

Divisions Affected- all

PLACE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

24 September 2025

LOCAL GOVERNMENT REORGANISATION PROGRESS UPDATE

Report of the Executive Director of Resources, Section 151 Officer

RECOMMENDATION

1. The Committee is RECOMMENDED to:

- A. To note the progress of Local Government Reorganisation (LGR) at the County Council;
- B. To critically evaluate the progress of the LGR programme, key areas of the proposal of a single unitary council for Oxfordshire, and the engagement pursued against the guidance in the statutory invitation;
- C. To make recommendations to Cabinet as the Committee sees fit.

Executive Summary

- 2. The [English Devolution and Community Empowerment Bill](#) was published on 10 July 2025. The Bill re-affirmed the government's goals to achieve the most significant reforms to local government since the Local Government Act 1972.
- 3. This report provides an update on the work the council has undertaken in response to the aforementioned Bill and the statutory invitation for LGR in Oxfordshire, having received feedback from the Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG):
 - (a) Background and contextual information
 - (b) Benefits of the 'one unitary' proposal for Local Government Reorganisation (LGR) in Oxfordshire
 - (c) Assessment against Statutory Invitation requirements for LGR
 - (d) Engagement with residents and other relevant stakeholders that has occurred and is being pursued
 - (e) Next steps in the LGR process – both in local and central government.
- 4. An update is being provided well ahead of a scheduled decision to allow for due consideration and scrutiny by the Committee and any recommendations to be made to Cabinet in a timely fashion. The council deems this especially important considering the wide-ranging implications of LGR on the County Council and for the delivery of public services across the area, in line with the legislative provisions set out in the Local Government Act 2000 for Overview and Scrutiny Committees.

Background

5. The Government has set out its intention to significantly reform, at great pace, local government structures and implement devolution across England.
6. The Government wishes to see successor councils emerge from the current two-tier system of district and county councils and that those successor councils and the existing unitary - structured councils of England must join a Strategic Authority.
7. Since the receipt of the statutory invitation, all councils across Oxfordshire have been working together on initial options accompanied by a single interim plan. This plan for Oxfordshire's proposals was submitted to Government on 21 March 2025. The plan set out three proposals:
 - (a) A single unitary council for Oxfordshire – this is the County Council's preferred option.
 - (b) Two unitary councils – Oxford and Shires Council (covering the geography of Oxford City, West Oxfordshire and Cherwell District Councils) and Ridgeway Council (covering the geography of South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse District Councils and West Berkshire Council).
 - (c) Three unitary councils – Greater Oxford Council (covering the geography of Oxford and its Green Belt); Northern Oxfordshire Council (covering most of the geography of Cherwell and West Oxfordshire districts); Ridgeway Council (covering the geography of most of the existing South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse districts combined with existing West Berkshire unitary based on the proposals being developed by those councils, but with those villages within the Green Belt closest to the city becoming part of Greater Oxford).
8. As option (a) is the only one being actively developed by the county council, this report will primarily discuss a single unitary council for Oxfordshire. Respective councils in Oxfordshire and West Berkshire are developing their preferred options and the County Council is collaborating with them to supply relevant data and test our thinking for public service reform via a series of teach in sessions.
9. The Government has stopped short of instructing places on how to reorganise local government, and arrive at successor councils, but instead has been clear that areas must work together on a proposal/s for the benefit of residents.
10. The Government has set out guidance within the statutory invitation to support local government reorganisation. That guidance includes:
 - (a) Size/council footprint to achieve efficiency saving – new Councils as a guiding principle must be a minimum of 500,000 or more with exceptions on a case by cases basis;
 - (b) Deliver high quality and sustainable services;

- (c) Enable devolution to a Strategic Authority;
 - (d) Empower neighbourhoods and;
 - (e) Be informed by a level of engagement.
11. The Government has requested that Councils commence work to reorganise in two phases. The first phase was to share outline proposals to Government by 21 March 2025. Feedback was received on all three proposals. The second phase is to commence the development of final proposals, and the Government expects all Councils to respond by no later than 28 November 2025.
 12. The Government has not suggested that the features of the guidance, evidenced in paragraph 10 above are weighted in any way, to prioritise one over the other. **Therefore, the ultimate decision will be the Secretary of State's after the submission on 28 November 2025** based on the relative merits of each proposal and matters arising from the statutory consultation which the Secretary of State, via their department, will launch, manage and may report the findings of.
 13. Against this backdrop, the Council is also progressing the establishment of a Mayoral Strategic Authority and has held several meetings with Councils across Berkshire and Swindon. The direction of travel for Government, through the Devolution White Paper and the Devolution and Community Empowerment Bill is that all Councils must form part of a Strategic Authority.
 14. The delivery of LGR and devolution in tandem with maintaining delivery of vital services and forthcoming national policy change across SEND and the NHS to name two examples presents significant risk and opportunity for the people of Oxfordshire. Whilst the county council are at an early phase of both local government reorganisation and devolution, Members must note that delivering on the decisions of national government with regard to the future shape of local government and devolution will be a significant and costly undertaking.
 15. In preparation for this, the County Council took a decision earlier this year in which to set aside a budget of £10m to fund these changes but it will not cover the costs in full. Increases to that budget will be needed to cover further costs.
 16. At the time of writing this report, we are awaiting work from PWC to detail the financial model of a future Council for Oxfordshire. This will, as a minimum, include savings from consolidating into a single council, the costs of transition, the length of time it will take to pay back the costs of transition (known as 'the payback'), the projected costs of disaggregating services currently delivered at a county level and any indicative savings arising from transformation of this nature. This information will be issued to the Committee by addendum prior to the Committee's meeting.

Benefits of the Single Unitary Council Proposal

Closer to Communities

17. The three pillars that have guided the development of the proposal are

- Closer to communities
- Connected
- Cost effective

The outcomes of our engagement, shown later in this report, showed a clear response from the public to minimal disruption arising from local government reorganisation. To that end, the County Council will focus on ways in which it can embed this into its proposal.

18. A brand-new council provides the opportunity to fundamentally revisit delivery, decision making and democracy at different spatial levels to ensure efficacy and equity using, as a starting point, fifty years' experience of delivering services across Oxfordshire.
19. The County Council recognised at the earliest stage that there would be a perception that a single council for Oxfordshire could be seen as 'remote' or 'distant' from its communities or be seen as 'too big' even though it has been delivering the overwhelming majority of services by expenditure – currently at 85% - since 1974.
20. It is worth noting that any successor Council will be larger – whether that be as a result of a change of geography, population, service portfolio, risk, financial exposure or a blend of all those elements.
21. As a result, the County Council commissioned the Centre for Governance and Scrutiny to undertake a piece of work to seek to identify ways in which to localise a future Council or Councils. Their report outlined a framework for arriving at ways in which to ensure any successor Council or Councils can ensure it remains connected to communities and can discharge future functions relating to neighbourhood governance. That report is enclosed at **Annex 4**. District Council colleagues and councillors, as well as a range of partners contributed to this work and have received a copy of it.
22. A new council has an opportunity to further enhance the role of Town and Parish Councils, and the County Council is working with Oxfordshire Association of Local Councils (OALC) to consider this in its single unitary council proposal via a Town and Parish Framework which builds on the existing Town and Parish Charter. It should be noted that Government have shared that places '*need to think very carefully about establishing new Town and Parish Councils*' - that they are not a solution to neighbourhood empowerment and have shared correspondence with Councils to suggest that '*every local authority hardwires local community engagement into their own structures, preferably through neighbourhood Area Committees*'. That said, the city status of Oxford is held by the City Council and it is essential that this status is not lost through transition. There is precedence for this and that must be learned from.
23. The continuity for the City must be provided by the establishment of Charter Trustees and this extends to all other civic and ceremonial roles and artefacts

held by all councils due to be succeeded as a result of local government reorganisation.

24. A new Council has the opportunity to establish a set of Area Committees to enable community activity and strengthen a future Councils' understanding of place and places. By doing this, it will enable elected Members to be at the centre of their communities driving local intelligence gathering and action in concert with residents, the voluntary and community sector, town and parish councils and other stakeholders.
25. A new Council would need to have more members than the current County Council but fewer than all Councillors across Oxfordshire presently. Current estimations are below based on the Local Government Boundary Commission's Guidance.

Council Size	Relative Cost	Relative Workload	Relative Representation
69	Very Low	Very High	Very Low
95	Low	High	Low
101	Low-Medium	Medium-High	Low-Medium
108	Medium	Medium	Medium
119	Medium-High	Low-Medium	Medium - High
138	Very High	Very Low	Very High

Connected

26. A single unitary council option provides a clear, single front door which creates ease of access for residents, businesses and investors to the full suite of council services.
27. It allows for the continuity of Oxfordshire as a defined place and governed as so with coterminous administrative and ceremonial boundaries. This will significantly reduce disruption that Local Government Reorganisation will bring.
28. It creates opportunities to cluster, on a functional basis, connected services e.g. housing, transport, planning, economic development and energy, alongside, public health, wellbeing and leisure, parks and open spaces. This provides opportunities to deliver services fairly across the entire county, with local divergence where needed. This will enable deeper integration with partners such as Thames Valley Police and the NHS and provides the ability to progress public sector reform at scale.
29. This option allows a strong, single voice for the county to be heard locally, regionally and nationally and with the incorporation of Area Committees, enable a new Council to hear, more sharply the issues and needs of local communities.

Cost Effective

30. This section will be covered by the addendum to be published prior to the Committee's meeting.

Assessment against Statutory Invitation requirements for LGR

31. The high-level criteria of the statutory invitation are shown at **Annex 2**. This element of the report will account for how the County Council is progressing against those criteria.

Size/council footprint to achieve efficiency savings

32. As outlined in the statutory guidance, proposals for unitary authorities should aim to encompass a minimum population of 500,000. The population of the county of Oxfordshire is c.750,000 and thus comfortably meets this requirement and provides the scale required for resilient service delivery. Research conducted by the County Council Network repeatedly finds that scale is a key determinant necessary for unitarisation of local authorities to be most effective.
33. Consolidating the full suite of local government services into a single unitary structure at scale will create stronger, simpler services for the whole of Oxfordshire. By doing this we will enrich vital services and ensure cost effectiveness, confidence and continuity in local government for the long term.

Deliver high quality and sustainable services

34. A single unitary across Oxfordshire will facilitate the progression of public sector reform more rapidly, with deeper partnerships across the length and breadth of the county, the region and the country. This is a result of focusing available time on improving services and not the process of disaggregating services across new organisations or moving them into new models of care provision.
35. LGR will create a vital step change in how the council funds, designs and reinvests in services. This will create a broad mission across the county and beyond to connect talent with opportunity and drive better outcomes and life chances for present and future generations.
36. Crucially the single unitary model is best placed to secure the continuous provision of adults and children's social care, safeguarding, some homelessness and SEND services. Not least because many of these services are already delivered at the county level by the county council and thus the transition to a unitary county wide authority will minimise disruption.
37. Additionally, in regard to housing and homelessness, bringing teams and systems together under a single county unitary will create efficiencies and opportunity to use best practice from the legacy councils and elsewhere across a wider scale. A unitary authority can better align public health, social services, housing, and homelessness to deliver more effective solutions, be a

single point of coordination for the voluntary sector and the Integrated Care System and use the stability of strong financial position to plan and deliver for the long term.

Enable Devolution to a Strategic Authority

38. The creation of a Mayoral Strategic Authority (MSA) in the region is about maximising the potential of each area to contribute to a shared vision of progress. By leveraging the unique assets and capabilities in the region, the MSA will be well-positioned to address regional challenges, attract investment, and create a sustainable future for all residents. The focus on inclusive growth ensures that the benefits of this initiative will be felt across all communities, promoting equity and enhancing the overall quality of life.
39. Across the Oxfordshire geography, whilst Oxford is the only settlement formally designated as a city, many of the county's towns such as Banbury, Bicester, Didcot and Witney are economic powerhouses in their own right - hosting major employers, innovation hubs, and transport infrastructure. A single voice for Oxfordshire – given it is a highly connected place – is essential and only a single unitary for Oxfordshire will be hard wired to have that voice.
40. A single unitary council for Oxfordshire provides unified leadership and strategic coherence. It removes the friction and deadlock often seen between sovereign organisations. Decisions are made by one elected body, supported by a single officer corps, enhancing accountability and reducing the potential for inertia.
41. Inclusive growth requires scale. A single county unitary can operate across a broader geography, enabling it to tackle systemic issues such as health inequalities, housing shortages, and employment gaps with greater agility and impact. Oxfordshire functions as an integrated socio-economic ecosystem, with interdependent communities. Transport connections are present, but the overall network is not strong enough.
42. A single county unitary offers a unified planning authority, capable of delivering coherent spatial strategies that align with MSA ambitions. It ensures that planning is not only strategic across the MSA but also internally consistent within the unitary boundary. This coherence is essential for delivering infrastructure, housing, transport and economic services in a way that supports inclusive growth.
43. A county-wide unitary integrates urban and rural priorities. It will ensure that inclusive growth reaches all communities, not just those within city limits. This is particularly important for MSAs, which aim to reduce regional disparities and promote equitable development.

Empower Neighbourhoods

44. Oxfordshire County Council's established community wealth building approach reconnects local people with the places that generate wealth, using progressive procurement and fair employment practices supported by anchor institutions. Through partnerships with organisations like Centre for Local Economic Strategies (CLES) and the Community Action Group Network, the council has developed a deep understanding of the local economy and empowered grassroots leaders to drive social and environmental change.
45. The council can build on the existing community wealth building infrastructure as a unitary, bringing decision making closer to communities and unlocking further community control. The Centre for Governance and Scrutiny (CfGS) has suggested that devolving aspects of community wealth building to locality-led groups could be a means of local democratic engagement in a unitarised Oxfordshire.
46. LGR also opens up opportunities to expand Community Asset Transfer (CAT), to the benefit of our residents and communities. The county council properties that can be transferred currently are limited, but unitarisation would mean more properties could be included, as well as making our approach to CAT across the county more uniform. This would benefit our community enterprise sector by making it simpler and easier to take advantage of asset transfers around the county.
47. CfGS' research has also suggested establishing area committees in new Unitary authorities to both empower neighbourhoods and address issues surrounding 'remoteness' of large county wide unitary authorities. This model has been taken on in Buckinghamshire:
48. Buckinghamshire County Council established area committees, known as Community Boards, as part of a move to a unitary authority structure. The aim was to bring the council closer to local communities, enhance engagement, and provide a mechanism for local decision-making and partnership working.
49. The boards were intended to be local engagement opportunities, not just grant funders, and to facilitate collaboration between the council, councillors, and local stakeholders.
50. Buckinghamshire's area committees (Community Boards) have become a key mechanism for councillor leadership and community engagement, evolving from grant-giving bodies to enablers of local partnership and action. Their success relies on strong member involvement, effective officer support, and ongoing adaptation to local needs and resources.

Be informed by a level of engagement

51. Internal and external engagement pursued by the council has been guided by the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) which, in a letter dated [6 February 2025](#) outlined the following guidance for engagement:
- (a) “Proposals should include evidence of local engagement, an explanation of the views that have been put forward and how concerns will be addressed.”
 - (b) “We also expect local leaders to engage their Members of Parliament, and to ensure there is wide engagement with local partners and stakeholders, residents, workforce and their representatives, and businesses on a proposal.”
 - (c) “The engagement that is undertaken should both inform the development of robust proposals and should also build a shared understanding of the improvements you expect to deliver through reorganisation.”
52. Additional guidance was given in a letter dated 3 June 2025 and addressed to all districts and the county council in Oxfordshire, states:
- (a) “It is for you [relevant local council] to decide how best to engage locally in a meaningful and constructive way with **residents, voluntary sector, local community groups, parish councils, public sector providers, such as health, police and fire, and local businesses to inform your proposals.**”

Internal Engagement

53. Since June 2025, there has been internal engagement on LGR and the single unitary council for Oxfordshire proposal. This engagement includes the following:
- (a) Senior managers (briefings and active involvement in programme);
 - (b) Colleague inclusion networks and values champions;
 - (c) LGR and Devolution ‘ambassadors’ from each directorate within the council;
 - (d) All councillor briefings and briefings of Political Group Leaders;
 - (e) Audit and Governance Committee (July 2025);
 - (f) This Committee (Place Overview and Scrutiny)

External Engagement

54. External engagement has also been pursued across residents and wider stakeholders in Oxfordshire from June to September 2025.

This engagement includes the following:

- (a) Residents and Wider Stakeholders: Online open survey (hosted on [Let’s Talk Oxfordshire](#)), LGR questions in Residents’ survey, street

interviews, school engagement and an external commission of independent focus groups.

- (b) Local businesses: LGR business engagement sessions, virtual town hall, written correspondence (i.e. letters)
- (c) Local MPs: Joint meetings for all Oxfordshire MPs, one to one meetings and written correspondence (i.e. letters)
- (d) Local Councils: Oxfordshire Association of Local Councils (OALC) 'Talking Tables' session, meetings with individual town councils, a public meeting convened by the Chair of Beckley and Stowood Parish Council, and a workshop for 'larger' Town Councils and the Oxford City Parishes is being planned;
- (e) Voluntary and Community Services: virtual Q&A session hosted by Oxfordshire Community and Voluntary Action (OCVA) with representatives from all three proposals present as well as individual meetings where requested;
- (f) Public sector providers: meetings with Thames Valley Police and Crime Commissioner, written communication (i.e. letters) with NHS commissioners and providers

55. Further information on the engagement undertaken is detailed in **Annex 3**.

Incorporation of feedback into proposal

56. The feedback gathered from these engagements (especially concerns identified) has been incorporated into the council's preparation of the final proposal for central government.

Strengths	
Cost Efficiency	Cost efficiency is a key benefit identified by residents, especially potential to reduce duplications and streamline service delivery.
Simplicity and accountability	Residents and stakeholders alike identified that one council for the county will simplify interaction with local government. Additionally, accountability was linked to simplicity as residents and stakeholders will be able to raise concerns without being passed between councils as often occurs in the current system.
Concerns	

<p>Loss of local knowledge, balance of urban/rural priorities and size (too big)</p>	<p>Research was commissioned for the CfGS to explore how neighbourhood governance - the ways in which decisions are made closer to communities - might evolve following local government reorganisation in the county. This research has been taken on board to address the concerns around local knowledge, balance and size and considered in the development neighbourhood governance. More specifically, there is active consideration of provisional 'area committees' made up of neighbouring councillors to enhance the links between residents and the unitary council.</p> <p>A new Parish and Town Council framework will enhance joint working and explore future opportunities for the design and delivery of services.</p> <p>The creation of Charter Trustees will protect city status and ceremonial assets and roles.</p>
<p>Training of staff/councillors to deal with broader remit</p>	<p>A future Council would need to develop and deliver a new training programme for future unitary councillors.</p> <p>The County Council has already developed a network of LGR and Devolution staff ambassadors. Work will start shortly on how we can use that network to develop familiarity with other services and, potentially, colleagues across Oxfordshire. Regardless of the outcome of LGR – workforces will be coming together in some way and therefore there should be a shared interest in early planning for a transition to any new future.</p>
<p>Cost and disruption of transition</p>	<p>LGR is mandated by government, so continuing the status quo is not an option.</p> <p>The one unitary proposal is designed with the aim to minimise this disruption as</p>

	<p>much as possible as services delivered by the County Council, children's and adults social care, public health, education, SEND, transport, trading standards etc, will be maintained. Cost information will be provided in the addendum to this report.</p>
Fewer local contact points/staff	<p>A single unitary council will provide simplified contact points with all services provided by one organisation, across the county.</p> <p>A single council offers the ability to undertake a significant review of our estate across Oxfordshire – ensuring council buildings fit for the future with opportunities to co-locate services with the wider public sector and the voluntary and community sector.</p>

Next Steps

57. Government expects final proposals for LGR by 28 November 2025. The County Council's Cabinet will meet on 13 November to agree its preferred option for reform. This Committee will meet on 12th November to be assured, or not, that any recommendations arising from this session have been integrated.
58. Following the 28 November deadline, central government will then pursue a statutory consultation 'in the new year' on any LGR proposals that are chosen for consideration.
59. A provisional timeline for Government process following the 28 November deadline is laid out in the letter sent from the Minister to relevant council leaders on the [25 July 2025](#) **Annex 5**.
 - (a) **Government Consultation** 'could be launched' in early 2026 and 'would likely close after the local elections in May' [2026] Note this timeline is entirely controlled by central government.
 - (b) Following this, **secondary legislation** would then be presented to the House of Commons after Summer recess 2026 (dates to be determined)

- (c) Once the legislation has gone through and been approved by the Houses of Parliament **elections** to the new authorities could occur on 6 May 2027 with new authorities going live on 1 April 2028

Corporate Policies and Priorities

- 60. The Council has agreed strategic priorities in which to:
 - (a) Play our part in a vibrant and participatory local democracy.
 - (b) Invest in an inclusive, integrated and sustainable transport network.
 - (c) Work with local businesses and partners for environmental, economic and social benefit.
 - (d) Tackle inequalities in Oxfordshire.
- 61. Progression of reorganisation ambition, in tandem with devolution, will provide a successor Council or Councils with new responsibilities in which to progress social, economic and cultural objectives.
- 62. 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

- 63. The County Council has set aside £10m one-off funding towards the costs of Local Government Reorganisation and Devolution in Oxfordshire. The financial implications of the proposal for one unitary authority will be shared within an addendum to this report to be published prior to the meeting.
- 64. Kathy Wilcox, Head of Corporate Finance and Deputy s151 Officer.

Legal Implications

- 65. Local government reorganisation is governed by the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007. The Secretary of State can at any time invite proposals for a single tier of local government from local authorities and also has the power to direct authorities to submit proposals.
- 66. The Council has been invited to submit a proposal for local government reorganisation in accordance with Section 7 of the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007 and has been asked to submit a finalised plan by 28 November 2025.
- 67. The approval of the Council's final plan proposal is an executive function in accordance with the Local Government Act 2000 Section 9D(2).

68. Following submission of the final plan by 28 November 2025, should the government decide to implement any proposal, legislation will have to be agreed by parliament prior to moving to elections to new “shadow” unitary authorities. At this stage it is envisaged that these elections would be held in May 2027.
69. A shadow authority is one that is elected to carry out the functions of a new unitary council until that authority formally comes into effect. This is commonly called “vesting day.”
70. The best value duty is contained in s3 of the Local Government Act 1999 as a result of which the Council is under a duty to make arrangements to secure continuous improvement in the way in which functions are exercised, having regard to a combination of economy, efficiency and effectiveness. This report and the addendum sets out within it the financial and other implications of the recommended final plan which Members are advised to consider in full.
71. Comments checked by:
- Jay Akbar
Head of Legal & Governance Services, Jay.Akbar@Oxfordshire.gov.uk
(Legal)

Staff Implications

72. The County Council has already invested in the delivery of LGR and Devolution through the appointment of a very small staff team which will expand as the Council makes active preparations to deliver on both these transformative changes to local government in Oxfordshire and the Thames Valley.
73. Significant amounts of staff time will be needed to deliver local government reorganisation and devolution, whilst, at the same time continuing to deliver services on behalf of Oxfordshire County Council. Further such information should be provided to this Committee in November.

Equality & Inclusion Implications

74. None immediately arising from this report. A full Equality Impact Assessment will be required to support Cabinet’s decision on 13 November. This will be considered by this Committee on 12 November.

Sustainability Implications

75. None immediately arising from this report.

Risk Management

76. None immediately arising from this report, but an analysis of the financial risks will be presented in the addendum.

Helen Mitchell
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Annex 1: Letter from His Majesty's Government – 3 June 2025

Annex 2: Letter from His Majesty's Government – 6 February 2025 - [Letter: Oxfordshire - GOV.UK](#)

Annex 3: Further detail on LGR engagements

Annex 4: Centre for Governance and Scrutiny, August 2025: Neighbourhood Governance in Oxfordshire

Annex 5: Letter from His Majesty's Government – 25 July 2025 [Summary of the local government reorganisation process - GOV.UK](#)

Background papers:

REMInd Research, July 2025

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September 2025