

# Planning for Devolution – A ‘Growth’ offer from the proposed 2 new Unitary councils.

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## **Developing a growth offer from the proposed 2 unitary councils.**

### **1. Our unitary council proposals – Understanding the context, planning for growth**

#### **1.1 Introduction**

The proposed two new unitary councils – ‘*Oxford & Shires*’ and ‘*The Ridgeway Council*’ – are based on a set of corridors which link the current districts and the existing unitary council together. The proposed new unitary councils are all located in the Oxford to Cambridge Growth Corridor and the proposed MSA for the Thames Valley.

These proposals consider the strategic context, national priorities and local ambitions to show how the new mayor and our proposed two new unitary councils could interact and makes proposals for areas of collaboration between the mayor and each unitary Council to deliver a significant growth package at pace.

This paper considers a series of proposals for the growth issues common to both new unitary councils.

The paper also offers views on the two proposed alternative reform options, a large countywide unitary council and a small Oxford City unitary council.

This paper also sets out the common features and ambitions for growth, accelerated economic growth, new housing, transport and other infrastructure priorities.

#### **1.2 Local Government Reorganisation and Devolution – the strategic context**

The Government is aiming to transform how local government operates in Oxfordshire within the next two to three years.

The current focus will involve both local government reorganisation (LGR) of the current two-tier systems of the County Council and the District and City Councils which will be replaced with a system of unitary authorities. It also involves an invitation for the establishment of new Strategic Authorities (SA) which will have powers and responsibilities across SA areas. The Berkshire and Oxfordshire local authorities have agreed to progress with the submission of a Mayoral Strategic Authority (MSA) for their geography, but this is still subject to formal agreement by the relevant councils. There remains a question about the inclusion of Buckinghamshire and Swindon within this MSA.

Although both processes of LGR and Devolution have their distinct remit and processes of reform, there is a significant amount of overlap, especially where existing and new functions and statutory responsibilities shift to the MSA in future as part of the devolution process. An important new role for local government will be statutory strategic planning powers. These will be established through the Planning and Infrastructure Bill (PIB) which is expected to receive Royal Assent this Autumn. All areas will then be required to prepare a new strategic plan– a Spatial Development Strategy (SDS)- with universal coverage expected by the end of the first Parliamentary term.

The new SDS will form part of the statutory development plan alongside local plans (and neighbourhood plans where relevant) and will have a number of key roles in relation to strategic infrastructure and determining the spatial distribution of growth (including housing allocations for each local plan). Those areas with MSAs now and in the future will also be able to access significant additional powers and funding opportunities to help deliver the SDS, including the ability to call in an application from the relevant local planning authority for Mayoral decision-making and the raising of Strategic Infrastructure Levy.

The SDS will also operate as a long term (30 year) spatial investment framework so will have a critical role in the integration of wider roles and responsibilities, especially for the environment, the economy and infrastructure. They will also be expected to reflect the Government's ambitions for 'health in all policies' and will therefore be important to both Public Health and the Health Authorities, especially in relation to addressing health disparities.

Although the Government's ambition is that all parts of England will eventually have an MSA with strategic planning responsibilities, work on the new system will have to start before the new MSA has been established in some places. The PIB therefore includes transitional arrangements where the strategic planning authority will initially sit with the upper tier authorities. If the working assumption is that there will be a Thames Valley SDS, all unitary councils (Berkshire, Bucks, Swindon) and Oxfordshire County Council will have responsibility for preparing the SDS. This will be managed through the establishment of a Strategic Planning Board (SPB) following enactment of the PIB.

The Government's expectation is that the SDS preparation process will take two to three years which means that the first version is likely to be prepared (or at least submitted for examination) before LGR becomes fully operative in May 2028 or a new MSA has been established.

We have considered a number of key issues as part of the LGR process, including:

- What role will the existing Councils play in the preparation of the SDS, especially as some local plans will be being prepared/updated on a similar timescale and there is an opportunity to share evidence? Note: Government's expectation is that local plan preparation should continue at pace even if this means they will have to be updated to reflect the emerging SDS at some point.
- What opportunities are there to reset the skills and resources through LGR with the potential to share some of these with the emerging strategic planning teams (and eventual MSA), especially some of the specialist skills that are often in scarce supply?
- The new unitary authorities will also be responsible for all local government functions (taking on a number of responsibilities from Oxfordshire County Council in the Oxfordshire area of the two new unitary councils) that will impact on how they manage their place-making functions (such as minerals and waste planning, Lead Flood Risk Authority etc). Local Government Reform and Devolution (with roles around spatial planning, transport,

regeneration and housing delivery) provide an opportunity to rethink how these resources are managed.

- What opportunities are there to establish new working arrangements with stakeholders (especially infrastructure providers) and communities that can be used to inform the individual authorities and to shape strategic policies managed through the future MSA?

### **1.3 Our proposed spatial growth strategy**

We propose to base our proposed two unitary councils on an ambitious growth strategy that enables the two Councils to build on experience, to collaborate together and with the new Mayor.

- Our proposals consider residential housing, employment and commercial growth, based on adopted Local Plans and looking to the future.
- Our proposals focus on market towns and villages as well as the development needs of Oxford City and new settlements such as Salt Cross in West Oxfordshire.
- Our economic offer focuses on supporting commercial and business growth in key sectors, clusters and corridors.
- To build a network of business and science parks across Oxfordshire and West Berkshire, not just the locations around Oxford.
- Our proposals include an increase in social housing to accompany our current planned growth and to go further to meet needs of the community and growing the economy.
- We will work with the MSA at the regional level and education/business at Local authority level to drive skills development to meet the needs of key sectors and commerce.
- We are prioritising the reuse of brownfield land on former military bases and supporting the creation of a series of garden communities and new settlements.
- We are aligning our infrastructure priorities to support growth across Oxfordshire and the Thames Valley areas.
- We have identified infrastructure priorities to engage with the new mayor to address, maximising the potential of existing infrastructure and including an ambitious new transport investment package.
- Our infrastructure issues include the need for improvements to our energy, water connections and investment to assist nature recovery.

- Our proposals seek to avoid major ecological constraints and seek to support climate resilience, with minimal impact on the Green Belt and local communities.
- Our proposals aim to ensure our growth is sustainable and avoid major constraints, such as areas of flood risk.

#### **1.4 Working in transition.**

We recognise that there will be a period of transition between the current local government landscape and the establishment of 2 new unitary councils and the new mayor and Combined Authority.

We are committed to a smooth transition to create a stable environment in which services are delivered and our aspirations for Devolution can be secured by working with the mayor.

We recognise that the Planning and Infrastructure Bill, on adoption, will confer powers to the Upper Tier Authorities such as unitary councils, including West Berkshire Council, straight away and will require a transitional period of working between Oxfordshire County, West Berkshire Council and the existing Oxfordshire Districts, leading to the creation of Mayoral CA and the 2 new unitary councils by a set timetable.

In this transition period, a Spatial Planning Board will be established, ahead of the forming of our 2 new unitary councils. We will work with Oxfordshire the County Council and the six existing Berkshire Unitary Councils on the Spatial Planning Board to ensure it reflects our growth priorities.

The proposed two unitary council model will facilitate this joint working as West Berkshire Council will straddle the Oxfordshire and Berkshire areas. In planning for Ridgeway and Oxford & the Shires Councils, West Berkshire will provide glue to ensure that the plans for growth are aligned across the existing Berkshire and Oxfordshire areas.

The West Berkshire Council not only has an understanding and experience of delivering all unitary functions but, with a foot in both Oxfordshire and Berkshire, it will enable this experience and knowledge of the strategic plans for Berkshire to be coordinated with plans for Oxfordshire, working with the existing Oxfordshire Councils and Berkshire Councils too, especially given the significance of the current joint working within the Berkshire Prosperity Board.

## 2.The purpose of our 2 new unitary councils

### 2.1 Introduction and overview

Our proposals for the Government and our offer to the new mayor aims to show the ambition, intended culture and collaboration between the merged Councils to create the new unitary councils. With spirit of joint working and alignment we want to establish between the unitary councils and the new mayor over the long term:

- Creating and taking new opportunities.
- Securing environmentally sustainable housing standards of a high quality.
- New integrated unitary councils with shared services, which learn together.
- Working with others in the new Strategic Authority.

These proposals are shaped by our history and experience as Districts and a small unitary, close to the communities and responsible for shaping the future of each District. We are looking 30 years ahead and planning for the long term. This proposal follows in that spirit.

New arrangements will build collaboration and cooperation between the 6 current Districts and the unitary council of West Berkshire through the creation of 2 new complementary unitary councils. These proposals can be implemented at pace in both the northern and southern areas.

### 2.2 Our proposed two new unitary councils

Our proposed two new unitary councils are built around a series of corridors that link the two areas:

- A unitary council in the north of Oxfordshire to be called 'Oxford & Shires' which is linked by the A40 corridor from Carterton to Oxford, together with the A41, A4260 and the M40 and A34 corridors linking Banbury and Bicester with Oxford. This link is reinforced by the new East - West rail, the Banbury to Oxford Line and North Cotswolds line linking West Oxfordshire with Cherwell and Oxford City.
- A unitary council that brings together the south of Oxfordshire and West Berkshire to be called 'The Ridgeway Council', linked by the M4 corridor, the A34 and A420 corridors linking South Oxfordshire, the Vale of White Horse and West Berkshire.

### 2.3 Governance, building on existing relationships.

Our proposed 'northern' and 'southern' unitary councils are complementary and reinforcing.



They are intended to collaborate with each other and the mayor through a new Oxfordshire Forum to include the 2 unitary councils, the Berkshire Prosperity Board, business (Advanced Oxford and Chambers from the Thames Valley and Oxfordshire), Universities and others. This will enable joint learning between the 2 new Unitary councils and the exchange of best practice.

- With each new unitary council being of a broadly comparable size.
- The current councils all have a strong delivery record, our delivery of new housing, business parks and town centre regeneration and our two new unitary councils will take forward their innovation and dynamism. Each unitary will build on the track record of delivery and joint working that is already well developed in the area. For example, the long-standing joint working between South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse, Cherwell's previous collaboration with South Northamptonshire and the collaboration within the Berkshire Prosperity Board.
- West Berkshire Council will bring its experience as an established unitary council in the design of the 2 new unitary councils, leading to informed organisational design.
- The two proposed unitary councils will retain a close focus on the distinctive local areas they cover and will work to maintain communities that are resilient and cohesive with good health and high well-being.

We propose to establish area oversight boards within each new unitary, to work closely with and involve businesses and developers in shaping identified localities, the market towns and areas within the City and to consider delivery coordination, infrastructure challenges and to consider the cumulative impacts of development. The use of area panels will help ensure the distinctiveness of local areas is retained, taking account of Local Plans, Neighbourhood Plans, Transport Plans and Environmental Strategies and other local strategies:

- In Cherwell covering Banbury, Bicester, Heyford and Kidlington.
- In West Oxfordshire focus on Carterton, Witney and Eynsham.
- In Oxford City the current ward arrangements.
- In South Oxfordshire & Vale of White Horse focusing on Didcot, Henley, Thame, Wallingford, Faringdon and Wantage.
- In West Berkshire covering Newbury, Thatcham, Marlborough and Hungerford.

The new unitary councils will take account of the work and conclusions of the Oxford Growth Commission in shaping how the growth needs of Oxford city and the economic opportunities and infrastructure challenges both transport, power and water are addressed.

The new unitary councils will also engage closely within the MSA and other neighbouring councils to facilitate the growth of the wider Thames Valley area and the success of our places within MSA.

## **2.4 Principles to guide our new unitary council's approach to growth.**

The principles that should guide the new unitary council's approach to growth include:

- Meeting the growth aspirations from Government.
- Listening and engaging with our communities, businesses and service users to meet their needs.
- Deepening and leveraging the economic strength of areas, showing that we are '*investment ready*'.
- Placing climate action at the centre of all our future plans.
- Taking account of the corridors which bring the two new unitary councils together and the opportunities within the Oxford Cambridge Growth Corridor.
- Making sure that the city of Oxford can grow in a sustainable way, meeting identified needs.
- Establishing two outward looking new organisations that engage closely with neighbouring bodies on key matters.
- Align strategic plans for growth across the wider geography including transport and other infrastructure to enable growth across Oxfordshire and the Thames Valley.
- Aiming for more confidence and certainty in how planning will support growth by ensuring universal coverage of up-to-date local plans and speeding up decision-making on planning applications.

There is an important link between economic success, the delivery of housing growth and the increased provision of affordable housing in a relatively wealthy area. Our aims include:

- Securing affordable housing to support economic growth.
- Coordinating housing delivery of a range of types to meet community needs.
- Ensuring new housing is distinctive and is place related, not 'anywhere' development.
- Supporting high quality economic and residential growth across the two unitary council areas, meeting our ambitions for net zero carbon.

Planning will be one of the central roles of the new unitary councils but ,split with some aspects of planning undertaken by the new mayor. Coordination and alignment between the two bodies – unitary and mayor – will be essential to be accountable to community and business in planning for the long term, as well as ensuring development occurs in the right places.

One of the issues that will be critical for the 2 new unitary councils will be securing a quicker planning service.

Through the creation of two new planning teams, one for each new unitary council, we have considered what will be needed to build investor confidence through the planning system and address our customers' needs efficiently and effectively, providing certainty for our communities and for our applicants.

Two new unitary councils will be able to speed up decision-making on planning as this will be easier if a) the unitary is not a large county authority, with a poor delivery record on current development proposals, and b) because there is the opportunity, based on experience, to reset the skills and resources needed to focus on speed and efficiency. We intend drawing on existing experience to speed up planning approvals at business parks using LDOs (see section 2.8.1)

The two unitary councils will end two tier working and bring all teams within a single structure, bringing together planning, housing, transport and flooding etc. West Berkshire Council has the experience of this model of service coordination and stands ready to support the north unitary too. West Berkshire has developed and adopted its local plan in this context

The two new unitary councils will not be too big to lose sight of the needs of the community but big enough to drive efficiencies, meet community needs and deliver in this context.

The two new unitary councils will plan for the long-term needs of each area, by using Local Plans alongside our proposals for growth to:

- Meet housing growth and providing affordable housing.
- Build dynamic, sustainable communities.
- Build distinctive places, with high quality buildings reflecting the attractiveness of the area, its history and its urban and rural landscapes.
- Ensure we support dynamic, attractive places that people want to live in, work in and visit.
- Support economic growth and create an environment in which business wants to invest and grow.
- Provide a framework for relating infrastructure to planned growth and greater level of certainty for investment.

## 2.5 Working with the mayor in collaboration.

We plan to establish a collaborative relationship within the new mayor; challenging where appropriate but always engaged and responsive. We want to:

- Establish shared priorities.
- Work with common stakeholders, including business and skills providers for the long term success of the area's economy. This will include working with the mayor and business across the area to identify skills needs and development opportunities to deliver for the needs of business.
- Recognise that planning powers will be split but need to interact to be effective.
- Identify infrastructure needs and work together to establish a joint investment pipeline.
- Recognise that the Spatial Development Strategy set by the mayor, with input from the 2 new unitary councils, will create a 30-year strategic framework for new councils and drawing on the connecting corridors that underpin them will set a framework for the Local Plans of the future.
- Working with the mayor to ensure climate ambitions are a central consideration of their long term planning.
- Assist the mayor to use spatial planning powers to transform infrastructure planning, with housing and community development proposals from the new unitary councils complementing the mayor's economic focus.

## 2.6 Our ask of the new mayor.

Our proposals present a series of proposals to the new mayor to forge a shared approach and to help ensure that the new unitary councils and new mayor work in tandem.

Our proposals which follow for each new unitary include proposals for a package of investment in key road links and rail infrastructure to support economic and housing growth in key transport corridors. They also look to unblock network constraints and improve productivity. This will look across the Oxfordshire and Berkshire geographies to incorporate Councils that have a knowledge and experience of both.

Our proposals place an emphasis on investing in social housing, securing improved transport and digital connectivity, improving infrastructure and skills, recognising shared climate ambitions and working closely with business.

Our proposals establish an investment pipeline that will enhance nationally significant sectors located across Oxfordshire and West Berkshire within the areas to be covered by the two new Unitary councils.

## 2.7 Delivering the government's priorities.

Our proposals respond to the Government priorities as set out in the 'Programme for Change' and associated documents. The two new unitary councils are the right level to ensure national objectives support area delivery, considering community and business impacts. It is this local community and business focus that distinguishes our unitary council proposals from other options. In addition, West Berkshire has a foot in both Oxfordshire and Berkshire which will support the mayor to coordinate and navigate between the local authorities of the two areas to deliver ambitions. We are embracing:

- The Government's commitment to growth, through new housing and economic development, delivered at pace.
- The UK's Modern Industrial Strategy and 8 high growth sectors to ensure our approach to economic development and response to proposals that reflect these national objectives are supported. We will work with local partners to support clusters, key sectors and skills support.
- The prioritisation in the Spending Review of spending on critical infrastructure to accelerate growth and promote energy security.
- Engagement with Great British Energy as well as the National Energy Systems Operator (NESO) and communities, businesses, district network operators on the green energy transition to increase home-grown, local renewable energy generation and extend the grid supply and storage to meet the energy needs of our growth plans and to accelerate net zero.
- Planning for a green energy revolution, securing investment to enhance the power grid to support planned and sustainable economic and housing growth, and investment to upgrade our water and sewage infrastructure.
- Engagement with new Great British Railways and existing train operating companies GWR and Chiltern Railways to enhance transport connectivity.
- The need to work together with the mayor on the delivery of infrastructure needed to support the decisions of the New Town Commission about any new large new settlements in Oxfordshire and West Berkshire which will sit outside the Local Plans but will impact on the existing settlements and infrastructure.
- The commitment by the Government to secure '*health in all policies*' and that the application of these policies will help tackle health and inequalities.
- The enhanced role of Natural England resulting from the Planning and Infrastructure Bill to secure 'Environmental Delivery Plans' to protect the SACs in Oxfordshire and West Berkshire in support of Local Nature Recovery.
- The work of the Oxford Growth Commission on the growth needs of Oxford and to support the Oxford to Cambridge Growth Corridor and leverage support for our growth priorities.

The Oxfordshire Growth Corridor is one of the Government priorities which will impact on the work of the two new unitary councils and the new Mayor, by:

- Bringing new investment from Government in infrastructure and removing 'roadblocks' to growth.
- Securing new capital investment from the private sector from the UK and beyond to co-fund growth in all stages.
- Supporting our universities to locate business innovation on their campuses and working with our colleges and local businesses on skills provision.
- Ensuring sites are available to attract new investment.
- Ensuring that the skills needed to harness the innovation are available and by providing good and affordable housing.
- Ensuring Local Plans are up to date, and planning applications are determined quickly.

Alongside the Oxford to Cambridge Growth Corridor will be continuing to engage with the Berkshire Prosperity Board and delivery of the associated Berkshire Economic Strategy.

The Board has adopted a significant economic ambition –

*'Our vision is that, by 2035, Berkshire will have the most productive and fastest growing local economy in the UK. Our strategic aim is to grow the Berkshire economy by 3% per annum in real terms from £52.5bn to £70.5bn and to increase employment by 6% from 601,000 to 637,000 between 2025 and 2035.'*

## **2.8 Maintaining a strong economy.**

We want to maintain the economic success of our area by building on our economic strengths and the distinctiveness of each area. The area plays a leading role in providing economic strength to the UK, with major business and science parks and the transfer of technology from research in Oxford's Universities & Colleges to new business applications, enabling accelerated economic growth in critical sectors such as advanced engineering, AI, robotics, biomedicine and new forms of mobility. This includes:

- We wish to build on our close relationship with Oxfordshire and West Berkshire businesses, meeting their aspirations, by providing decision-making certainty, involving business of all sizes and listening to them. At the heart of our closer relationship with business, we aim for planning to be an enabler and not a blocker, with a planning service in each unitary council that is built on the principles of efficiency, speed and effectiveness.
- In each unitary will be an opportunity to engage specialist skills and provide services across the new Unitary area and extend the existing high volume of business communications.

- We will work with sector and business groups, such as the local Chambers of Commerce and the Thames Valley Chamber, the Federation of Small Businesses and Advanced Oxford. This will include working with and within the Berkshire Prosperity Board. The experience West Berkshire has had from working with the Berkshire bodies will provide coordination and alignment to deliver economic growth within MSA area.
- We are determined to support business growth in science, innovation and technology, together with their critical supply chains, in line with the UK's Modern Industrial Strategy and 8 high growth sectors in our two unitary council areas. We will continue to work with our Enterprise Zones covering 'Science Vale' and the Didcot Growth Accelerator.
- Other key sectors include working with defence at AWE in West Berkshire, Brize Norton in West Oxfordshire, defence research at Shrivenham in the Vale of White Horse and Bicester in Cherwell; and working with the creative industries including digital media the film industry at Shinfield in West Berkshire and across Oxfordshire.
- We will also focus on rural diversification across both new unitary councils, working with SMEs and including green farm infrastructure and working with the racehorse industry in the Ridgeway Council area extending the current work of West Berkshire Council.
- We are looking to strengthen and extend, consolidate and connect the tourism offer and links within and between the destinations of the 2 proposed unitary areas, beyond the main attractions to increase dwell time and overnight stays. Also, tapping into the 32 million annual visitors to Oxford and at the same time addressing the overheating of Oxford City as a single visitor destination.
- Work with destination partnerships, promoting careers in leisure and business tourism and promoting retail destinations will help strengthen our high streets in the market towns, Oxford city, Blenheim Palace, the internationally known Bicester Village and our three National Landscapes.
- We want to secure business support and support the growth of business sites and to be able to respond positively to inward investment inquiries, making best use of strategic locations such as motorway junctions and the reuse of former military bases.
- Social economy and community interest companies are strongly represented in Cherwell and South and Vale. We want to spread the use of Community Employment Plans to improve access to skills and employment opportunities at new business locations.
- The experience of using Community Employment Plans has helped ensure inclusive growth and leverage the planned growth to meet needs of local community. There are closely related to skill providers in FE Colleges. The creation of 2 new unitary councils will help widen this economic activity in

conjunction with the work of West Berkshire unitary council in the Berkshire Prosperity Board .

- We are ready to deepen our partnership working with colleges and businesses across the two unitary areas to support the acquisition of the skills through apprenticeships and the training necessary for all residents to enter the workforce.
- We will build on the work of OCC and the Berkshire DIG to improve digital infrastructure across the region will extend our support for business opportunities.
- We want to use AI to provide clear pathways for skills and apprenticeships with local businesses, linked to local communities and their needs.
- We want to secure research & development funding from government via the mayor to accelerate science, innovation and technology development across Oxfordshire in the business centres of 'Oxford & Shires' and the 'Ridgeway Council' areas.

### **2.8.1 Our offer to business**

Our two new Unitary Councils will draw on the approach of the existing Councils to enable work at scale, strengthening our ability to work with local business to understand their needs, to respond and coordinate with ensuring housing, infrastructure and workforce development meets these needs.

We plan to significantly increase the speed of our decision taking on planning applications to support business activities.

We propose to use Local Development Orders (LDOs) at all existing and any new business parks in each Unitary. Our approach will be based on the excellent example approved by Vale of White Horse Council, where an LDO covering Milton Park commits the Local Planning Authority to taking planning decisions within 10 days. Milton Park is a very high-quality development and the template we intend to follow.

There is also an LDO already in place for both the Didcot Technology Park and Greenham in West Berkshire and being prepared for the new Culham AI growth zone in South Oxfordshire.

We have a good record of developing and supporting new business and science parks to support the growth of key sectors, such as those at Bicester Motion, the Begbroke Science Park, the Oxford Technology Park, Greenham, Theale and Newbury, Culham, Harwell and Milton Park. We intend to expand business parks to support the growth of key sectors across each Unitary area.

We propose to establish an advisory panel in each unitary council to bring together all business parks in the unitary council area and consider common challenges and operational issues, especially as LDOs are used more extensively.



## 2.9 Growth and place shaping

As Oxfordshire economy grows, we want to maintain our quality of life and places to live and work. We want to create attractive new places and breathe life into old ones. We want to ensure we secure sustainable development and sustainable growth.

We will ensure we meet the Government's growth targets set for the area, develop Local Plans at pace and consider planning applications quickly.

We will seek to ensure new development provides new health services, education, leisure & other civic services to ensure they are great places to live, work and visit. We will continue to use place funding such as CIL and s106 contributions to engage with the community and deliver commitments entered into. We will also establish the use of S106 standard clauses to speed up agreement and delivery of approved developments.

We will continue our focus on the needs of the city of Oxford, our market towns and villages to ensure sustainable growth. We will also ensure coordination across wider Oxfordshire and Berkshire areas to meet the needs of the region. There is a significant advantage that incorporating West Berkshire brings and to be the conduit for this given its knowledge of Berkshire and inclusion with Oxfordshire Councils.

We will focus on our market towns and support new growth along corridors with good transport links, with limited new development to sustain our villages.

Our 2 unitary areas have undertaken a range of sustainable town centre regeneration schemes, including for Newbury, Thatcham and Hungerford, Didcot, Witney, Banbury and Bicester. We will emphasise the quality of development we support, and we will regenerate areas where necessary and support innovative design and building approaches. Our next priorities include Carterton, Thatcham, Berinsfield, Blackbird Leys and Kidlington.

In addition, the new unitary councils will work with GWR and Network Rail to regenerate stations and their localities as critical points of arrival into the market towns. For example, West Berkshire Councils experience with GWR on redeveloping Newbury Station and taking forward plans for Banbury station in Canalside.

We will explore creating new settlements and use of former military bases and quarry sites to limit the need for new green field or new green belt development. We will ensure that green and blue infrastructure such as river basins and lakes play a positive role in place shaping, where appropriate and where appropriate ensure that our active canals (the Kennet & Avon, the West Berkshire Canal project and the Oxford Canal) form the centre piece of new development.

We will look to maintain a 5-year housing land supply, addressing slow delivery and the delays to site delivery with the 2 new unitary councils learning from each other. We see a significant opportunity for speeding up the delivery of strategic housing sites with land transfer from Oxfordshire County Council to the 2 new unitary councils on allocated sites, to unblock development.

We plan for each unitary council to use specialist skills such as design and conservation advice and provide advice to help ensure our places retain their distinctiveness. We will also ensure we consider the health impacts of development and tackle climate change and promote net zero in our design advice and work with Great British Energy, NESO and local network providers to ensure the energy needs of new development are met.

Scale will enable us to intend to strengthen our community focus in our approach to growth by understanding their needs and aspiration. We plan to draw on the extensive experience of supporting and guiding Neighbourhood Plans and to use AI to involve community in the development of locally distinctive design codes that lock in quality from the outset. This was the approach used at Graven Hill in Bicester.

### 2.9.1 Our offer to residential developers

We want to speed up the planning process for residential sites. Through new approach to Development Management, we aim to maintain our 5-year housing land supply, through a proactive approach. To help achieve this:

- Agreed PPA will be stuck to by the Unitary Councils and agreed timetables will be met.
- The Unitary Council will not reopen the principle of development for an allocated site in an adopted Local Plan in the planning application.
- The Unitary Council will aim to secure consent as quickly as possible after a Local Plan is adopted and will work with applicant to shape their proposal as soon as the Local Plan has been submitted to PINs for Examination.

We will introduce new area based Local Development Orders (LDOs) to speed up planning of new development and area intensification at large sites in the way has been delivered at Graven Hill in Bicester.

Each Unitary Council will maintain a developers' forum to meet and discuss current delivery challenges.

We plan to offer a '*Mini-Homes England*' structure to accelerate the delivery of housing schemes. By working across the 2 new unitary councils, we wish to undertake a systematic review of all elements of a site/scheme and remove block to sites already allocated. As part of this approach we will explore forward funding infrastructure to help unlock and accelerate development. We recognise that communities do not want more greenbelt allocated for growth until current allocated sites are delivered.

The unitary councils will need to take account of the changes introduced by the Planning and Infrastructure Bill, especially the changes to the role of council planning committees and increased delegation to officers.

The new unitary councils will build on and extend the development plan strategies set out in adopted Local Plans. There is currently an adopted Local Plan for each district, with a new generation of Plans in preparation and a number are in an advanced state (see Annex B for status) and the intention is to progressively reduce the number of Local Plans to one ambitious Local Plan for each unitary with area chapters within the new documents.

The two new unitary councils will input into the mayors new 'Spatial Development Strategy' based on our local priorities and aspirations. Each district currently has an adopted local plan, of varying ages and all are in the process of review and update. The local plans are comprehensive area development strategies.

The new unitary councils will have responsibility for minerals and waste planning drawing on the experience and expertise of West Berkshire Council which is a minerals and waste authority, with an adopted minerals and waste plan. The new unitary council will explore providing advice and support to Bucks unitary council to achieve economies of scale on minerals and waste planning.

All Councils have an adopted Local Plan in place, with updates in preparation (West and City), submission (Cherwell), examination (South and Vale) and recent adoption (West Berkshire). Move to 2 unitary councils is an opportunity to secure a streamlining, establishment of a common evidence base and secure savings in due course.

Transport planning is a key aspect of place shaping. West Berkshire Council has experience of aligning transport planning with community need and plans for growth. LTP4 was approved by the Councils Executive in July 2025. This unitary experience will support the new councils which are big enough to develop infrastructure plans strategically but small enough to align with local need of business and communities and to deliver planned growth

## **2.10 Improved digital connections.**

By extending coverage of superfast broadband to secure 100% coverage across our rural areas we are looking to increase access for business, social enterprises and community uses across the whole of each new unitary council's area.

Councils are already using AI to deepen our place engagement and want to take this approach further by promoting community access to council 'place' information in preparation of new Neighbourhood Plans and in preparing new Local Plans.

South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse received national recognition for their innovative approach to the consultation stages and plain English style of their Joint Local Plan. West Oxfordshire is also a well-established part of the Government's proptech/digital planning community. The Councils wish to widen this approach to ensure our Local Plans are data driven and to improve community and business engagement with our growth work.

The use of AI speeds up the time taken for preparing Local Plan stages including logging responses to Local Plan consultation and releasing time for more productive uses. We are looking to use AI more extensively through our growth work, to speed

up the completion of repetitive tasks and to improve community engagement and also roll out to development management in line with Government objectives.

Infrastructure does not stop at administrative boundaries and our two unitary council model will facilitate coordination across the whole MSA area. West Berkshire Council currently hosts the DIG and has the experience of delivering infrastructure across Berkshire and the new Ridgeway Council will facilitate this coordinated approach.

## **2.11 Meeting housing needs**

Economically this is a relatively well-off area, with a strong housing market and with a mix of housing types, though relatively high-cost market housing.

There is a shortfall in the level of affordable housing across the area and a need for more genuinely affordable homes i.e. social rented and there is a need to increase the volume of affordable housing supported in each unitary area as part of the local housing mix. The new unitary councils will work closely with Registered Providers.

The area has supported significant housing innovation and delivery methods as well as investing in bold responses to the climate change emergency, for example the NW Bicester Eco Town in Cherwell, Salt Cross in West Oxfordshire and the Graven Hill custom build community at SE Bicester. At Thatcham, in West Berkshire, working closely with the community to shape this new development is an example of community working that would be lost at the large unitary scale. Our proposed two unitary councils aim to be small enough to understand local need but big enough to be effective.

The new unitary councils will draw on a number of important projects, including the South Oxfordshire use of climate action scorecards (which have been nationally acknowledged) and the West Oxfordshire Net Zero Carbon Toolkit to guide the design, development and delivery of new net-zero carbon, low-energy homes by small and medium-sized house builders, architects and self-builders. It also provides advice on how to implement energy efficiency measures in existing property and to begin to decarbonise in an affordable, phased way.

Our aspiration, reflected in our Local Plans, is to increase the volume of net zero 'carbon positive' housing and zero-bills housing we support across the area and in the growth corridors that underpin the two new unitary councils, ensuring that housing growth is supported by accessible transport for access to employment locations.

We intend to continue our support for housing innovation, while taking a more delivery focus, engaging closely with our housing providers as well as house builders to deliver the consents issued, to improve the quality of the housing built and to place an increased emphasis on securing the engagement of SME developers to drive increased local choice and innovation. The two unitary approach will build on local knowledge and be large enough to be effective, driven by a focus on delivery and quality outcomes.

We support the use of community-led housing such as has been achieved at Cumnor in Vale of White Horse and is being prepared for the Salt Cross new settlement in West Oxfordshire.

A number of the partner Councils, such as West Oxfordshire and West Berkshire are using digital planning and design tools. We are keen to see AI tools used with community engagement in place-related growth to help maintain local distinctiveness to design codes for development, not just '*standard house types*'. This is the approach used in the custom and self-build development at Graven Hill, Bicester.

We intend to speed up our response times to housing enquiries.

We also recognise the role that garden communities and new settlements have a role to play in providing growth, as they can ensure that services and infrastructure are provided from the start. As we have seen through the development at Graven Hill and Elmbrook in Bicester and Dalton Barracks in Vale of White Horse, new settlements in appropriate locations can avoid adding more growth onto those locations that have already accommodated relatively high level of growth, putting pressure on existing public services and infrastructure.

## **2.12 Setting transport priorities.**

The Thames Valley has significant opportunities for enhanced transport connections across the area and to elsewhere in the country and to ports and airports such as Heathrow.

There are existing transport links and corridors which link Oxford & Shires and the Ridgeway areas. There are good bus links into Oxford from Witney, Chipping Norton, Banbury and Bicester. Newbury is also connected to Oxford through South Oxfordshire.

The wider transport connections from the 2 new unitary council will be an important aspect of growth. Improved links to London, Hampshire, Heathrow with its major expansion plans, Swindon and Gloucestershire, as well as into Bucks and the West and East Midlands will be critical factors for consideration taking forwards existing transport plans. Working in partnership with other transport bodies such as Transport for the South East, England's Economic Heartland will be critical to improving links to the wider MSA. West Berkshire has a central role to play, being a member of Berkshire bodies and joining with partners in Oxfordshire will help align transport across the wider MSA area.

As an area that had witnessed high growth over the past 15-20 years Oxfordshire faces a transport network that is constrained with major points of congestion as well as a challenge of rural accessibility across both new unitary council areas.

New investment is needed to fund road and rail improvements to support both planned residential growth and commercial growth. Rail investment has a role to play in supporting improved connectivity and opening new areas for growth. The new unitary councils will work with GWR and Network rail as well as Great British Railways once it is operational, to secure rail service improvements as step towards a new Oxfordshire Metro system, which integrates rail and bus service provision in both new Unitary council areas, with both urban and rural connectivity. The proposed shift to electric trains by GWR and others is providing quicker services, with easier

access and a more sustainable, low carbon rail network across Oxfordshire and Berkshire.

The East-West rail route is a key infrastructure project in the Oxford to Cambridge Growth Corridor and will unlock areas for new growth together new transport links and residential and commercial growth.

Annex C provides an overview of the main transport priorities for the 2 new unitary councils which we wish to see the new mayor address. A particular priority is to improve the A34 which is severely constrained. Also to enhance the capacity of Oxford Station is important to unlocking a series of bus service improvements and new lines connecting Oxford to surrounding towns and to major settlements further away.

Oxford station has significant potential as a rail hub with unrivalled connectivity. We want to see the new East-West rail line extended to the Cowley Branch Line to open up development land to the east of Oxford. West Oxfordshire has an aspiration to secure new rail links through the A40 corridor to Witney and Carterton and is seeking to safeguard land for this purpose through its emerging local plan.

Railway station improvement have taken place at Newbury and Bicester, with plans for Theale. The market towns have the potential to be transport hubs linking bus and train services as well as new stations playing a major role in unlocking economic growth, such as Heyford Park and Grove.

West Berkshire has the right delivery experience to bring to the 2 unitary model. This will help ensure the 2 council model has the right skills and experience in each council. Its experience of infrastructure delivery including digital and transport will be a considerable resource for the MSA in which a series of corridors and growth partnerships exist and will require coordination.

The West Berkshire Ultra Low Environment Vehicle Strategy offers learning for the new unitary councils of approaches to tackling climate change in the transport sector, as does the Oxford zero emission zone.

There is an opportunity to extend cycle links between areas combining into the two new Unitary councils using the Strategic Active Travel Network (SATN) which is mapped and planning underway for delivery in Oxfordshire. Both the Oxford Greenways routes, Sustrans routes, improved connections to rail stations on commuting routes and in rural areas for tourism opportunities for example from Stow on the Wold to Kingham station; in the Cherwell Local Plan Partial Review to extend cycle connections between Yarnton/Kidlington to Oxford, around Botley and between Didcot - Newbury across the North Wessex Downs. The current Vale Local Plan and in the Joint Local Plan with South Oxfordshire land has been safeguarded land for the re-opening of the Wilts & Berks Canal, with a new active travel GI route alongside. West Berkshire is promoting green modes of transport, linked to the Berkshire wide connected travel plan and has linked the promotion of cycling to its Local Transport Plan and Environment strategies.

## 2.13 Closing infrastructure gaps

Our infrastructure priorities are to address power shortages in Oxfordshire and West Berkshire, where a power grid upgrade is needed to enable planned residential and commercial growth to commence. At the moment there are a number of stalled sites due to a lack of grid investment, despite the level of growth required being clear from the adopted Local Plans.

Investment in large solar schemes continues across Oxfordshire and West Berkshire, partly as a response to the current grid constraints and partly through the pressure to enable the green energy transition. The pressure for new renewable energy schemes can be expected to continue.

Managing National Infrastructure will be a need of the new unitary councils, for example in Oxford & Shires the Ardley Strategic Rail Freight Interchange and Botley West solar farm are challenging projects with wide spatial impacts on transport and the landscape of such a large solar scheme.

Water stress is becoming a challenge across Oxfordshire and West Berkshire and the need for sewage upgrades. The new investment package agreed at southeast Oxford enables the Grenoble Road residential development to proceed as well as other developments in South Oxfordshire and Cherwell too. West Oxfordshire faces challenges at many of its villages for improvements to the local sewage facilities.

## 2.14 Tackling Climate Change

The new unitary councils will continue to respond to the urgency of climate change by taking measures to promote climate resilience, such as tackling flood risks and will support innovative approaches to moving towards carbon zero development. A range of initiatives have been taken in Oxfordshire and West Berkshire that will form the basis of action by the two new unitary councils.

The Salt Cross development in West Oxfordshire will act as a trailblazer, with its 25% Biodiversity Net Gain requirement (15% above the 10% statutory requirement) as will other smaller residential and commercial schemes. These are central to our approach to the design of new development.

Other policy approaches developed in Oxfordshire include:

The new unitary councils will apply '*Project LEO*' (*Local Energy Oxfordshire*) to their place shaping, planning and housing work replicate the work that was undertaken on a detailed energy mapping for Bicester in the other market towns of each new unitary council area. Such maps aim to serve as tools for place-based planning. They show vulnerable areas and neighbourhoods that require tailored interventions for issues such as fuel poverty, off-grid heating, and tackling inefficient homes. Project LEO has also mapped areas suitable for renewable energy generation and electric vehicle charging points.

The '*Pathways to a Zero Carbon Oxfordshire*' (PAZCO) report is a useful guide for the new unitary councils that has outlined pathways to net-zero by 2050. It highlighted economic opportunities from innovation in energy, transport, land-use, and housing sectors supporting clean energy jobs and green industries.

The new unitary councils will continue to use the '*Net zero route map & action plan*' (NZRMAP), the route map of steps identified for Oxfordshire authorities to take to achieve net zero to meet their net zero target dates, which range from 2030 to 2050.

The two new unitary councils will build on existing work, such as PaZCO and the '*Zero Carbon Oxford Partnership*' (ZCOP), which details milestones, carbon budgets and KPIs to track progress including:

- Using the '*Local Area Energy Planning*' (LAEP) function
- Decarbonising buildings
- Accelerating the roll out of publicly accessible EV charge points
- Exploring opportunities to enhance carbon sequestration through land use change, including targeted habitat restoration and creation

The Eynsham CAPZero is the UK's first hyper local energy plan and is ready for rollout across the new unitary councils.

We also know sustainable development relies on public access to greenspace, tree planting and the provision of allotments, but it also includes the wider application of the concept of 'One Planet Living' (developed by Bicester based 'Bioregional') to ensure development is designed to have the least impact possible.

West Berkshire will bring its comprehensive, integrated cross-service approach to tackling climate change into the Ridgeway Council. The Council's approach is guided by its Environment Strategy 2020-2030 which sets out detailed practical measures and deliverable targets for reducing emissions and steps towards carbon neutrality. The Council supports local energy generation and carbon sequestration projects and aims to be a carbon neutral operation by 2030.

The approach taken by West Berkshire encourages responsible economic growth, supports healthy communities and works in closely with communities and local partners.

## **2.15 Major landscape and heritage constraints**

There are important landscape designations to treat with considerable care, given their sensitivity and national importance, as the two unitary councils focus on growth. These are:

- Cherwell – has small coverage by the Cotswolds National Landscape.
- West Oxfordshire – has major coverage by the Cotswolds National Landscape, one third of the land total.
- South Oxfordshire & Vale of White Horse – has significant coverage by the Chilterns and North Wessex Downs National Landscape.
- West Berkshire – has significant coverage by the North Wessex Downs National Landscape.



There is a legal duty to take account of the Management Plans for the Chilterns, North Wessex Downs and Cotswolds National Landscapes in considering any growth proposals in those areas.

Green Belt covers part of the city of Oxford as well as part of the four surrounding Districts too. This coverage helps prevent urban sprawl and limit the coalescence with surrounding towns.

The area covered by the two new unitary councils has internationally important heritage assets too, including World Heritage Sites, registered parks and gardens, ancient monuments, battlefields, and a rich number of listed buildings and conservation areas and archaeological assets. Examples include the White Horse at Uffington, Blenheim Palace, much of the centre of Oxford city - features from all stages of the history of England.

## **2.16 Protecting our environment.**

Oxfordshire and West Berkshire have an attractive high-quality environment, but it faces the challenge of nature recovery too. Central to future growth will be considerations of the requirements of Biodiversity Net Gain, enhancing our green and blue corridors and securing nature recovery using the Oxfordshire and West Berkshire Local Nature Recovery Strategies and working with the Berkshire Local Nature Partnership on 17 Biodiversity Opportunity Areas and the Berks, Bucks and Oxon Wildlife Trust (BBOWT).

We are committed to retaining our high-quality environment and therefore approach the issue of growth with sensitivity. There are a number of ecological constraints that have to be assessed as growth is proposed and to secure planning consents. We are particularly concerned to respect our National Landscapes, the Special Areas of Conservation (SACs) and SSSIs, as well as tackling nutrient neutrality with the use of grant funding to overcome issues to enable housing growth in West Berkshire.

Importantly, West Berkshire has three SAC including the River Lambourn, while Oxfordshire has 7 Special Areas of Conservation (SACs) which require Habitat Assessment of potential impacts of new growth to be assessed. They are especially vulnerable to potential NO<sub>2</sub> impacts. For example, Natural England has expressed significant concerns about growth impact on the Oxford Meadows adjoining the A34 and the A40 from increased traffic growth.

Of the 7 SACs in Oxfordshire the 4 most sensitive due to their location adjoining major roads are:

- Oxford Meadows SAC, adjoining the A34.
- Aston Rowant Woods, adjoining the M40.
- Aston Rowant adjoining the M40.
- Aston Rowant Cutting adjoining the M40.

Vale of White Horse and West Berkshire are nutrient affected authorities because of the River Lambourn SAC. Parts of West Berkshire are also impacted by the SE Plan Natural Resources Management Policy - Thames Basin Heaths SPA. Water

neutrality is an emerging issue, West Berkshire has recently been awarded a grant for nutrient neutrality solutions to enable development to proceed.

The Planning and Infrastructure Bill before Parliament proposes to introduce 'Environmental Delivery Plans' (EDPs) which are likely to significantly change how the impact of development on SACs are mitigated in the future.

There are other designated Sites to avoid. Oxfordshire also has 111 Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs) and geological SSSIs too, with 39 Conservation Target Areas (CTAs) which will be replaced this year by the map in the LRNS once adopted, Ramsar sites and 472 Local Wildlife Sites. All feature in the Oxfordshire Nature Recovery Strategy. West Berkshire has 51 SSSIs, 7 local Geological sites and 500 Local Wildlife Sites.

### 3. Why 2 unitary councils are best for growth in Oxfordshire?

This section considers the 3 LGR options and their relationship to growth. The main assessment of the options is set out in the joint LGR report on proposals for 2 unitary councils.

#### 3.1 Option A. A single county wide unitary council

The current 2 tier arrangement for local government in Oxfordshire is not effective or efficient. Moving to a unitary council for the whole of Oxfordshire would be a big council in terms of geography and population size. It would run the risk of being too remote from people, businesses and the communities it serves. Unlike the 2 unitary model which would be closer to its community to understand its needs.

One challenge that can be seen with the current structure is the relatively poor delivery by the County Council of transport schemes to support growth identified through Local Plans and the withdrawal of funding from transport services especially rural bus services which impacts on rural communities and the decline in road conditions. Enabling West Berkshire to be part of the proposal brings the experience of delivering transport to meet local community needs eg demand transport in rural areas. This experience can be shared between the 2 new unitary councils once established.

The transport needs of adopted Local Plans which shape growth over a 15 year period have not been met. This includes road investment in Banbury and Bicester to reduce congestion and on the A44 to manage the growth associated with the review of the Cherwell Local Plan that led to housing allocations to close to Kidlington and on the A40 to help manage the growth in West Oxfordshire. The County Council voted against the proposed new Thames crossing north of Didcot, an essential component of growth to support the delivery of the adopted Vale of White Horse and South Oxfordshire Local Plans.

The County Council still lacks a comprehensive county-wide transport model after many years of development, which means it is hard to assess the implications of new development on the transport network and on Habitat Regulation sites.

The delay and failure to deliver of the Oxfordshire Mobility Model (OMM) by the County Council has held up progress, including planning policy work, access for site promoters (eg Dalton Barracks in the Vale of White Horse) to a comprehensive model to test schemes, as well as creating complications for Habitat Regulations Assessments which need to consider cumulative impacts.

The County Council has the worst performance in England on the use of approved, paid s106 contributions for the purposes on which they have been secured from developers (House Builders Federation, October 2024). This undermines the delivery of approved schemes, and the honouring of commitments reached with the local community too.

Oxfordshire County Council has not been releasing their land in allocated sites in West Oxfordshire which has the effect of holding back approved development.

Oxfordshire County Council is not close to the communities served. The County Council bid continues this remoteness and distance. Being a commissioning body, it lacks intelligence on local needs and local issues which is essential for effective growth planning. Across Oxfordshire housing and economic growth has been secured and delivered by the district councils.

The creation of two new unitary councils would provide the right opportunities to secure economies of scale, building on growth planning and regeneration experience without becoming too remote.

### **3.2 Option B. A standalone unitary for the city & 2 accompanying unitary councils.**

Oxford City council is ambitious, but the creation of a standalone unitary council for Oxford City would be of a relatively small unitary council, well below the recommended 500,000 population size.

Adopting the Oxford City unitary proposal would subsume a significant proportion of the current Oxford Green Belt. This is not the only way for Oxford to grow. It would be better for the city to consider alternative land uses within the current administrative area to use land more efficiently through regeneration schemes with higher housing densities and retain the integrity of the current Green Belt in both the city and its neighbouring areas (except for sites that have been released through the current adopted Local Plans in the neighbouring Districts). The Oxford City growth proposal will lead to new, additional green major Green Belt release in surrounding areas and runs the risk of creating 'urban sprawl' which is what the Green Belt is intended to avoid and should continue to do so.

Expanding the city further through urban extensions into the Green Belt at the edge of the city of Oxford runs the risk of compounding the existing constrained infrastructure on the edge of the city.

The housing need of Oxford should be met within the new unitary council areas in a coordinated, planned way. For example, part of the current unmet housing need of the city is planned for with housing growth at Kidlington through the Cherwell Local Plan Review, at Salt Cross and West Eynsham in West Oxfordshire and land north of Bayswater Brook, Northfield Farm and Grenoble Road in South Oxfordshire.

But future growth does not need to adjoin the city boundary. In the future, further housing growth from Oxford could be provided for at Heyford Park in Cherwell, on a significant brown field land location. For this to be delivered, improved transport connections will be needed, with rail links to Oxford. The key issue for supporting the growth of the City is for good public transport links by train and bus and improved walking and cycling links from identified areas of growth into the City.

Oxford growing as a standalone Council runs the risks of retaining the current tensions between the city and its neighbours over how best to grow. It's now time to move to a new more positive relationship. The creation of two new unitary councils will ensure the recent challenges of the Duty to Cooperate, meeting the unmet housing needs of the city in the future can be dealt with more positively through a joint approach under Spatial Development Strategy to enable development in the right place to respect constraints and landscape quality. By including Oxford within

the new structure of the proposed 'Oxford & Shires' unitary council the needs of the city to grow will be addressed comprehensively. In the two new unitary councils there will be an on going to need to cooperate. This will be especially relevant to the wider Berkshire collaboration, with West Berkshire continuing working ties to Berkshire and infrastructure in place to ensure service coordination and cooperation across the wider MSA area

The Oxford economy has underperformed relative to other comparable areas in southern England. The economy of Oxford, with major business parks and the investment from the Universities and Colleges does not operate separately from the rest of Oxfordshire. It is all interconnected and integrated and plays a powerful economic role. Oxford is a part of and connected to the County as a whole, through investment, supply chains, economic networks, travel patterns and commuting.

The city proposal is inward looking, ignoring Oxford's relationship to neighbouring districts and their economic potential. In contrast, our focus will be on building a network of science and business parks on the edge of City and across Oxfordshire, relating to the Universities and Colleges.

Our proposals seek to address these interconnections and the important economic relationships between the business parks of Oxfordshire, taking account of the importance of the wider economy and globally significant business parks such as Harwell and Culham located at distance from Oxford. We believe that Oxford's challenges are best met on a collaborative basis between local authority partners within a joint structure and with the new Mayor too.

The two new unitary councils (and the mayor) will also embrace the recommendations from the recently established Oxford Growth Commission, in particular how the economy of the city might grow and how affordable housing should best be expanded.

### **3.3 Option C. Two new unitary councils – 'Oxford & Shires'; 'The Ridgeway'**

Our proposed two new unitary councils are built around corridors that link the two areas:

- A Unitary council in the north of Oxfordshire to be called '*Oxford & Shires*' which is linked by the A40 corridor from Carterton to Oxford, together with the A41, A44, A4260 and the M40 and A34 corridors linking Banbury and Bicester with Oxford. This link is reinforced by the new East - West rail, the Banbury to Oxford Line and North Cotswolds line linking West Oxfordshire with Cherwell and Oxford City.
- A Unitary council in the south of Oxfordshire with West Berkshire to be called '*The Ridgeway Council*', linked by the M4 corridor, the A34 and A420 corridors linking South Oxfordshire, the Vale of White Horse and West Berkshire.

We propose to take a 'corridor approach' which ensures we keep a focus on the distinctiveness of our localities as well as opening up and supporting Oxford's growth without decimating the Green Belt. Green Belt is a well established strategic planning tool for assisting with regeneration of brownfield land as well as other

planning objectives like protecting the setting of historic towns, which is very relevant in Oxford's case with its 'dreaming spires' set in a valued green landscape.

Our proposed two unitary councils have complimentary geographies, Cherwell and West Oxfordshire connect to Oxford along the A40, A44, A4260 and A41, while the Ridgeway connects well to the wider Thames Valley along the M4. The creation of two new Unitary councils would blend the best of each current component Council, building on a good record of collaboration and joint working.

There are deep historic ties too, as Berkshire included the parts of Oxfordshire south of the River Thames until the local government reorganisation in 1974 as well as the historic Ridgeway path, and the River Thames as a link joining the authorities but currently separately them (the River Thames is the district and county border for much of its length) but would enable effective catchment thinking if both banks were in same authority for more of it.

There are positive lessons to apply from working with West Berkshire Council, an established unitary council, in the design of the 2 new unitary councils. Their practical experience will lead to informed organisational design and an approach to service delivery of upper tier authorities but at a level that understand and delivers for local needs. This will bring experience of a *whole system approach* to growth and bring experience of people services, health, community safety (police & fire). Also, an understanding of wider MSA geography to create the glue between Oxfordshire and Berkshire councils working with the MSA.

The involvement of West Berkshire secures opportunities for scaling up, collaboration and joint learning in developing rural industries and common approaches to growth, as well as meeting the needs of market towns, renewal and rural transport connectivity.

The two new unitary councils will provide a balanced and proportionate approach to growth. Building on the development strategy set out in the adopted Local Plans and commits to an approach to future growth *that is expansive and ambitious*. Experience of working in a single tier brings experience of coordinating growth plans with infrastructure delivery at the strategic and local level

The population thresholds of 500,000 will be met with planned future development through the delivery of adopted Local Plans. The two new unitary councils will be big enough to drive efficiencies but small enough to understand community (business and residents) to deliver to meet their needs and aspirations.

The two new unitary councils are close to their local communities and will be closer to the people and businesses served than a countywide unitary can be. They will have an intimacy, a focus and a local connection that a county wide unitary cannot have.

One of the issues that differentiates the creation of 2 new unitary councils from a County wide unitary will be the approach taken to planning. Our approach will combine planning for growth through local plans and the coordination with infrastructure delivery. We intend to introduce a quicker planning service, that is not held up by two-tier working and has the ability to plan for and make decisions to deliver growth and development.

Through the creation of two new planning teams, one for each new unitary council, we have considered what will be needed to build investor confidence through the planning system and address our customers' needs efficiently and effectively, providing certainty for our communities and for our applicants.

Two new unitary councils will be able to speed up decision-making on planning as this will be easier if a) the unitary is not a large county authority, with a poor delivery record on current development proposals, b) because there is the opportunity, based on experience and detailed local knowledge, to reset the skills and resources needed to focus on speed and efficiency as noted in section 2.10 and c) to use standard s106 clauses. West Berkshire brings experience of single tier system working across transport, drainage, people services to deliver the needs of the communities and deliver on the ground. Bringing West Berkshire into the Oxfordshire model will help inform and shape the new local government model.

We propose two new unitary councils that are keen to work positively with the new mayoral combined authority, to secure sustainable growth and investment, not in opposition.

Our two new unitary councils have a close understanding of their patch and will bring that knowledge and understanding to a 'Team Thames Valley' approach, working with the mayor to secure the major economic potential of the area with accompanying housing growth and infrastructure planning.

Our emphasis is on market towns, and we have invested in regenerating and strengthening many of them. They are all different and are also distinct to our focus on meeting the needs of the city of Oxford. Our two new unitary councils will work together and share best practice.

Parts of the current districts have seen significant growth, with attractive town centre regeneration and the towns have remained 'local' in feel.

The constraints faced, such as National Landscape, areas of environmental and heritage sensitivity and areas of flooding made us focus development geographically which has generated locations with strong infrastructure such as Didcot and Newbury, Witney, Banbury and Bicester. Our two new unitary councils are an opportunity to both meet the needs of Oxford and Reading on a collaborative basis and to ensure that major growth avoids the National Landscape areas.

While the 2-tier split between County Council and the District Councils, as well as between the city and its 4 neighbours, has not helped the planning of Oxfordshire, a two unitary approach will help with this.

The 5 District Councils of Oxford City, Cherwell and West Oxfordshire, South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse have an established collaboration on planning matters, such as jointly unmet housing need through the Growth Deal and its associated MoU.

Collaboration in a larger Local Government unit, a new unitary council as 'Oxford & Shires' is the opportunity to address unmet housing need and assist Oxford City to expand, not necessarily on edge of the city which would compound the existing

infrastructure challenge, or through further Green Belt release, but further away and ensure rail and bus connections are put in place to enable quick links into the city. There is major brownfield land availability in Cherwell at Heyford Park and rail connections too.

The neighbouring Districts to Oxford City showed what could be done together in 2016/17 when the identified unmet housing need of the city of 14,300 housing was shown as capable of being accommodated in the surrounding districts and apportioned between Cherwell, West Oxfordshire, South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse in a jointly agreed package.

The proposed 2 new unitary councils, with the benefit that West Berkshire can bring of experience and links to the rest of Berkshire to address the wider MSA area, are best placed to tackle in an integrated way the infrastructure challenges of growth, with improved transport links and the provision of power and water connections of both Oxford and in the wider parts of each unitary area.

The new unitary councils will be outward looking new organisations. Both new unitary councils will look to engage closely with neighbours on strategic transport planning, school catchment planning, environmental management and river basin planning as they contribute to the success of the new Thames Valley Combined Authority.



## **4A. The 'Oxford & Shires' Council**

The new 'Oxfordshire and Shires' Unitary Council will bring together the 3 current districts of West Oxfordshire, Cherwell and the City of Oxford. The new unitary council is based on a series of transport corridors which link the area together and also strong track record of working collaboratively.

The Oxford & Shires Council will embrace a collaborative approach to working together with the Ridgeway Council. In this the experience of the West Berkshire Unitary of coordination, the operating model and planning for growth and infrastructure delivery together will be powerful.

### **4A.1 History of the relationship**

The Partial Review of the Local Plan undertaken by Cherwell of the area adjoining Oxford between Kidlington and Yarnton, was a response to unmet housing need in Oxford City in 2016/17, as was the focus by West Oxfordshire on the creation of Salt Cross new settlement and proposed development to the west of Eynsham. Oxford City has been given nomination rights to affordable housing created in this area. Oxford has not been treated as a separate area and its housing needs have not been ignored by its neighbours.

The new unitary council, bringing existing partners together in a joint structure, will take the existing relationship one stage further and enable service integration to be achieved as the growth is delivered.

The area is a significant part of Oxford to Cambridge Growth Corridor with the potential for new commercial and residential growth.

We are feeding into and engaging with the new Oxford Growth Commission and will take account of its conclusions.

### **4A.2 Our growth aspirations**

We have a history of growth in each of the current districts and supporting innovation in delivery such as at Graven Hill, Salt Cross and at Garden Communities too.

By directing development teams to focus on development corridors, we will be structuring their work on key growth locations; for example, from Carterton, to Salt Cross, Kidlington/Yarnton, south to Oxford – building on area strengths within the corridors and the links between different types of development. In contrast the proposal from Oxford for major growth into green belt locations is much less deliverable than growth along our corridors.

We see future residential growth taking place at our market towns and on a more limited basis at Oxford, given their limited land availability. We see new growth taking place in transport corridors where there is good rail and bus connectivity, as well as good links to the highway network, that are also capable of being made more sustainable through appropriate investment. For example the A40 corridor has the potential for rail or other mass transit that supports new growth.

We embrace the importance of the city of Oxford as a major economic area and want to strengthen its network role to the economy of the 2 new unitary council areas. The city is an important retail and cultural centre and its interdependence with its neighbours is an underpromoted asset. The future of Oxford is safe in the hands of the new Oxford & Shires Council, working closely its sister Council, the Ridgeway.

We anticipate intensification of land use within our market towns continuing, with a scaling up of the provision of affordable housing and with area regeneration such as at Carterton and in Oxford over the long term and the intensive use of brown field land such as is clearly possible at Heyford Park to support a major residential and commercial expansion. This includes working with the MoD/DIO on the regeneration of areas of existing service family accommodation.

We see new settlements as playing a role too and Heyford Park has a major role to play in supporting new growth (we anticipate it being supported by the New Town Commission, possibly with a new Urban Development Corporation to help take the expansion forward) along with likely rail freight terminal alongside and major changes to J10, M40 and a new rail station improving access. The expansion of the Salt Cross new settlement has the potential to secure strategic transport investment to improve its connectivity.

As recorded earlier we intend to use Local Development Orders (LDOs) for all business and science parks (see para 2.9.1) across the new Council area. We also intend to establish Local Development Orders (LDO) to speed up the planning of area development and reducing the time to secure consents for residential-led schemes. This would be based on the Graven Hill experience on the edge of Bicester where a new community with predominantly custom-build housing has been implemented within the parameters of an LDO.

We will continue our programme of regeneration, building on the success of those completed at Bicester and Witney, with a particular focus on Carterton, Kidlington, Canalside in Banbury and the station area in Oxford. The new unitary council will work with businesses to support Business Improvement Districts (BID) and secure economies of scale through working across the 3 districts.

We will continue to seek to ensure that growth at our villages is consistent with our development strategy as set out in our adopted Local Plans.

We intend to continue protecting the Cotswolds National Landscape from major development proposals and to promoting its objectives as an area of national significance.

#### **4A.3 Maximising our economic and commercial potential.**

We recognise that this new unitary council area has major economic assets across its geography, from the Cotswolds, RAF Brize Norton base and Blenheim Palace, to the City of Oxford, with its research strength and a range of business parks across the area which drawn on the expertise of the Universities and Colleges, to the Airport, Bicester Village, the emerging new town at Heyford Park and advanced manufacturing in Bicester and Banbury.

Forging closer ties with these assets and support for intensifying their outputs will ensure that the economic success of the unitary area is secured. Part of this will depend on securing improved rail connections and stations with an improved Oxford Station at the heart of the network and improved strategic highways, including the A40, A34 and A41 and the critical junctions on the M40 at Junction 9, 10 and 11 and Junction 13 on the M4, which are both network connections and areas for intensifying the economic opportunity that exists to secure significant economic development potential.

Of note is M40 J10 which is set to become a major growth zone, with the Heyford Park expansion, the rail freight NSIP development proposed at Ardley and a historical theme park being assessed. A Masterplan will be needed of the links between these major developments to ensure coherence and to secure developer gains.

We intend to build on our economic strengths such as the areas advanced engineering sector including Innovative Bicester Motion, with major developments close to the Motorway network at M40 Junctions 9 and 11. We want to see the new Vertiport at Bicester Motion develop in order to place the area at the forefront of the new electric air taxi industry, as part of emerging new national network.

There has been significant job creation in the distribution and manufacturing sector located at M40 junction 9 and 11 with more under consideration close to junction 10. Manufacturing and food processing is strong at Banbury and defence at Brize Norton, the area has a significant advanced engineering presence with advanced motor companies, motorsports and an extensive research and development base around Oxford linked to the research base of our two Universities and Colleges, with hi-tech spin outs and across the unitary area with growth locations to support.

Growth locations include support for the growth of key clusters, sectors and locations at 'Science North', a high tech zone linking the major new North Oxford development, The University of Oxford Begbroke Science Park, the Oxford Technology Park, London Oxford Airport into West Oxfordshire too, all with quick access to the Oxford Parkway and Long Hanborough stations. Carterton is highlighted in the Local Industrial Strategy and Local Investment Plan as a new 'technology hub'.

Many of these locations are closely aligned with the National Industrial Strategy and have the potential for significant expansion such as the Oxford Technology Park and the aero industries of Oxford Airport. A new Park and Ride to serve Oxford has potential in this location too.

The area has a very strong tourism offer that combines the major tourism assets of Blenheim Palace, the Cotswolds, Bicester Village (with the Puy du Fou historical park under consideration at M40, Junction 10) and the opportunity to harness overheated Oxford by linking together to forge a strong international tourism offer.

As noted earlier the use of a Local Development Order (LDO) to provide quick planning approvals in 10 days, based on the Vale of White Horse experience, would provide certainty for business. Extending this approach to cover all business parks would remove planning as a major development issue.

In Oxford the colocation of new residential and commercial and more affordable workplaces will help reduce an outwards commute to commercial development on the outer edge of the city.

#### **4A.4 Meeting housing need**

We intend to address the need across the area for significant levels of affordable housing. The Unitary area faces high housing costs, and a major affordability challenge in Oxford, neighbouring Districts and in rural West Oxfordshire.

Cherwell has had a strong record of housing delivery and housing innovation as its investment in the Graven Hill custom self-build community and support for the NW Bicester Ecotown show. Working with Greencore Homes at Shipton quarry to build a new settlement of 'climate positive' homes will recapture that leadership position.

Other high-quality developments that tackle climate change are planned at the Salt Cross new settlement in West Oxfordshire with its high building standards and with development planned to be net zero carbon in operation.

While the boundary of Oxford limits unchecked growth, in recent years some Green Belt release has been supported into the Cherwell, South and West Oxfordshire Districts and the Vale of White Horse that each sit on its edge. Within the City there is potential for urban renewal and site intensification through building higher and at high densities. But this will not meet the entirety of Oxford's housing needs in the future.

We will continue to support the growth of Heyford Park in Cherwell and its conversion from a military base into a dynamic new town. It lies close to Junction 10 of the M40 and next to two rail lines with the potential for a new station next to the site to support new growth. A creative Masterplan has been prepared that proposes new residential and commercial growth at scale, plus leisure uses and major renewable energy generation to meet its own needs. Development on the brownfield land at Heyford Park avoids the need for new development on green fields around the more sensitive village locations.

Heyford Park has a major role to play in providing major housing growth and supporting the unmet housing needs of Oxford City, as it avoids further Green Belt incursion, as does the potential for future growth at the military base of Arncott and land at Weston on the Green.

Likewise expanding Carterton in West Oxfordshire provides a major opportunity to meet the housing needs of West Oxfordshire and to engage in an accompanying programme of regeneration of the town to help secure its role as an important service centre next to the RAF Brize Norton base, as well as capitalising on the economic spin-out opportunities.

#### **4A.5 Our transport and infrastructure priorities**

There are major transport challenges across the Oxford & Shires Area with major congestion on our roads and constraints on the rail network. There are opportunities to use transport investment to drive growth.

The new Council will work with GWR and Network Rail to regenerate stations and their locals as critical points of arrival in the market towns and to enhance the rail network in the area, including:

- The opening of a passenger service on the Cowley Branch Line to extend the East-West rail link to unlock major development sites on the east side of Oxford.
- An enhanced Oxford Station to ensure the new services and rail links can all be accommodated and improve connectivity to locations beyond Oxford, especially London, Bristol and Reading.
- Enhancements to the North Cotswold line to double track the line between Oxford and Long Hanborough, improving the connections to Worcester and beyond and investing in major improvements to Hanborough Station including new bridge and additional platform.
- Improvements to the rail line between Banbury and Oxford with new stations at Begbroke and possibly at Shipton to help deliver significant plans for proposed residential and commercial growth.
- A new station at Ardley (on the footprint of a previous station) and an expanded Lower Heyford station to support the development of the Heyford Park new town and secure a close service connection into Oxford.
- West Oxfordshire are seeking to safeguard land to enable the future provision of a potential rail connection from Carterton to Oxford via Witney (known as the Carterton - Witney - Oxford Rail Corridor or CWORC for short).

Improving key roads with investment on strategic highways network aligned with Local Plan related growth, including:

- New Motorway junctions to support growth and manage transport flows at Banbury and Bicester.
- Tackling A34 congestion.
- A40 improvements to access growth of Carterton and Witney and access into the Cotswolds.
- A41 improved connection between Oxfordshire and Bucks, providing enhanced access to the M40 for Aylesbury Vale part of Buckinghamshire.

Improvements to the electricity grid are required. The area has major gaps to close in the power supply to Cherwell and Oxford to enable planned and new growth to proceed.

The area also has water needs to meet through an enhanced water network and improvements to the sewage provision of the area across West Oxfordshire and at Grenoble road on the southeast of Oxford.

#### **4A.6 Conclusion on ‘Oxford & Shires’**

There is a major opportunity to create a new unitary council that builds on the track record of delivery and innovation by the current Councils in housing approaches and responses to climate change

These Councils believe that the Oxford & Shires unitary council will strengthen the economy of the city of Oxford and the two neighbouring Districts and working closely with the new Ridgeway Council. Its ambition will expand its economic assets and expand local clusters in nationally significant sectors of science and technology industries and strengthened tourism too.

The Oxford & Shires unitary council aspires to respond to the future housing needs of Oxford through new and extended settlements with close transport links to the city.

The new unitary stands to be a significant actor and a willingness to collaborate with partners and help secure the proposed Thames Valley MSA and support the new Mayor.

## **4B. The 'Ridgeway Council'**

The new 'Ridgeway Council' is to bring together the 3 districts of South Oxfordshire, Vale of White Horse and West Berkshire as a Unitary council. The area is linked by the A34 and the extensive coverage of the chalk landscapes of the Chilterns and North Wessex Downs bringing common landscape, environment, heritage and tourism links.

There are deep historic ties, as Berkshire included the parts of Oxfordshire south of the River Thames until the local government reorganisation in 1974.

There are lessons for the new unitary council from working with West Berkshire Council, an established unitary council in the design of both of the 2 new unitary councils. Their practical experience of coordination, its operating model and planning for growth and infrastructure delivery will lead to informed organisational design.

The involvement of West Berkshire secures opportunities for scaling up, collaboration and joint learning in developing rural industries and common approaches to growth, as well as meeting the needs of market towns, renewal and rural transport connectivity.

### **4B.1 History of the relationship**

South Oxfordshire and the Vale of White Horse Councils have worked jointly for many years with a shared management team and shared services between the two Councils. This has brought efficiency, cost saving and a shared policy agenda, whilst respecting the local differences between the 2 Councils and the communities within each District.

The new Ridgeway Council will add West Berkshire Council into the established two Council partnership. The 3 Council merger will bring depth to the current two council collaboration.

The 3 Districts share many common features, an internationally significant high tech business cluster centred on Harwell, Milton Park and Culham, two Enterprise zones, the 'Science Vale' initiative and collaboration with both the Universities of Oxford and Southampton. The area has a significant coverage of the North Wessex Downs National Landscape and the Chilterns National Landscape and market towns, conservation areas and villages.

### **4B.2 Our growth aspirations**

The members of the proposed Ridgeway Council have a solid record of sustainable growth and a significant delivery record of housing and commercial growth. They have shared ambitions to maintain our economic success and aim to grow further in a sustainable way.

The new unitary will look to align its next series of local plan reviews with the aim of moving to one new local plan for the unitary council area, incorporating an area focus to the new plan. The new unitary will have the ability to coordinate traditional upper tier functions of infrastructure delivery (transport/drainage etc) with growth plans due to the knowledge and skills from the West Berkshire experience.

The aim is to continue to plan for major residential, employment and commercial growth at the market towns and garden communities while protecting the areas of greatest sensitivity including areas of greatest landscape quality, the National Landscape of the North Wessex Downs and the Chilterns. We will retain the character of our villages and work with the communities to ensure they remain viable.

The Ridgeway Council will seek to continue the participation of the West Berkshire Council in the Berkshire Prosperity Board and its significant ambitions and in the Berkshire economic strategy for collaboration and investment. This will strengthen the links between the new unitary council into Oxfordshire and Berkshire, helping to deepen collaboration and joint working within the Thames Valley.

The new council will continue the successful programme of regeneration at Didcot Garden Community and Berinsfield Garden Community, while also embracing the Newbury regeneration programme and masterplans to shape the renewal of Thatcham and Hungerford. The plans for major development at Thatcham have been developed with the local community.

There is an opportunity for shared learning from the applying the consideration by West Berkshire Council of the economic development consequences of planning approvals and of the implications of health from new development by the new unitary council.

The current Councils have a positive history of using community led Neighbourhood Plans to secure growth at villages of a more limited, proportionate scale, together with growth to support local infrastructure priorities, such as the Benson bypass. The new unitary council will continue community engagement in growth through a focus on support for Neighbourhood Plans to enable communities to take control to meet their aims.

The new Council will explore the potential for a new settlement at the A34/M4 junction 13 in West Berkshire.

As a Minerals and Waste Authority, with a plan adopted in December 2022, West Berkshire Council brings the experience and skills to work across the new unitary area on these key issues.

#### **4B.3 Maximising our economic and commercial potential.**

The area already has a strong record of support for economic growth at the business parks with their science and innovation strengths at Newbury, Greenham, Theale, Harwell, Culham and Milton Park.

One current challenge is to meet the energy and water needs of proposed data centres at Didcot and the new AI growth zone at Culham.

The science cluster between Harwell, Culham and Milton Park is an area known as 'Science Vale' which has significant international partners and collaborators such as MIT in the USA, not just links within the UK and to Oxford University. The nuclear



research at Aldermaston & Burghfield in West Berkshire, also forms part of the high-tech cluster between the 3 current Districts that have the potential to grow further.

The area also has close links via the A34 to the Solent Freeport at Southampton and the ports of Portsmouth, together with the life sciences connection between the University of Southampton and Harwell.

In addition to the links between West Berkshire and South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse, in Oxfordshire, West Berkshire has close involvement within the wider Thames Valley and the Berkshire Prosperity Board. This involvement is a source of economic strength and the Berkshire economic strategy a successful approach from which the two new unitary councils will draw learning benefits.

'Assisted Area' status has helped to establish successful Enterprise Zones that have helped to secure new investment into South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse. Culham recently secured an AI zone designation to support its future development. We intend to continue our outward looking approach with continued support for the science, innovation and technology sector in the area.

The area has already introduced a significant innovation with the use of Local Development Orders (LDO) at Milton Park in the Vale of White Horse and Greenham in West Berkshire (and also the Dtech LDO) which has introduced a 10-working day turn around for planning approvals by businesses. This approach provides planning certainty for business with quick consents. We plan to extend this innovative approach to cover all business parks.

The area has an opportunity to create more incubator space to meet the needs of SMEs as well as an existing commitment to servicing inward investment enquiries.

The new unitary can learn from the West Berkshire experience of using regulatory services as business enablers, the use of business rate reviews, support for supplier firms and securing social value policy in procurement.

Working with local colleges such as Abingdon and Witney College and Newbury College will remain a priority for securing new skills and apprenticeships related to local sector needs. Of note is the net zero hub at Abingdon and Witney College which is upskilling people in net zero installations (heat pumps, solar panels, insulation etc) to help deliver sustainable growth and retrofit.

Diversification of the rural economy will be strengthened by the 3 Councils engaging together, bringing a focus on green farm infrastructure from working with companies such as Dev Agritech and Dyson and the significant racehorse industry.

The Ridgeway Council area has a strong tourism offer with extensive attractions across the Chilterns and North Wessex Downs such as the famous Ridgeway Path, vibrant market towns such as Henley, Faringdon, Wallingford, Marlborough and Newbury etc and the West Berkshire Canal project.

The involvement of the two unitary councils in Local Visitor Economy Partnerships (the Berkshire LVEP and Experience Oxfordshire) will coordinate and developing the tourism industry at the local level, working with national bodies like Visit England.

#### 4B.4 Meeting housing needs

The Ridgeway Council we will take the opportunity to expand social housing and address the need for affordable housing in an area of high-cost housing. And build on the innovative policies and successes such as the policy of 50% affordable housing in adopted local plan for the unmet need (of Oxford) sites in South Oxfordshire and the work lead by West Berkshire Council to focus on securing affordable housing that meets the needs of young professionals.

There are opportunities for affordable housing, both new development opportunities and also but also increased scale to deliver innovative solutions such as a housing company and increased influence over RSLs. Sovereign are the main RSL provider in South Oxfordshire, Vale of White Horse and West Berkshire but are small enough for local connection and to understand local housing needs.

The new Ridgeway Council will build on West Berkshire successful working as a unitary to deliver specialist housing to meet local needs.

#### 4B.5 Our transport and infrastructure priorities

The West Berkshire Local Transport Plan (LTP) is driving the transport approach of West Berkshire Council. In contrast, the Oxfordshire LTCP will need further consideration to ensure it meets the transport needs of South and Vale within the Ridgeway Council area and is capable of delivery and more effective implementation than has been evident to date. As a unitary council West Berkshire has valuable expertise in the delivery of strategic infrastructure. Page 46 provides more detail of policy themes and infrastructure priorities.

Transport planning concerns improving connectivity within the Ridgeway Council area, but also connectivity beyond the Council area; to the wider Oxfordshire and Berkshire, working across the MSA area and importantly close links to London and Heathrow.

The A34 is a key connection that runs north and south through the area to the Solent Freeport at Southampton, a major focus for HGV movements, the M4 is a major east-west strategic route together with the A420 to Swindon.

The Great Western line runs through the Unitary area and provides excellent connections to London, Reading, Bristol and Oxford.

However there is a gap with no stations between Didcot and Swindon. So Science Vale, a major area of growth of national significance, has inadequate access to the rail network and relies on bus services. A new reopened station at Grove on the Great Western Line would act a driver of new growth and at Milton Park would strengthen sustainable access to a major business park.

The new Council will work with GWR to regenerate stations and their localities as critical points of arrival in the market towns.

The involvement of West Berkshire will bring the promotion of green modes of transport, linked to the Berkshire wide connected travel plan as well as an applying

the Ultra Low Environment Vehicle Strategy and the promotion of cycling links across the unitary area.

There is a need to invest in improvements to the water infrastructure across the area to tackle water stress, which is emerging as a challenge.

There is potential to work jointly with the mayor on securing leisure and employment and business opportunities from the creation of the new reservoir close to Abingdon (the current County Council is opposed to the development).

#### **4B.6 Conclusion to ‘the Ridgeway Council’**

There is a significant opportunity to create a new unitary council that builds on the track record of significant delivery by the current three Councils.

These three Councils have a significant ambition to go further. To strengthen its economic assets and expand local clusters in nationally significant sectors.

The Ridgeway Council stands to be a significant actor, with valuable aspirations and a willingness to collaborate with partners, to help secure the proposed Thames Valley MSA and support the new Mayor too.

# **Annex A: Local Plan status.**

Each District has an adopted Local Plan in place, with new Plans at various stages of preparation.

	Local Plan adopted	Staged reached in Local Plan review.	Examination
Cherwell	(2011-2031) July 2015	Reg 19 Nov 2024 July 2025 (Submission)	Not yet set
City of Oxford	(2016-2036) June 2020	Submitted, but subsequently withdrawn	Exam completed - Plan rejected & new plan is in preparation having recently consulted at Reg 18 stage.
South Oxfordshire	To 2035 December 2020	Submitted December 2024	June 2025
Vale of White Horse	To 2031 December 2016	Submitted December 2024	June 2025
West Oxfordshire	(2011-2031) September 2018	Completed its Reg 18 stage in August 2025	-
West Berkshire	Core Strategy (2006-2026) 2012	Submitted	Adopted at Council June 2025

**Annex B: Housing numbers and the 5-year housing land supply.**

The changes to the standard method for housing requires a significant level of new growth to be considered in each District.

	Pre Standard Method	New Standard Method	Increase	Average houses built 2020/21 to 2022/23.	5-year housing land supply position – as reported in Annual Monitoring Reports
Cherwell	706 pa	1095 pa	0.9x	1242	2.3 yrs (at Feb 25)
City of Oxford	762 pa	1051 pa	2.4x	437	5.93 yrs (at Feb 25)
South Oxfordshire	579 pa	1179 pa	1.2X	1010	4.5 yrs (at Jan 25)
Vale of White Horse	633 pa	937 pa	0.8 x	1162	5.81 yrs (at Jan 25)
West Oxfordshire	549 pa	905 pa	1x	865	Less than 5 years (at 18/12/24)
West Berkshire	495 pa	1057 pa	1.6X	660	2.6 yrs (at Feb 2025)

## **Annex C: Initial infrastructure priorities.**

Infrastructure investment has been sought through Local Plans to enable growth to be supported. There are rail improvements that are sought and improvements to utilities infrastructure as well as improvements to the power grid and to address areas of water stress.

Our initial infrastructure priorities include:

### **Cherwell**

- Road improvements at Banbury (Henneth Way) and the proposed A41 Bicester SE relief road for which land is safeguarded. Improvements to the A44 are needed to support the delivery of the Local Plan Partial review sites in Yarnton.
- Challenge of capacity on M40 J10 to J9 and J9. And A34 southwards from J9 which faces significant constraints.
- Major changes proposed at M40 J10 to enable further growth at Heyford Park, the former USAF base, which can accommodate significant new growth and proposed NSIP rail freight terminal.
- East to West rail completed to Oxford and Bletchley, near Milton Keynes.
- New station at Begbroke associate with expansion of Begbroke Science Park and housing delivery associated with Partial Review of the Cherwell Local Plan.
- Expanded grid connections to support new growth.

### **City of Oxford**

- Rail improvements to City Station, aspiration to secure Cowley line as extension to East-West rail.
- Double tracking to rail line to Didcot and to Long Hanborough on North Cotswolds line.
- Expanded grid to support new growth.

### **South Oxfordshire & Vale of White Horse**

- The A34 faces significant constraint at Botley, to the west of Oxford.
- Double tracking rail line to Oxford.
- Aspiration to reopening the station at Grove and a new station at Milton Park on the Great Western rail line.

- Meeting the water and energy needs of the growing data centre sector in South and Vale with the government identifying the nation's first AI growth zone at Culham.
- Challenge from water stress and sewage in both Districts.
- Leisure and business opportunities from the proposed new reservoir.

#### West Oxfordshire

- Improvements to A40 to enable further growth at Witney and Carterton to improve modal shift and reduce congestion at peak times.
- West Oxfordshire has an aspiration to extend rail links through the A40 corridor from Carterton to Oxford via Witney with a corridor of land proposed to be safeguarded through the new local plan.
- Double tracking the North Cotswold line from Oxford to Long Hanborough and major station improvements to turn Hanborough Station into a super mobility hub.
- Challenge of need to improve sewage facilities in the rural parts of West Oxfordshire.

#### West Berkshire

From the Transport Infrastructure Plan for Berkshire and Local Transport Plan 4:

The West Berkshire Local Transport Plan 2025–2040 (LTP4) sets out a long-term strategy to deliver a sustainable, inclusive, and economically resilient transport system across the district. It adopts a place-based and vision-led approach, aligning with the Council's Local Plan and Environment Strategy.

Four Key Policies Supporting Economic Growth:

##### 1) Strategic Connectivity Enhancements

Investment in key road and rail corridors (e.g. M4, A34, Great Western Main Line) to improve access for businesses, freight, and commuters, supporting productivity and regional competitiveness

##### 2) Public Transport Improvements

Expansion of bus services, demand-responsive transport, and upgrades to railway stations (e.g. Newbury and Theale), making travel more reliable and accessible for workers and customers

##### 3) Infrastructure for New Development

Transport planning is integrated with housing and employment growth areas (e.g. south of Newbury, north-east Thatcham), ensuring new developments are well-connected and economically viable

4) Digital and Electric Mobility Investment

Support for electric vehicle infrastructure and digital connectivity (e.g. EV charge points, smart mobility), enabling modern business operations and reducing transport costs



**Annex D: The authors of this report.****Adrian Colwell**

Adrian is a consultant specialising in strategic land use planning and growth strategies. He works for both public and private sector clients. He is currently advising on new settlement proposals, urban extensions and major business park investments. He has led Local Plan preparation including the Cherwell, South Northants and West Northants Plans. He has also overseen economic development strategies, infrastructure programmes and led the Oxfordshire 2050 Plan.

He was 'Executive Director for Place and Growth' across Cherwell and South Northants Council. He was also Special Adviser to the First Minister of Scotland (2001-2007) where he led a series of reforms of transport and the planning system introducing the Scottish National Planning Framework in 2006. He worked at COSLA, the local government association for Scotland as Head of Policy, Central Regional Council and Wakefield Council on EU regional programmes.

He has also worked in the European Parliament, House of Commons and US House of Representatives. Adrian has published extensively and presented evidence to Parliamentary enquiries by the Scottish & European Parliaments, Select Committees of the House of Commons & House of Lords on regional development.

**Catriona Riddell**

Catriona is an independent consultant providing support on a wide range of spatial planning issues but specialises in strategic planning, working with a large number of local authorities across England, helping them develop their approaches to strategic planning and establishing new governance arrangements.

She has authored several reports on the subject of strategic planning, most recently, as part of a small team researching strategic planning practice, published by the Royal Town Planning Institute in September 2025. She is currently chairing a national Strategic Planning Group which is helping to develop the approach to a new generation of strategic plans. In 2025 Catriona was voted as one of The Planner's Women of Influence for her work in strategic planning.

Catriona is the Planning Officers Society's Strategic Planning Specialist and Vice Chair of the Town and Country Planning Association. In 2022 she was elected as a Fellow of the Royal Town Planning Institute and awarded an Honorary Doctorate from Oxford Brookes University for her contribution to planning.

She is a regular columnist for Planning Magazine, a Judge for both the Planning Magazine Awards and is a Commissioner on the Radix Big Tent Housing Commission. Catriona is also a presenter on the new podcast Planning After Dark.

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