it and to foster good relations between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it.
27. There are no equalities implications arising from this report, however as the councils move to the transition phase of LGR, an equality impact assessment will be undertaken for each workstream to identify any implications and the associated actions being taken to mitigate any negative impacts.

Risks

28. None immediately arising from this report, however reorganisation on this scale presents significant risks and issues. A comprehensive risk register will be maintained as the councils move to the transition phase of LGR, which will gather, monitor and manage a full suite of risk and issues.

Other considerations

29. There is consensus among all Oxfordshire councils in wanting to move at pace towards devolution and local government reorganisation, in the best interests of all our residents, businesses and our respective workforces. The ability of a Strategic Authority to stimulate innovation, sustainable growth and infrastructure delivery at a 'regional' scale, as opposed to a single local authority scale, is identified by Government as the key to long term economic growth and prosperity, and the functions and roles of new unitary councils need to be developed to compliment, rather than compete against this background.
30. Delay in progressing devolution and local government reorganisation, and any misalignment of timing, would significantly increase uncertainty and would not offer the clarity and pace that officers believe is essential to support sustainable growth and deliver transformative outcomes for our communities.

Conclusion

31. This report proposes the submission of a Full Proposal for a two unitary model based on one new unitary council covering the entire existing boundaries of South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse District Councils and West Berkshire Council, with the working title of 'Ridgeway', and a second new unitary council covering the entire existing boundaries of Cherwell and West Oxfordshire District Councils and Oxford City Council, with a working title of 'Oxford & Shires'.

Background Papers

None

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