Divisions Affected – All

CABINET
16 December 2025

Local Government Reorganisation: One Oxfordshire Proposal
Report of Place Overview & Scrutiny Committee

RECOMMENDATION

1.   The Cabinet is **RECOMMENDED** to —

   a) Note the recommendations contained in the body of this report, and

   b) Agree that relevant officers will continue to update Scrutiny for 12 months on progress made against actions committed to in response to the recommendations, or until they are completed (if earlier).

REQUIREMENT TO RESPOND

2.   The Place Overview and Scrutiny Committee met on 12 November 2025 to consider the report on Local Government Reorganisation which was then considered by Cabinet on 13 November 2025. The Committee submitted its recommendations at that meeting and notes Cabinet's response as approved at that meeting, accepting all recommendations in full. In accordance with section 9FE of the Local Government Act 2000, there is no further need for Cabinet to respond although Cabinet is still recommended to agree that relevant officers should continue to update the Committee.

INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW

3.   The Committee had requested a report on Local Government Reorganisation (LGR) and the Council's One Oxfordshire Proposal for its meeting on 12 November 2025. This was in advance of it being considered by Cabinet and prior to the deadline for submitting it to Government, which was 28 November 2025.

4.   The Committee would like to thank Cllr Liz Leffman, Leader of the Council, Lorna Baxter, Executive Director of Resources and Section 151 Officer (Deputy Chief Executive), Anita Bradley, Director of Law and Governance and Monitoring Officer, Rob MacDougall, Chief Fire Officer and Director of Community Safety, Helen Mitchell, Programme Director: Local Government Reorganisation, Robin Rogers, Director of Environment and Place, and

Susannah Wintersgill, Director of Public Affairs, Policy and Partnerships, for attending to present the report and to answer the Committee's questions.

SUMMARY

5.   The Leader of the Council introduced the report, outlining that there were three proposals for submission: a single unitary authority from the County Council, a two unitary model from the district councils, and a three unitary model from the City Council. She urged a focus on making the strongest case for a single unitary, particularly regarding service integration, councillor numbers, and the impact on key services such as adult social care, children's services, and transport. Comments were invited to shape the final proposal.

6.   The Programme Director explained that three options for Local Government Reorganisation had been developed, following Government's invitation to council leaders in Oxfordshire to respond. Engagement with the public and partners focused on refining the proposals, emphasising simplicity, minimal disruption, and the importance of strong local governance, particularly the role of town and parish councils. The rationale for a single Oxfordshire-wide authority included continuity of the border, integrated services, and efficient transition without fragmenting existing provision. The Programme Director highlighted aims to build on best practice and to enhance service delivery, especially in homelessness and housing.

7.   The Executive Director of Resources and Section 151 Officer presented the financial aspects of Local Government Reorganisation, noting that PwC's independent evaluation showed guaranteed savings from reorganisation because of less duplication. There would also be additional, less certain savings from transformation. She stressed that the single Oxfordshire authority was deemed the most financially resilient and lowest risk, according to the Financial Resilience Index, particularly given likely funding cuts under the Fair Funding Review. She further explained that adopting a single unitary model would lead to minimal changes in council tax levels, making it a more stable option compared to the two- or three-unitary proposals.

8.   The Committee had a wide-ranging discussion involving council housing and housing debt; West Berkshire Council; the size of One Oxfordshire; representation on a future Mayoral Strategic Authority; the powers and responsibilities of area committees under the proposed model; staff retention and culture; the Fire and Rescue Service; democratic responsibility and boundary reviews; town and parish councils; local government finance; local services and net zero; stakeholder feedback; public engagement and communications; the process after submitting the initial proposal.

9.   Ultimately, the Committee made three recommendations which it submitted to Cabinet the next day, on 13 November 2025, and it provides the rationale for those here. The recommendations were about communications, about local governance, and about member engagement.

RECOMMENDATIONS

10.   The Committee recognises that the purpose of engagement with residents before the Council finalised its proposal was not to campaign for its preferred model but, rather, was to seek input on that preferred model. The Committee is aware that the Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity[1] sets out constraints on how councils are meant to engage and notes the Minister of State's recent letter in which she reminds councils that they should "take particular care around the principles of objectivity and even-handedness, and the appropriate use of publicity."[2]

11.   The Committee notes without comment that some councils had seemingly sought to campaign for their preferred option during the engagement period. That is a decision for those councils. The Committee is not calling for the Council to contravene the guidance but it is calling on the Council to be more engaging in the future.

12.   If the Council is to engage people with its proposal for LGR, it seems self-evident to the Committee that its presentation of that proposal should be engaging. Whilst the digital campaign had reached over 284,000 residents, the Committee considered that the presentation of the engagement campaign had been regrettably lacklustre. During the meeting, one member highlighted that the proposed submission to Government itself was colourful and that it was both interesting and engaging. The Committee's view is that the earlier engagement was not.

13.   The Committee recognises that the Council had intended its public engagement to be factual and to raise awareness and does not disagree that this was appropriate. It does, though, consider that – in future communications regarding LGR – it should work to ensure that, however factual and nuanced they are, they should be accessible, engaging, and interesting.

Recommendation 1: That the Council should ensure that future public communications regarding Local Government Reorganisation are engaging, accessible, and interesting.

14.   The Committees notes that the Government's view is that LGR "should enable stronger community engagement and deliver genuine opportunity for neighbourhood empowerment."[3] The Committee explored at some length how that is envisaged to work with the One Oxfordshire proposal and scrutinised carefully section 6.3 'Neighbourhood governance' of the proposal. Given that it is a proposal, rather than a plan, not all of the detail members considered important was yet available. The Committee notes that the "final number, name, geography and design – including any decision making, budget and

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[1] https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a75a04aed915d506ee80433/1878324.pdf

[2] https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/691dde2f513046b952c500af/Letter_to_Leaders_on_Publicity_Code_and_Local_Government_Reorganisation.pdf

[3] https://mycouncil.oxfordshire.gov.uk/documents/s78659/Annex%204%20-%20JM%20LGR%20invitation%20to%20leaders%20Oxfordshire%20Final.pdf

grant giving functions – of area committees will be subject to early engagement and consultation with residents, town and parish councils and public sector partners."[4]

15. Members were keen to stress the importance of these area committees having meaningful authority. At the same time, there was concern that they could introduce additional administrative layers and potentially create inconsistencies in decision-making. The Committee is aware that area committees are expected by Government in all proposals and accepts that it is not unreasonable for the Council to have not yet decided in full how it would propose that the new authority should use them.

16. However, the Committee is of the view that – as part of its submission to Government – the Council should provide further attention to how these would work to ensure effectiveness and accountability as well as to minimise overlap or confusion.

Recommendation 2: That the Council should give greater attention to neighbourhood governance, and particularly to Area Committees, within its submission to Government.

17. One point of discussion amongst members was that a meeting of Council to discuss and debate LGR had not happened. Views on the pros and cons of various proposals are inevitably nuanced and there are several different views on the Committee. Some members are instinctively in support of the One Oxfordshire Proposal; there is also support for the two unitary model as well as for the three unitary model.

18. The Committee recognises that the decision to submit the proposal and the response to the statutory consultation once the Government launches that are an Executive function and thus that it is for Cabinet to make those decisions. The Committee also considers it appropriate for the proposal to be scrutinised closely in committee. The Committee is pleased that there has been engagement with members informally.

19. Despite that, though, the Committee is strongly of the view that all members of Council should have been able to debate the topic at a meeting of Council prior to Cabinet submitting its proposal to Government. The Committee considers it regrettable that did not happen, not least given that other local councils had that opportunity.

20. Whilst that opportunity is no longer available, the Committee was heartened by the Leader's remarks in Committee that she considered it appropriate for Council to give its view during the statutory consultation period. The Committee noted the Monitoring Officer's comment that she would herself need to be satisfied that the motion put to Council was appropriate in terms of

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[4] One Oxfordshire Proposal, p125
https://mycouncil.oxfordshire.gov.uk/documents/s78656/Annex%201%20-%20OneOxfordshireProposal.pdf

decision-making or view-expressing but the Committee was content that this was achievable.

21.   The Committee believes it to be imperative that Council has the opportunity to debate Local Government Reorganisation before the response to the statutory consultation is submitted.

Recommendation 3: That the Council should ensure that Council is given the opportunity to express its view on Local Government Reorganisation during the statutory consultation.

FURTHER CONSIDERATION

22.   The Committee may consider this topic again during this municipal year, depending on the timeline of the statutory consultation.

LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

23.   Under Part 6.2 (13) (a) of the Constitution Scrutiny has the following power: 'Once a Scrutiny Committee has completed its deliberations on any matter a formal report may be prepared on behalf of the Committee and when agreed by them the Proper Officer will normally refer it to the Cabinet for consideration.

24.   Under Part 4.2 of the Constitution, the Cabinet Procedure Rules, s 2 (3) iv) the Cabinet will consider any reports from Scrutiny Committees.

Anita Bradley, Director of Law and Governance and Monitoring Officer

Background papers: None

Other Documents: None

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