Interim Plan Update to MHCLG - March 2025
Oxfordshire and West Berkshire Three Unitary Option

A vision for a Greater Oxford unitary

Oxford needs city scale governance to fulfil its huge potential. Its knowledge and innovation sector is internationally renowned, with the potential to drive not just local but national economic growth. The Government's Growth Commission for Oxford, and the Oxford-Cambridge Growth Corridor recognise this.

The creation of a Greater Oxford unitary council is the right level of governance to unleash growth that will benefit both local communities and UK plc. It would have four distinct and linked missions:

1. Enabling the rapid expansion of Oxford's key knowledge economy sectors to create a globally significant ecosystem
2. Accelerating housing delivery to unlock the economy, tackle ingrained inequality and reduce strain on public services
3. Empowering communities in Oxford and its surrounding area to benefit from regeneration and a more innovative approach to public service delivery
4. Providing a powerful voice at the Mayoral Strategic Authority table to ensure delivery of central Oxfordshire's wider infrastructure needs

A Greater Oxford unitary would provide governance to support and enhance the identity and potential of the urban heart of Oxfordshire, with unitaries to the north and south recognising their own market town and rural character.

This three unitary proposal creates sensible economic areas, each with an appropriate taxbase, and does not create an undue advantage or disadvantage for one part of the area. The proposal also creates sensible geographies that will help to significantly increase housing supply and meet local needs.

Intro and context

Oxford is central to the economic success of the region and must play a key part in the national agenda for growth. Yet the city has grown significantly beyond its administrative boundaries, it has very limited space for new business sites, and a severely constrained ability to provide more affordable housing for a growing workforce.

A new unitary council representing the city conurbation and its surrounding area has a key role to play in enabling Oxford to meet its full potential for UK plc. Such an authority can give clear focus to the challenges of a rapidly growing economy, the needs of a high-density local population, and deliver service efficiencies through local knowledge, partnerships and adaptability. It would also retain Oxford's distinct city identity to better meet its needs while enabling stronger community engagement and neighbourhood empowerment across the Greater Oxford area.

At the same time new councils covering the surrounding areas to the north and south of the city would be better placed to manage their different economic strategies and housing growth: A North Oxfordshire Council, comprising much of the existing West Oxfordshire and Cherwell districts, and a Ridgeway Council comprising of much of the existing South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse districts combined with existing West Berkshire unitary.

This proposal also considers the impact of unitarisation on devolution in our area. Discussions across the region indicate support for a strategic authority to cover a minimum of Oxfordshire and Berkshire, and potentially Swindon. In our proposed option for local government, Oxfordshire ceases to be the prism through which local government challenges and successes are defined. A Greater Oxford authority would always be rooted in the wider county, but removing the administrative county boundary would redefine the scope of shared opportunity, challenges and success. Partnerships and sectoral alignments would run across the wider strategic geography, for both urban and rural areas, shifting the paradigm for leaders in local and strategic authorities.

Size and boundaries

Oxford is a high growth city, held back in growth and housing terms by current boundaries which in turn holds back regional and local growth. Therefore, we believe the unique opportunity for a Greater Oxford Council to unlock housing and economic growth presents a compelling exceptional case in respect of the Devolution White Paper guidance on new unitary authorities needing a population of 500,000 or more.

We are considering a number of spatial approaches to creating a central Oxfordshire authority that will enable us to deliver the economic, population and housing growth that can unlock our potential for the UK economy. Subject to final determination of boundaries, this would see a population of between 320,000 and 495,000 within the proposed new council area.

Our approach will define an area that has sufficient population for local services sustainability, and a cohesive identity that gives residents a sense of belonging. We are developing a number of options for the optimum settlement for the city and the rest of the county, together with West Berkshire.

All options require boundary changes from the very under-bounded existing City Council, which covers a significantly smaller area than the urban settlement. Oxford is bordered by three other district councils, and close to a fourth – West Oxfordshire.

The limited available space in Oxford means the City Council is unable to meet all future city housing development need within its own boundaries. Currently all four neighbouring districts are required to contribute to the city's unmet housing need. For decades this has been an issue of disagreement between the local planning authorities played out through successive local plans and more recently a failed attempt at a joint statutory plan.

Our expectation is that a Greater Oxford authority would require boundaries to be redrawn with at least three, and possibly all four, districts in order to provide sufficient

space to meet ambitions for growth while delivering its own housing needs over the next 50-100 years. The new boundaries will present an opportunity to strengthen local, regional and national economies.

Creation of a central Oxfordshire unitary area must take account of key spatial considerations: the natural landscape and topography of a city and its satellite settlements within river valleys and among hills; the Green Belt that recognises Oxford's green and blue setting and hinterland and its need to 'consume its own smoke'; and the Knowledge Spine and opportunity to consolidate agents of change in central Oxfordshire's knowledge intensive employment and research locations.

Population estimates in the table below show ranges for the current and projected populations by 2040 for Oxford and the proposed northern and southern unitaries, associated with different boundary options. Greater Oxford's numbers have been calculated using the government's new Standard Methodology plus additional growth options. The neighbouring unitaries show population growth to 2040 using the new Standard Method only to calculate housing delivery.

Given the strength of the sub-regional economy empowered under a new Mayoral Strategic Authority, we believe the two adjoining unitary authorities covering Northern Oxfordshire and the Ridgeway would also be viable. They would have populations of between 326,000-342,000 and 424,000-562,000 respectively by 2040.

Population ranges	Current population	2040 population
Greater Oxford	217k-333k	**320k-495k**
Northern Oxfordshire (reboundaried Cherwell+West)	252k-264k	**326k-342k**
Ridgeway (reboundaried South&Vale + West Berks)	326k-433k	**424k-562k**
Southern Oxfordshire (reboundaried South&Vale)	159k-266k	**207k-346k**

Identity and belonging
We recognise that an expanded footprint will require a reconsideration of how we understand our communities and our area.

Oxford's boundaries have changed many times over the centuries to incorporate villages that still retain their own identity. Iffley Village became part of Oxford in 1928, Wolvercote in 1929, Blackbird Leys was built in the Green Belt in the 1960s and incorporated in 1991 into the city along with Old Marston, Risinghurst and Littlemore.

The conurbation continues to expand, and the city exerts a gravitational influence on surrounding areas which make use of both the work and leisure facilities it offers. Redefined boundaries will crystallise this into direct and mutual responsibility. We will not simply be asking communities to join the city, we will ourselves be joining well

established communities. We will need to draw on the wider identity that exists within areas beyond the city to help them become part of a cohesive whole.

Oxford is already a very diverse city that has built strong links across our communities, and we will build on this ability to recognise and harness diversity to develop pride in belonging to different but connected groups.

Given Oxford's housing market, connections between the city and the nearby places like Kidlington and Abingdon have increased. Yet, distances across Oxfordshire as a whole are substantial, and while the experience of people within Oxford has a lot in common with those who are a short public transport ride into the city; there is much less obvious connection with those in places like Cropredy or Henley.

The creation of new unitary authorities covering Northern Oxfordshire and the Ridgeway would enable them to build on the distinct identities of their existing market towns, new development sites and the historic connections that linked Berkshire and southern Oxfordshire.

Unlocking economic growth
Cities are engines of growth and critical to economic success at a regional level. Oxford, as a globally significant centre for life science and other cutting edge knowledge industries is also critical to the national growth agenda. But that growth has been held back by the current boundaries, with insufficient development space for new labs and housing within the city, and different priorities in neighbouring areas.

A central Oxfordshire unitary council based around the city would provide a clear, focused partner for Oxfordshire's knowledge spine, working with the universities, industries, the MSA, the Oxford-Cambridge Growth Corridor and central government. Greater Oxford would be released from the different economic alignment and growth ambitions in the rest of the county.

There is a huge unmet demand for lab and innovation space to support these sectors, in and around the city, as the strong market pricing in the area shows. The proposed new authority would create significant new sites for economic development, in addition to that already defined in Local Plans.

Creating these new economic centres adjacent to the city, served by public transport infrastructure reduces the likelihood people would need to commute by car, increases the space utilised for development rather than car parking, and limits the growth in road traffic. The anticipated Cowley Branch Line reopening for passenger services is a further driver of connection and growth between housing, skills and business location.

The proximity for knowledge exchange, supply chains and supporting services creates an innovation ecosystem that can accelerate inclusive economic growth. Transport links via East-West Rail will enhance the connection to similar innovation ecosystems around Cambridge and Milton Keynes.

While there is a focus on the opportunity for innovation businesses, we recognise the need for growth to benefit across the whole of the population. There will be further opportunities for local and regional supply chain businesses, high demand for construction and retrofit skills, and new demand within key sectors such as hospitality and leisure to support an expanded workforce and pace of business. We anticipate more opportunities for skilled non-graduate employment, and entry-level opportunities that offer genuine career development.

In terms of the opportunity and impact for regional growth, the government has been clear that this is the key priority of devolution– something that chimes with our ambitions for a unitary council around the city. Nascent Mayoral Strategic Authorities need growth capable unitaries to achieve their ambition. An MSA will benefit significantly from having Oxford at the table, providing a distinct pro-growth voice from Oxford as one of the key engines of growth across the region.

A strategic authority needs a balance of representation for population size and rural versus urban areas. Existing unitary authorities in Berkshire include strong urban economies in Reading and Slough, and a future strategic authority will benefit from having a key city economic partner in Oxford.

Economic growth potential

Oxford is uniquely placed globally in terms of its own strengths but also its untapped potential as part of the wider golden triangle of Oxford, Cambridge and London. The proposed Greater Oxford Council would cover an area that includes many of Oxfordshire's high value enterprises, including start-ups, spinouts, high growth businesses, and a handful of new 'unicorns' (with a market capitalisation in excess of £1bn).

A report produced by the Oxford-Cambridge Supercluster Board in 2024 highlighted that unlocking potential growth across the region could make it the 'crown jewel' of European science and innovation and could benefit the UK by as much as £50bn per year by 2030. (Oxford-Cambridge Supercluster Board, July 2024).

The Oxford Growth Commission and its Delivery Plan came forward due to the shared ambitions of the Government, Oxford City Council and both universities. A Greater Oxford Council would use its convening and championing role in partnership with the Oxford Growth Commission to unlock the city's economic growth potential – upgrading the Thames Water Sewage Treatment Works, reopening the Cowley Branch Line to rail passengers, resolving electricity grid capacity constraints and establishing a TIF (Tax Increment Financing) for Oxford West End.

While the development of significant additional lab and innovation space within the city is already identified in the emerging Local Plan 2042, an additional 5.9m–9.6m sq ft of R&D space and 2.1m–3.2m sq ft of other commercial space could be created on new sites within the Greater Oxford Council area. According to Volterra, this is expected to generate between 17,900 and 29,100 new jobs and an additional GVA of £1.2bn–£2.0bn per annum.

Our track record – supporting an inclusive economy
- Oxford is a GVA net contributor to the Exchequer, generating £7.6 billion of the total Oxfordshire £23.5bn GVA   - Oxford ranked as top performing city out of 50 UK cities in PwC's Good Growth for Cities Index in 2023 and 2024 – a measure of an inclusive economy   - Oxford is a leader at attracting international investment, ranked fifth in the UK for attracting overseas investment   - Commitment of £125m from the Crown Estate partnered with Oxford Science Enterprises and Pioneer Group to deliver 100,000 sq ft city centre life sciences, technology and innovation space

Housing delivery

Oxford is one of the least affordable cities in the country, and has a significant housing need, in excess of the new Standard Method. Our current, tightly drawn boundary prevents us delivering the land for the growth the city so desperately needs. Surrounded by Green Belt and authorities reluctant to build anything more than the minimum amount required, Oxford will never truly realise its full potential.

The way to unlock this is for an ambitious and pro-growth authority to take responsibility for supporting growth on expanded boundaries, delivering strategic Green Belt releases – involving where possible "Grey Belt" land - to meet all of the city's housing needs in excess of the Standard Method. Not only will this support city growth, but it will also ensure that there is no unmet need exported to neighbouring unitary authorities to accommodate, leaving them in full control of their own developments and housing needs.

With the Greater Oxford Council identifying and delivering additional growth within expanded boundaries, we will ensure that land is used efficiently, increasing density where appropriate to produce well-planned new communities. We anticipate that city adjacent sites will build to higher density low-rise development, while more rural areas will follow a lower density model.

In some cases that will involve increasing the housing density for already planned urban extensions. In other cases, it could see some of those already identified sites prioritised for new lab space and commercial development with new Grey Belt sites released for housing.

By 2040 an additional 43,000-67,000 new dwellings can be brought forward – a significantly higher level that in any existing or emerging Local Plans. This would include a significant proportion of new council housing (currently 40% social housing and 10% affordable housing under Oxford's 2036 Local Plan). This would help tackle a situation that sees Oxford average house prices 13 times average salary, and some 3,500 on Oxford City Council's housing waiting list. It would also open up the opportunity to deliver new council housing to areas around the city which currently have a limited supply of social housing.

Our track record – housing delivery and housing management
- Since 2018/19, Oxford City Council has delivered 1,075 affordable homes, including 699 homes at social rent and 311 shared ownership homes   - Our 2025/26 budget includes funding for nearly 1,600 new council homes in the next eight years.   - Government-acclaimed beacon local authority for homelessness prevention outcomes   - National leader in Housing First delivery, where we are on course to have 60 homes in the city by March 2026   - Only council in England to having introduced a licencing scheme for all private rented homes to drive up private rental standards

Financial Sustainability

Oxford City Council has robust financial sustainability based on strong financial management and medium-term forecasting, a strong track record in delivering efficiency savings and an insourcing structure that enables dividends and commercial income from essential services, and a strategic asset management approach.

We call this the Oxford Model: using our wholly owned companies and assets to achieve the Council's policy aims and generate income to support a wide range of services.

This has seen the Council innovate its organisational structure over the last decade establishing three wholly owned companies: a teckal company ODSL delivering statutory services; a sister company ODSTL providing externally traded services; a housing development company OX Place building and selling market, shared ownership affordable and social dwellings within Oxford and the wider geography; and two Joint Venture partnerships with the private sector.

This will put a Greater Oxford Council in a strong position to provide its enhanced level of services to a wider geography including those neighbouring areas that would form part of a new unitary authority.

Oxford City Council has neither considered nor required Extraordinary Financial Support or been subject to any Best Value measures.

A strong financial outlook

Oxford City Council's income streams are on course to increase by an estimated £8 million per annum over the next four years. By 2029, the Council's historic property portfolio is profiled to produce c £17.5 million pa which is mostly within the city centre.

The Council is in the process of delivering city centre regeneration through our wholly-owned companies and our partnerships, producing better outcomes for residents and businesses, together with additional housing and business floorspace. Delivering new housing across a wider geography through the Council's OX Place and ODS subsidiaries, we would not only secure much needed additional new homes but also provide further revenue back to a Greater Oxford council to support the needs of an expanded population.

The delivery of additional housing will also serve to reduce the significant housing pressures all local authorities are facing, while helping support the NHS through earlier patient discharge – as already successfully demonstrated through our partnership with Oxford University Trust hospitals. Ultimately, a Greater Oxford unitary council will be better able to join up of services, using its housing function to target outcomes on reducing inequality and delivering much greater savings to the public purse.

Our track record – robust financial management
• £15 million of dividends paid to Oxford City Council since the incorporation of its companies with future annual dividends estimated at around £5 million over the next 4-year period – equivalent to 10% of its annual total revenue income.
• £17 million efficiencies achieved over the past decade with no compulsory redundancies, including 15% savings in management costs.
• A £146 million historic property portfolio enabling regeneration in the city centre with other partners. This property portfolio comprising largely commercial premises allows the Council to combine income maximisation with its placemaking role as guardian of the city centre.
• Use of prudential borrowing powers to increase borrowing to an estimated £780 million in the next four years to fund investment in Oxford: including two new community centres, upgrading our existing 8,000 housing stock, and enabling the construction and acquisition of 2,200 additional dwellings.
• New ten-year leisure contract provides the council with approx. £1.3m p.a. management fee and investment of over £3 million in the facilities

Transforming public services

A Greater Oxford unitary will build on the City Council's existing culture of high standards where we see our role as a partner of choice, pioneer and activator – as recognised in the 2023 LGA Peer Review. The LGA commended the Council's approach to co-design and delivery in partnership with anchor organisations at all levels, from grass roots to major institutions. It also identified a high-performance culture with strong staff retention, and a workforce strategy based around ensuring the Council is representative of the communities we serve.

A Greater Oxford Council will be well positioned to use this successful collaborative approach to deliver whole system transformational integration of lower and upper tier public services. Our focus on preventative action - linking multiple community-based and partnership-based initiatives around tackling health inequalities and isolation, supporting the wellbeing and development of young people, and ensuring community safety – can ultimately deliver more significant savings to the public purse than those achievable simply through reorganisation of local authority structures and removal of duplicative roles.

Oxford City Council has a clear focus on always getting it right first time and continues to transform its operations and service delivery. We have identified key areas where we believe this approach on an expanded city geography can deliver service transformation. This includes the application AI and robotic processes to speed up processing time and increase efficiency.

Increasing digitisation of services and reskilling of the workforce will change how we use data, provide a 24/7 front door to services, and enable citizen self-service - in line with the transformation being see across the private and public sector.

Waste
Oxford City Council, Cherwell District Council and West Oxfordshire District Council as waste collection authorities are already working in collaboration, and with Oxfordshire County Council as waste disposal authority, to identify service transformation and integration of waste operations across their shared geography. Initial estimates suggest efficiencies of £1-3 million pa are achievable and should be realisable regardless of the final shape of unitarisation in Oxfordshire.

Social care
In the provision of social care, the priority for a Greater Oxford council will be to design in prevention and early intervention as standard, to reduce pressure on the health and care system. Government itself has acknowledged the current social care system urgently needs reform, nevertheless a new Greater Oxford unitary would be closer to home for communities and neighbourhoods in central Oxfordshire and better empowered to deliver integrated, citizen-focused services and reduce demand.

Taking a whole systems approach, we would be a partner and activator for prevention focused on good housing, good environment and good community. We would provide leadership for economic inclusion that reduces inequality, focused on living wages, affordable housing, efficient transport, skills and learning. We would build on our record of activating community resilience through youth support, grass roots grants, active communities and cross-community inclusion. This approach of providing hyper-local support optimises people's access, experience and outcomes, and helps support the sustainability of services.

Alongside the prevention focus, we are working with the District Councils Network to explore the best models for the delivery of adult and children's social care to avoid unnecessary fragmentation of services. This could involve shared services, or a

Trust/Community Interest Company commissioning model, and certainly better integration into existing education, health and community services.

The table below outlines the current adult social care costs across Oxfordshire. These costs are based on current structures and services, but as outlined above a three-unitary option that enables more local design, integration and delivery of services could enable new approaches that recognise the specific needs in a more tightly defined geography. On its current boundaries, Oxford has a low proportion of older people and children compared to both county and national averages, and benefits from an urban population's proximity to services. This translates into lower costs to serve which are likely to be lower than average even with inclusion of areas around the city within a new Greater Oxford unitary authority.

Adult social care costs per person					
	Number of people enrolled	Adult population (18 and upwards)	Percentage of people enrolled (as % of total adult population)	Total Cost	Average Cost per person enrolled
Oxford	**3704**	**133,209**	**2.78%**	**£30,812,213**	**£8,319**
Rest of Oxfordshire	**14604**	**445,379**	**3.28%**	**£152,852,565**	**£10,466**
Cherwell	4138	126,946	3.26%	£41,083,554	£9,928
South Oxfordshire	3532	118,037	2.99%	£36,470,918	£10,326
Vale of White Horse	3657	109,145	3.35%	£37,091,122	£10,142
West Oxfordshire	3277	91,251	3.59%	£38,206,970	£11,659

Education
Despite being a world centre for learning, Oxford underperforms within Oxfordshire and compared with statistical neighbours and national trends in terms of pupil outcomes in its schools. Closing the attainment gap must be a priority for the new education authority.

Engagement with school leaders suggests there is a positive case for change with a more place-based approach. We need a much clearer focus on tackling the social determinants of poor pupil outcomes in the urban setting, and the particular needs of children of deprived backgrounds, or with SEND. Such an approach has been demonstrated to work in a small geographic area through the East Oxford Community Impact Zone. Set up in 2018 as a partnership involving Oxford City Council, the County Council, Thames Valley Police, Oxford Student Hub and Lankelly Chase, the CIZ delivers family-centred support to tackle persistent school absences. This work clearly links to SEND and Education and Health Care Plans,

with interventions going much wider than the education system to include issues like housing, cost of living support, affordable transport and opportunities outside school.

We would further develop non-formal education programmes, including youth services and the city's Cultural Education Partnership to support learning and education-engagement.

We would also bring our experience as a developer and an asset manager to improving the school environment, with access to a share of the £143m Section 106 funding for Oxfordshire.

Transport
The transport system in central Oxfordshire is in crisis - there is a clear priority to get traffic moving in the city and to better connect surrounding areas. Urgent action is needed to address chronic congestion and provide real alternatives to the car, to help unlock the potential of the city and its hinterland.

While the MSA will take a much-needed strategic view of transport infrastructure delivery across the region, a new Greater Oxford unitary council would take a fresh approach to local transport issues. Additional bus services to villages around the city, increased active travel, improved traffic flow and reduced pollution will be pursued by integrating planning and place-based development responsibilities with transport and highways delivery within the new council.

The focus will be on listening to local residents and businesses and designing an effective transport mix into and around the city. Partnerships with transport companies, anchor institutions and communities will help create transparency, share challenges and develop shared solutions – as are already being progressed through the Zero Carbon Oxford Partnership and the Oxford Greenways initiative.

Our track record – service transformation, partnership and innovation
• Set up an Active Lifestyles Commissioning Group to give the ICB, Public Health and Adult and Children's Social Care a voice in how a new 10-year leisure contract helps to tackle stubborn health inequalities
• Delivered a minimum of £600k pa additional funding for community prevention work, including £1.3m for a new Youth Hub in area of highest deprivation
• Key older-people health prevention programme results in 51% fewer GP appointments, 23% fewer falls and 27% reduction in out-of-hours/NHS111 calls for participants
• Key active family programme shows 52% of participants report increased activity levels, 55% of children report increased happiness in first six months
• Provide award-winning non-statutory service for c6000 young people in areas of deprivation through Youth Ambition programme
• Led on strategic rail schemes including proposal for recommissioning Cowley Branch Line for city passenger journeys, and upgrading Oxford station
• Council of the year for climate leadership 2023 in both LGA and MJ awards

- Partnered with Government and EDF Renewables on Europe's most powerful EV charging hub at Redbridge Park & Ride to activate transformation in EV take-up and better city journeys
- Partnered with Government, universities and Low Carbon Hub to deliver Project LEO - one of the UK's most ambitious, wide-ranging and innovative energy trials, seeking to accelerate the UK's transition to a zero-carbon energy system

Indicative transition costs

Pixel Financial has estimated realistic transition costs of between £5-10 million per district and existing unitary (West Berkshire) moving into three new unitary authorities, citing the comparable experience of local government reorganisation in Northamptonshire.

Oxfordshire County Council's Cabinet has agreed to the creation of an earmarked reserve with an initial £5m allocation to help meet the costs of LGR. At its meeting in March 2025, the County Council Cabinet will be recommended to increase this reserve to £10m. It is expected that this pool of funding is supplemented by District Councils to facilitate essential LGR and devolution activity.

Costs are expected to be recouped over the medium term through efficiency savings. We have a strong record of achieving efficiency savings, and we have good confidence that the required level of savings are available.

Efficiency saving opportunities

Oxford City Council continuously drives efficiencies of between 5-10% per annum through the medium-term financial planning process. Further ongoing savings of around £4.4 million per annum have already been identified over the next 4-year period, through organisational redesign.

The creation of a Greater Oxford unitary council will create opportunities for significant additional efficiencies, as lower and upper tier authority operations are integrated. Pixel Financial estimates suggest further annual efficiencies of between £18 million and £27 million are achievable (savings based on expenditure only, not income) through the creation of three unitaries across Oxfordshire and West Berkshire. This differs from estimates produced by PWC that suggest efficiencies of -£4m would arise from a three unitary model in Oxfordshire.

Councillor numbers

As a unitary council on new boundaries, we would work with the Boundary Commission on the appropriate level of councillor representation. Looking at equivalent city unitary authorities such as Derby, Swindon and Nottingham, we estimate that the number of councillors for Greater Oxford would be in the region of 60-90 councillors based on population estimates. This delivers around 40% reduction in the number of councillors at local authority level.

Local empowerment

The Greater Oxford area would be supported by an expansion of Oxford City Council's existing Localities-based coordination of service integration and delivery, with dedicated officers covering groups of neighbourhoods. Alongside this new delivery model, we would want to focus on meaningful empowerment through 'double devolution' at a city area scale through parishes and other community forums.

There are currently only four parish councils within the city. A Greater Oxford unitary council would look at the best way to deliver full local democratic engagement, working with the Oxfordshire Association of Local Councils, to ensure the individual voices of all neighbourhoods can be heard. Some areas of the city have previously rejected the creation of parish councils, so the model could be to create Community Councils or something similar to the Neighbourhood Board approach, bringing together residents, local businesses, grassroots campaigners, workplace representatives, faith, and community leaders and those with a deep connection to their area.

How the proposal supports devolution ambitions

Devolution discussions across the region are progressing positively, with full support for Oxfordshire and Berkshire as the core of a new Mayoral Strategic Authority.

It is essential Oxfordshire has a strong growth-focused voice in this important regional governance alongside those of the other economic hubs of Reading, Slough, Bracknell Forest and potentially Swindon. Oxford is the major hub of science and innovation in the anticipated MSA geography, and on expanded boundaries will have the ability to support regional growth plans. There are already partnerships and vehicles to deliver infrastructure and housing that could be scaled wider in the region, and a Greater Oxford council would have the ability to bring forward measures that support key sectors across the wider region.

A Greater Oxford council would enable democratic decision-making to reflect the communities of interest that exist within and around the city, which depend on Oxford's success and are naturally strongly aligned to the government's agenda for economic and housing growth. The MSA will need unitaries with this economic growth capacity to achieve its ambitions, and as a centre of global investment in science and innovation Oxford will be an engine of our MSA's success. Without this there is a risk that both the MSA and Oxford-Cambridge Growth Corridor plans are frustrated by those opposing higher than minimum levels of growth.

Representation on the Mayoral Board also needs to be balanced across population and geography. A three-unitary option for Oxfordshire would give appropriate balance to Berkshire's multi-unitary representation. The three authorities have distinct demographics and economies that deserve their own representation. One voice for Oxfordshire, which will demographically lean to rural areas, cannot give fair and balanced strategic representation.

Local engagement

As a proposer of a three unitary solution for Oxfordshire and West Berkshire, Oxford City Council's Leader, CEO, and Council Leadership Team members have already been actively engaging with multiple local stakeholders, including:

- Universities Vice Chancellors
- Oxford University Colleges
- Developers
- Major businesses and Oxford Strategic Partnership members
- Oxford Civic Society
- Parish Councils Forum
- Trade Unions
- Anneliese Dodds MP - and briefings with other MPs are planned

A high level survey of the Oxford Residents Panel – a representative sample of Oxford's population managed on the Council's behalf by the independent polling company Beehive – had 266 responses. The Feb 2025 survey found that:

- 82% think the current 2 tier local government arrangements could be improved; 7% disagreed
- 67% think councils should not be too large, so they better meet the needs of local residents; 11% disagreed
- 61% think a single council covering the greater Oxford area would best meet the needs of residents; 17% disagreed
- 37% think a single council covering the whole of Oxfordshire would best meet the needs of residents; 40% disagreed

There has also been wider engagement with the LGA, District Councils Network, and with other cathedral cities, similar to Oxford that are putting forward proposals for city unitaries on expanded boundaries.

Indicative costs implementation planning

Where possible we are using existing officer time, and supplementing with specialist skills that are not available within the council. Allocated £100k in the budget for financial year 2025-26 to resource the development of this proposal. Initial costs in 2024-25 are estimated in the region of £40k.

As these are significant changes for the delivery of public services across Oxfordshire and beyond, it is essential that decisions on structures for Local Government Reorganisation are properly backed up by evidence. A significant programme of work is required to fully develop the proposals, however, if it is possible to conclude this in advance of the November deadline set by Government, then subject to the agreement of all Oxfordshire local authorities, we would favour an earlier submission.

Working together

The councils across Oxfordshire and West Berkshire have put in place arrangements to support joint working and data sharing for Local Government Reorganisation (LGR). Wider complementary arrangements are also in place for all Oxfordshire,

Berkshire and Swindon councils for data sharing over proposals for the creation of a Mayoral Strategic Authority.

Much of the information about the proposed unitaries that would exist to the north and south of Greater Oxford can be found within the separate outline Two Unitaries proposal that is being submitted in parallel with this Three Unitaries proposal.

While much of the LGR work is being coordinated through joint meetings of Chief Executives and Leaders of Oxfordshire Councils, the Oxfordshire Leaders' Joint Committee will also provide an important forum for ongoing discussions.

The development of full proposals for the three unitaries option including the Greater Oxford unitary will require the continuation of such working arrangements, ahead of submission of full proposals later this year.