

To: Council
Date: 14 January 2026
Report of: Chief Executive
Title of Report: Oxford City Council Local Elections 2026

Summary and recommendations	
Decision being taken:	That Members consider and debate the issues set out in this report in relation to the Oxford City Council 2026 local elections following a letter from Minister McGovern to the Leader of the Council seeking her views on the postponement of the elections and if this could release essential capacity to deliver local government reorganisation
Key decision:	No
Cabinet Member:	Councillor Susan Brown, Leader and Cabinet Member for Partnership Working
Corporate Priority:	A Well Run Council
Policy Framework:	None.

Recommendation(s): That Council resolves to:
1. Consider and debate the issues set out in this report in relation to the Oxford City Council 2026 local elections following a letter from Minister McGovern to the Leader of the Council seeking her views on the postponement of the elections and if this could release essential capacity to deliver local government reorganisation

Information Exempt From Publication	
N/A	N/A

Appendix No.	Appendix Title	Exempt from Publication
Appendix 1	Letter from Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government to Leaders of councils	No

	with elections in May 2026 where proposals for reorganisation have been submitted and decisions not yet taken 18 December 2025	
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Introduction and background

1. On 18 December 2025, Alison McGovern MP, Minister of State for Local Government and Homelessness, wrote to council leaders with elections in May 2026 where proposals for Local Government Reorganisation (LGR) have been submitted and decisions not yet taken.
2. The Minister invited Council Leaders to write to the Secretary of State “by midnight on Thursday 15 January, to set out your views on the postponement of your local election and if you consider this could release essential capacity to deliver local government reorganisation in your area and so allow reorganisation to progress effectively”. The letter is attached separately at Appendix 1.
3. The Secretary of State has indicated she “is only minded to make an Order to postpone elections for one year for those councils who raise capacity concerns”.
4. The content of the letter to the Secretary of State is a matter for the Leader to determine.
5. This Special Council Meeting has been called under section 11.5 of the Constitution. All members of the Council have the opportunity to express a view about the government’s invitation.

Postponement and implications for Council capacity

6. The Government has indicated that it will consult on LGR proposals received from Oxfordshire in early February 2026 for seven weeks. The likely earliest date a decision could be taken by the Secretary of State on a preferred reorganisation option is in May 2026.
7. If LGR proceeds as planned and on the timetable the Government has presented, the May 2026 elections would be the last elections for Oxford City Council before it is wound up – its assets, liabilities and responsibilities transferred to a new unitary authority. Elections to the new shadow unitary authority would take place in May 2027, to oversee the set-up of the new authorities which would come into being on 1st April 2028.
8. In the view of the Chief Executive / Head of Paid Service, council staff have been working on the basis that the 2026 local elections would be going ahead as scheduled and is confident that sufficient resources are available to enable the elections to be delivered securely and successfully.
9. The Chief Executive / Head of Paid Service is also confident that should the elections proceed as planned, sufficient resource and leadership capacity would be in place to ensure officer’s ability to deliver LGR successfully in our area. This may impact on officer’s capacity to deliver other areas of the Council’s work.
10. If local elections planned for 7 May 2026 were postponed:

- The Council would save around £250,000 which could be used to support LGR transition.
- There would be increased capacity for the Council's senior management to focus on the winding up of Oxford City Council, and design of the new unitary authority for which elections are scheduled next year. Government has set a challenging timetable for LGR and has required that councils keep to a minimum the external resourcing they utilise to deliver this. As a result, we have had to commit a significant amount of senior capacity from across the Council in the development of our proposal for three unitary councils across Oxfordshire and West Berkshire. This is placing a greater burden on the City Council relative to other Oxfordshire councils – as Oxfordshire County Council is much larger with more resources to put behind its 1 unitary authority (UA) proposal, while the 2UA proposal was produced by four district councils and an existing unitary – which are able to pool resources.
- We would have the advantage of enabling an earlier start to work in preparation for elections to the new shadow authority in May 2027. The 2027 elections will be complex and resource intensive as under our three unitary proposal they involve boundary changes, re-warding, the creation of new polling districts and the consolidation of electoral rolls. In addition, all town and parish councils in South Oxfordshire, Vale of White Horse and Cherwell districts and one third of the town and parish councils of West Oxfordshire will also be up for election in 2027. In total there will be over 200 town and parish council elections. Given the complexity and scale of work required to prepare for elections in 2027, there would be an advantage to starting that work now, rather than post-May 2026.

Other considerations

11. Under the terms of Section 24 of the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007, our Council will come under increasingly tight restrictions on expenditure, awarding contracts, asset disposals, senior recruitment and all other material decision-making over the coming months. The focus of the Council post-May will be on enabling the process of close down of the authority rather than setting new direction in policy or service delivery.
12. Under the requirements of LGR, as we close down Oxford City Council, the shadow unitary council, which will be elected in 2027, must be involved in all key decisions on spending, recruitment, strategies and policies. This includes permission from the shadow authority on any capital spend over £1m and revenue spend over £100,000.

Financial implications

13. The council's consultation budget proposes an allocation of £2m to support the work on LGR and transition to a new authority. The cost to the council of running the elections in 2026 is estimated to be £250,000 which could be reallocated to support transition.

Legal issues

14. The letter from Minister McGovern is to Council Leaders seeking their views on postponement of elections in their area and the impact on capacity to deliver LGR. The Leader is seeking views on the possibility of delaying the election to inform her response to the Government's request.

15. Under section 87 of the Local Government Act 2000, the Secretary of State has powers to vary by order the year of the annual elections of a local authority and it is understood that this is the power the Secretary of State will use to lay any Order to change the date of the Council's elections. Although the Council has been invited to provide its views, it is for the Secretary of State to defer the elections by Order. Until confirmation is given, and legislation is laid, the start of the election timetable at the end of March means that the Council's election team will need to continue planning for 7 May until officially told otherwise.
16. Members are asked to note that even if the local elections in May 2026 are postponed there may still be a need to hold by-elections where the rules require.

Level of risk

17. If Government were to be unable to stick to its published timelines for LGR, there is a risk of delay to the elections to the new shadow authority in 2027 which could result in a longer postponement of elections.

Equalities impact

18. It is important to note that a potential postponement of the 2026 elections would affect every resident in Oxford by removing an immediate opportunity to vote. A high-level assessment of the impact of a postponement of the local elections in 2026 considered whether any groups would experience disproportionate disadvantage. Potential negative impacts have been assessed as low or neutral overall, but a risk has been identified that extending the tenure of current members may not reflect the views of those who have recently reached voting age or newly arrived voters.

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Background Papers: None