

To: Cabinet

Date: 10th November 2025

Report of: Caroline Green, Chief Executive

Title of Report: Full response to Government Statutory Invitation to submit proposal for Local Government Reorganisation

Summary and recommendations	
Decision being taken:	To agree a preferred option for the creation of three unitary councils in Oxfordshire and West Berkshire as a proposal to Government for Local Government Reorganisation (LGR); and to submit the proposal to Government by the 28 November 2025.
Key decision:	Yes. FORWARD PLAN ENTRY
Cabinet Member:	Councillor Susan Brown, Council Leader
Corporate Priority:	Good, affordable homes. Strong, fair economy. Thriving communities. Zero Carbon Oxford. Well-run council.
Policy Framework:	The Government's Devolution White Paper published December 2024. The Council Strategy 2024 to 2028.

Recommendation(s): That Cabinet resolves to:
<p>1. Note and consider all three LGR proposals that have been developed by Oxfordshire and West Berkshire councils for the creation of unitary local government across Oxfordshire, which are presented in the appendices:</p> <p>Three unitary authorities (Greater Oxford, Northern Oxfordshire and Ridgeway) developed by Oxford City Council</p> <p>Two unitary authorities (Oxford and Shires, and Ridgeway) developed by West Oxfordshire District Council, Cherwell District Council, South Oxfordshire District Council, Vale of White Horse District Council and West Berkshire Council</p>

One unitary authority (Oxfordshire Council) developed by Oxfordshire County Council.
2. Agree that Oxford City Council's preferred LGR proposal is for the creation of three new unitary councils covering Oxfordshire and West Berkshire, as set out in Appendix One;
3. Delegate authority to the Chief Executive, in consultation with the Council Leader, to make any further minor amendments to the LGR proposal before its submission to Government in accordance with its prescribed process and requirements to ensure a fully compliant proposal, provided that such amendments do not materially affect the substance of the proposal. This may include the addition of explanatory graphics and case studies, and the design layout of the proposal.

Appendix No.	Appendix Title	Exempt from Publication
Appendix 1	Three unitary councils: Greater Oxford, Northern Oxfordshire, and Ridgeway	No
Appendix 2	Two unitary councils: Oxford & Shires and Ridgeway	No
Appendix 3	A single unitary council: Oxfordshire Council	No
Appendix 4	Risk Register	No
Appendix 5	Equalities Impact Assessment	No
Appendix 6	Appendix 3UA Oxford City Council LGR Proposal	No
Appendix 7	Appendix C Volterra Oxfordshire LGR Economic Growth Report	No
Appendix 8	Appendix F Oxfordshire Unitary Models – Waste, Recycling and Environmental Services Transformation Programme (WESP)	No
Appendix 9	Unmodified 3 unitaries proposal – not involving boundary changes	No

Background - Local Government Reorganisation

- On 16 December 2024, the Government published the Devolution White Paper. The paper sets out the most significant reforms to local government since the Local Government Act 1972, including the ambition to create unitary – or single tier – councils in all existing two-tier areas of England, including Oxfordshire.

2. Government has been clear that it sees local government reorganisation as an enabler to moving towards devolution of powers and funding to Mayoral Strategic Authorities.
3. On 5 February 2025, the Government issued to all councils in Oxfordshire a statutory invitation to prepare proposals for Local Government Reorganisation (LGR). Government requested that any councils wishing to submit LGR proposals should provide an Interim Plan updating on progress towards developing those proposals by 21 March 2025, followed by Full Proposals by 28 November 2025.
4. Government requested that councils within two-tier areas work together to develop a single Interim Plan for their area which may include more than one proposal in development. Oxford City Council worked with all other councils across Oxfordshire to develop three LGR proposals within a single interim plan.
5. Following submission of the Interim Plan, this report proposes the submission of a Full Proposal for the creation of three unitary councils in Oxfordshire and West Berkshire Council. This would see the existing City Council area form part of a larger Greater Oxford unitary council broadly aligned to the geography of the existing Oxford Green Belt. A second new unitary council with the working title of 'Ridgeway' would cover the rest of the existing areas of South Oxfordshire, Vale of White Horse and West Berkshire; and a third new unitary council with the working title of 'Northern Oxfordshire' would cover the entire existing area of West Oxfordshire and the rest of Cherwell.
6. Final proposals are to be submitted by 28 November 2025. The Government will formally consult on compliant proposals in spring 2026 with the Secretary of State deciding on which proposal is selected before summer parliamentary recess.
7. The Government has confirmed its intention that a new unitary council or councils will go live in May 2028 with shadow elections to the council or councils expected in May 2027.

Introduction

8. The Government wishes to see local government transitioning from the current two-tier system of district and county councils to new unitary councils. It also wishes to see councils working in combination to form Strategic Authorities at the sub-regional level where these don't already exist.
9. While the Government has not prescribed a specific model, local authorities are expected to collaborate on proposals that deliver efficiency, high-quality services, and stronger local engagement.
10. Government guidance sets out six key principles:
 - i) Establishment of single tier local government for the whole area, involving sensible economic areas and geographies that will increase housing supply and help meet local needs;
 - ii) Creation of unitary local government at the right size to achieve efficiencies, improve capacity and withstand financial shocks. New councils should serve a minimum population of 500,000, with exceptions considered where this ensures structures are locally appropriate, including for devolution. Decisions

will be made on a case-by-case basis. The proposed three-unitary model addresses this requirement;

- iii) Unitary structures must prioritise the delivery of high quality and sustainable public services to citizens;
- iv) Proposals should show how councils in the area have sought to work together in coming to a view that meets local needs and is informed by local views;
- v) New structures must support devolution arrangements;
- vi) Unitary structures should enable stronger community engagement and deliver genuine opportunity for neighbourhood empowerment.

11. Councils across Oxfordshire and West Berkshire developed three interim options:

- i) Three unitary councils covering all of Oxfordshire and West Berkshire (Greater Oxford, Northern Oxfordshire, Ridgeway) - developed by Oxford City Council.
- ii) Two unitary councils covering all of Oxfordshire and West Berkshire (Oxford & Shires, Ridgeway) - developed by West Oxfordshire District Council, Cherwell District Council, South Oxfordshire District Council, Vale of White Horse District Council and West Berkshire Council.
- iii) A single unitary council covering Oxfordshire (Oxfordshire Council) - developed by Oxfordshire County Council.

12. Interim proposals for proposals were published in March 2025, outlining the case for creating three, two and one unitary authorities. On 3 June 2025 all Oxfordshire's councils received feedback from the MHCLG on the interim proposals.

13. Since then, detailed work has been taking place to develop Full Proposal for the three options. All six Oxfordshire councils and West Berkshire Council have worked collaboratively to share data sets, provide teach-ins for officers across a range of specialist service areas and, where appropriate, to work together to engage with key stakeholder groups.

14. While officers are recommending the approval of the three unitaries proposal as for submission to Government, all three proposals are included in the Cabinet papers for Members to consider.

Three Unitary Authorities

15. The reorganisation of local government is a once in a generation opportunity. This is a key moment both locally and nationally to restore trust in local government by creating organisations which are fit for the future while reflecting the people and places they represent.

16. Introducing three unitary councils creates a unitary city on expanded boundaries, as well as northern and southern unitaries. This would include West Berkshire, which makes it a 'Type C' proposal under the Government's criteria: a single tier of local authority covering the whole of the county concerned, or one or more districts in the county; and one or more relevant adjoining areas.

17. It would also involve boundary changes, to create Greater Oxford on a footprint broadly aligned with the city's existing Green Belt. While Government has stated that it requires strong justification to depart from using existing district areas as the

building blocks for new unitaries, officers believe the Proposal fully meets this threshold.

18. Following MHCLG guidance, legal advice has been taken on how best to present the three unitaries proposal in a way that is consistent with the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007. This is because while the Statutory Invitation allows for LGR proposals involving boundary changes, the 2007 Act does not make provision for this and the English Devolution and Community Empowerment Bill 2025, which does include such provision is not yet enacted. The 2007 Act does allow the Secretary of State to make modifications to a submitted proposal.
19. Based on the legal advice received, this proposal is presented as a requested modification to the three unitary authorities proposal, as it better meets the criteria set out in the Government's statutory invitation in terms of financial sustainability, sensible economic areas, increased housing supply to meet local needs, robust public services, neighbourhood empowerment and supporting devolution.
20. It should be noted that MHCLG officials have advised officers that the majority of the 21 areas undergoing LGR include proposals that would involve boundary changes.
21. The proposal for three unitary authorities:
 - i) responds directly to Government's ambition to reshape local government around local priorities and opportunities: to unlock renewal of our public services, economy and society through deep connection to the distinct places and communities within our region. Three unitary councils are the best route to realise this vision and fully unleash the huge economic potential of our county, while retaining its strong character and environment.
 - ii) maintains and builds on the great strengths of Oxfordshire. It focuses growth of housing and employment growth around the city so that the wider area can access these opportunities and benefits whilst protecting and enhancing the character of the rural communities and countryside and delivering appropriate and proportionate levels of growth in those areas.
 - iii) has at its core councils, communities, and partners working together to co-deliver early intervention and preventative outcomes in efficient and inclusive ways. This is a huge opportunity to work with our residents, communities and partners on what matters to them most.
22. The LGR proposal strikes the balance of Oxfordshire's diverse needs in serving three distinct geographies and their communities across the county and into western Berkshire, which shares long historic links with southern Oxfordshire. It enables complementary and connected co-existence into the future across a geography that will be much more closely connected through the expected creation of a Thames Valley Mayoral Strategic Authority.

Case for three Unitaries

23. The proposal for three unitary authorities is fundamentally designed to deliver the best possible outcomes for the people, places, and economy of Oxfordshire. It is a direct response to the clear needs and ambitions of the area, providing a blueprint for a modern, effective, and equitable model of local government.

24. The three unitaries will deliver a future where Oxfordshire achieves its full potential across six critical dimensions:
- where **prosperity** is unlocked and shared through Oxford's economic engine;
 - where good affordable **homes** are available to all, and are delivered in a way that enhances sustainability;
 - where **quality of life** is enhanced through preventative, integrated services;
 - Where local community **identity** is strengthened rather than diluted;
 - where democratic **voice** is empowered at every level; and
 - where our local authorities are financially sustainable and **future-fit** and financially sustainable.
25. The case for three unitaries is built on the conviction that the right geography of governance is the foundation for success. This model uniquely delivers across these six elements by creating authorities of the right scale and character to meet Oxfordshire's diverse needs, while reconnecting the southern areas of the existing county and West Berkshire with which they share a long history.
26. It gives Oxfordshire the powers and space to drive transformational prosperity through new homes, jobs, and infrastructure, while ensuring the distinct identities of Oxford, Northern Oxfordshire and Ridgeway are preserved and strengthened through local decision-making. In doing so, it strengthens prosperity alongside health, wellbeing, and inclusion, restores clear and accountable leadership, and ensures that Oxfordshire's diverse communities are recognised and protected, not diminished by scale.

Engagement

27. Oxford City Council, as a proposer of a three unitary solution for Oxfordshire and West Berkshire, has undertaken a very extensive programme of engagement. This has involved many thousand interactions with residents and a broad range of stakeholders.
28. The engagement involved meetings with more than 75 stakeholder organisations including universities, developers, major businesses, parish councils, Members of Parliament, statutory bodies, and neighbouring local authorities.
29. A public survey of Oxfordshire and West Berkshire residents received 1,580 responses, of which 61% of respondents were from outside of the city. 340 residents were engaged through 11 drop-in events across Oxfordshire and one in West Berkshire. The Council's Residents' Panel was also surveyed, and there was a dedicated survey of businesses.
30. Community engagement and inclusivity were enhanced through targeted digital outreach, achieved more than 2.6million impressions and strong interaction across six platforms, with TikTok boosting youth engagement
31. The proposal was brought to the Group Leaders' meetings 6 times, and 4 all Member workshops were delivered as part of the Council's 3 Unitary Authority Local Government Reorganisation proposal. Each workshop focused on key themes, were led and facilitated by one of the Councils senior officers and were open to all Members.

- i) Housing delivery and economy
 - ii) Transport
 - iii) Social Services, communities and housing integration
 - iv) Governance and local representation
32. The input and contributions from all political groups were valued, ensuring a collaborative approach.
33. This comprehensive engagement programme has been central to the development of the three-unitary proposal. Feedback from this process demonstrates strong support for councils that are smaller, closer to their communities, and more responsive to local needs. Businesses highlighted the importance of proximity to the city and support for going beyond the Government's minimum targets for housing delivery.
34. Responses from residents, businesses, and partners consistently indicate a preference for a locally responsive governance model that:
- i) Delivers tailored services
 - ii) Strengthens local representation
 - iii) Balances economic growth with heritage and environmental priorities
35. This feedback underpins the Council's commitment to enhancing democratic participation through formal engagement structures that reflect both urban and rural perspectives. Each new authority will be rooted in its community, preserving local identity, enabling distinctive service models, and creating councils that residents recognise, trust, and feel part of.
36. The three unitaries proposal reflects these priorities by:
37. Preserving historic and cultural identities while aligning governance with community boundaries.
38. Empowering residents through stronger local voice and participatory governance.
39. Supporting economic growth and delivering affordable housing in sustainable locations.
40. Integrating health, education, and social care services.
41. Embedding principles of transparency, co-design, and tailored strategies for urban and rural needs

Other Options Considered

42. As part of the Council's work to develop a three unitary authority proposal, alternative options for Local Government Reorganisation in Oxfordshire were considered. The three alternative potential options are defined as follows:
- i) **Single Unitary Authority for Oxfordshire:** Amalgamation of all councils into a single unitary authority for the whole of Oxfordshire, where Oxfordshire Council is responsible for all services for Oxfordshire residents.
 - ii) **Two Unitary Authorities:** Replacing the current two-tier, six-council system with two unitary councils. Oxford and Shires Council created from the existing district councils for Cherwell, Oxford City and West Oxfordshire; and Ridgeway

Council, created from the existing district councils of South Oxfordshire, Vale of White Horse and the unitary council of West Berkshire.

- iii) **Three Unitary Authorities:** Introducing three unitary councils that create a unitary city on existing boundaries, as well as northern and southern Unitaries, also including West Berkshire. These would be Oxford, Northern Oxfordshire and Ridgeway. This is presented as a compliant proposal under the Local Government and Involvement in Public Health Act 2007.

- 43. The Cabinet may wish not to submit any LGR proposal to Government. Given Government's stated expectation that areas should submit proposals and that others in Oxfordshire are planning to do so, this option is not recommended.
- 44. Officer's recommendation is that the Cabinet endorse the preferred LGR proposal for the creation of three new unitary councils covering Oxfordshire and West Berkshire, on expanded boundaries, as set out in Appendix One for the reasons set out in this report and the Appendix One.

Corporate Priorities and Policies

- 45. The Council has set five strategic priorities it is working to achieve and will seek to progress further through local government reorganisation:

Good, affordable homes

Strong, fair economy

Thriving communities

Zero Carbon Oxford

Well-run council

- 46. Progression of reorganisation ambitions will provide a successor council or councils in Oxfordshire with broader responsibilities to progress social, economic, environmental and operational objectives on a greater footprint than the existing Oxford City Council.
- 47. Local government reorganisation will require partners to ensure democratic participation and voice is protected and where possible, strengthened as part of this process.

Financial implications

- 48. Financial modelling undertaken as part of the LGR proposal, and reviewed by Pixel Financial, has shown the transitional costs of merging seven existing local authorities into the proposed three new unitary councils will be £36.2million. This is in line with the level of transitional costs experienced in previous local government reorganisations.
- 49. The balance sheets of the current authorities were disaggregated into balance sheets for the 3 unitaries by a Finance Specialist at LGFin. This showed that, from a balance sheet perspective, the new authorities would have a sufficient level of assets and resources to be financially sustainable. Various measures of financial health show that the new authorities will start on a strong financial basis when compared with like authorities.

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51. Government has set a clear expectation that the transition costs of LGR must be met by local authorities themselves through efficiencies achieved.
52. Savings will arise from the move to successor unitary authorities from the removal of duplication and rationalisation across a range of services.
53. Strong balance sheets and significant future growth benefits underline the financial sustainability and resilience of the three unitary councils.
54. A manageable revenue position on formation of the unitaries based on disaggregation of their 2025-26 budgets.
55. Payback of transitional costs of £36.2 million and the transformation of services could be achieved within a 4-year period with- no need for any Government support.
56. By year 5 annual net savings of £48.6 million per annum will be achieved through transitional and transformational efficiencies
57. Oxfordshire County Council has already committed £10m from earmarked reserves for local government reorganisation and devolution, which can be used towards the cost of local government reform and devolution (£1.2m of which will be used for devolution). Oxford City Council's Budget 2026/27 is also expected to allocate a provision towards meeting LGR and devolution transitional costs, and it is expected that this pool of funding will be further supplemented by the District Councils to facilitate LGR and devolution activity.

Legal issues

58. The legal basis for the statutory invitation having been issued is the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007. This report, and the resulting decisions of Government, would signal the continuation of a significant legal and constitutional process. This is set out in detail within this report, with the Council proposing a Type C proposal.
59. Whilst District areas should be considered the building blocks for the proposals more complex boundary changes can be considered where there is strong justification. The Council has sought advice on the format and structure of its proposals. This has confirmed that:
60. A proposal within the existing boundaries and a request to government to modify/a supplementary proposal with boundary changes can be submitted together on a cross-reference basis.
61. A proposal involving boundary changes should include as much information as possible in order to ensure the "strong justification" is demonstrated in the submission.
62. The Secretary of State can then determine the submissions made in line with the above.

63. The decision regarding the submission of a proposal for a single tier of local government under Part 1 of the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007 ('the 2007 Act'), is an executive function, in accordance with Part 3: Responsibility for Functions as out in the Council's Constitution. This report and recommendation complies with the provisions of the Local Government Act 2000 and the Local Authorities (Functions and Responsibilities) (England) Regulations ('the Functions Regulations').
64. Upon submission to the Secretary of State, under Part 1 of the 2007 Act (Section 7) they may, by order, implement the proposal, with or without modification or decide to take no action. The Secretary of State may not make an order implementing a proposal unless he has consulted every authority affected by the proposal (except the authority or authorities which made it), and such other persons as he considers appropriate.

Level of risk

65. The Secretary of State can decide to take forward proposals that are submitted by areas with or without modification. Furthermore, the Government has the power to initiate and implement LGR, even if local councils choose not to propose changes.
66. It is, therefore, important to submit a compelling, evidence-based vision for LGR to the Government that fully reflects the needs, opportunities and challenges of Oxfordshire's diverse places and communities. (See Appendix Four)

Equalities impact

67. Equality, Diversity & Inclusion of local government services are key aspects of local government reorganisation and service transformation. LGR provides an opportunity to further enhance Equality, Diversity & Inclusion across public services and features prominently in our proposed service delivery model, particularly in structuring services around the principles of Early Intervention and Prevention. (See Appendix Five)

Carbon and Environmental Considerations

68. New unitary authorities will be responsible for meeting government targets on greenhouse gas emissions and setting and agreeing Net-Zero targets. As such this decision should not impact North Norfolk District Council's immediate Net Zero commitments.
69. However, during the time in which LGR is agreed and implemented, there is the potential for delays in the implementation of Net Zero actions for the improvement of community assets and buildings. Should decisions and investment be delayed due to uncertainty of LGR, progress towards Net Zero could be limited, and this would increase the need for accelerated action in the future to meet government targets.

Conclusion

70. The preferred LGR proposal for the creation of three new unitary councils covering Oxfordshire and West Berkshire, on expanded boundaries (as set out in Appendix One), delivers three local councils that:
- Are of significant size and scale.

- Have economic opportunities which can unlock new homes, new skills and new jobs for local people in the most sustainable way, anchored in the character of Oxfordshire's distinct historical city, towns and villages.
- Have different communities and geographies with distinct needs which are best served by locally tailored and delivered public services which ensure local voices are heard and identity retained; and
- Are financially sustainable, safe and legal, with real opportunities to drive efficiencies, savings and local benefit not only through economies of scale but meaningful reform which reduces demand for services and ensures the most people have access to fulfilling lives.

71. Officers are satisfied that the preferred LGR proposal for the creation of three new unitary councils covering Oxfordshire and West Berkshire, on expanded boundaries (as set out in Appendix One), fully meets the government criteria set out in the Statutory Invitation and includes an options appraisal of the other proposals, which score lower.

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Background Papers:

List the background documents and, if possible, link to them.

All background papers must be listed in accordance with the Local Government (Access to Information) Act and The Local Authorities (Executive Arrangements) (Meetings and Access to Information) (England) Regulations 2012. This includes, any material which discloses facts or matters on which the report or an important part of it is based and which have been relied on in the preparation of the report. Each document must be listed and a copy of each document made available to members and the public on request, (or they should be directed where to find it if it is already published on the Council's website). All confidential, exempt, copyrighted and published works are EXCLUDED from this requirement.

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| 1 | Interim Plan for Oxfordshire, March 2025 |
| 2 | Interim Oxfordshire and West Berkshire Three Unitary Option |
| 3 | Interim Oxfordshire and West Berkshire Two Unitary Option |
| 4 | Interim Oxfordshire Single Unitary Option |

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