

# Neighbourhood governance in Oxfordshire: options exploration

Final draft

## About the Centre for Governance and Scrutiny

The Centre for Governance and Scrutiny (CfGS) is a social purpose consultancy and national centre of expertise, working to improve decision-making for the public good. We support local government and wider public services to strengthen governance, transparency, and accountability.

Founded in 2003, CfGS has grown into a respected national charity, helping organisations design and deliver more inclusive, evidence-based, and outcomes-focused governance. We believe the best decisions are made when they are constructively challenged, well-evidenced, and shaped by those they affect.

Our work goes beyond structures—we support cultural change, build capacity, and champion values that lead to better outcomes. We collaborate with councils, national bodies, and partners to ensure scrutiny plays a vital role in good governance, shaping a better society for all.

## Introduction

The Centre for Governance and Scrutiny (CfGS) has been commissioned by Oxfordshire County Council 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 report brings together this short research commission, carried out through interviews and desk research. It seeks to support ongoing conversations about the way that a future council or councils might connect with the needs of its residents at the most local level.

In this report we examine potential models for how a future council or councils might do this, setting out different options for local-level governance arrangements, which we refer to throughout this report as “neighbourhood governance”.

Permanent arrangements for neighbourhood governance can only be made by a new authority, or authorities, once they are set up, following a council reorganisation.

So rather than define action, this report is designed to be a tool to engage residents and other stakeholders in conversations about future governance arrangements. It outlines a set of insights, principles, and requirements for how different neighbourhood governance arrangements might evolve and work – and lays out one potential model in order to provoke thinking and dialogue. It is designed to support such thinking and dialogue irrespective of the structural approach that Government chooses to pursue.

Oxfordshire County Council has also committed to sharing the final output to inform wider discussions and planning across all the authorities involved in Oxfordshire’s reorganisation.

CfGS would like to thank all those who contributed to this work by speaking to us during June 2025, and to the officers of Oxfordshire County Council who provided logistically and administrative assistance in our evidence-gathering.

# Contents

|  |           |
|--|-----------|
| <b>Summary of methodology</b>                                  | <b>4</b>  |
| <b>Executive summary and provocations</b>                      | <b>5</b>  |
| <b>Main findings</b>   |           |
| <b>1. Exploring the existing landscape</b>                     | <b>13</b> |
| 1A: Context  | 13        |
| 1B: Defining neighbourhood governance                          | 14        |
| 1C: The work of parish, town and community councils            | 15        |
| 1D: Wider community activity across the county                 | 21        |
| 1E: How public bodies contribute to neighbourhood governance   | 23        |
| 1F: Summarising Oxfordshire's needs                            | 25        |
| <b>2. Exploring what others do</b>                             | <b>30</b> |
| 2A: Examples from the UK                                       | 30        |
| 2B: Examples from outside the UK                               | 33        |
| 2C: Inclusive methods for design, decision-making and delivery | 35        |
| 2D: Reflecting on what makes neighbourhood governance work     | 38        |
| <b>3. Exploring the possibilities for Oxfordshire</b>          | <b>41</b> |
| 3A: Design principles  | 41        |
| 3B: Defining neighbourhoods and areas                          | 43        |
| 3C: The area committee   | 44        |
| 3D: Practical arrangements for area committees                 | 51        |
| 3E: Other potential models                                     | 54        |
| <b>4. Exploring the approach for Oxford</b>                    | <b>56</b> |
| 4A: City-wide functions in Oxford                              | 56        |
| 4B: Structures available to carry out the work                 | 57        |
| <b>Appendix A: Methodology</b>                                 | <b>60</b> |
| <b>Appendix B: Oxfordshire as a place</b>                      | <b>61</b> |

# Summary of methodology

This report is based on a combination of desk research and structured qualitative engagement. We spoke with 52 individuals from eleven organisations through a series of one-to-one interviews and small focus groups conducted in July 2025. Participants included councillors, officers, and representatives from organisations with a stake in the future of local governance in Oxfordshire.

The conversations explored four core themes: **identity and sense of place; local power, leadership and accountability; community engagement and participation; and the practicalities and support needed for neighbourhood governance to function effectively.** Findings were triangulated with relevant research and examples from elsewhere in the UK and internationally, helping to build a grounded but outward-looking evidence base.

The research was underpinned by a number of connected principles:

- **CfGS's work is not premised on the adoption of a particular structural model for Oxfordshire.** We have been commissioned by Oxfordshire County Council which is developing a proposal for Option 1. However, a renewed focus on neighbourhood governance will be necessary irrespective of the model Government chooses, because the structural result of reorganisation will bring fewer, larger councils<sup>1</sup>.
- **Our work is introductory and exploratory in nature – it supports the start of a wider, ongoing conversation.** We have spoken to only a few people, and carried out a limited amount of documentary analysis with the intention of setting out the overall landscape for people at a local level to explore in more detail. At this stage we can suggest possible models and approaches but we can't make recommendations or proposals for change. In particular, a wider range of insights directly from the public, and a range of other stakeholders, will add richness and nuance to these preliminary findings and the conclusions we have reached on their basis.
- **The options and opportunities we explore must be grounded in the needs of Oxfordshire as a place.** Any approach to neighbourhood governance must reflect specific local circumstances – it must respond to the actually existing position rather than set out an arbitrary, idealised model of what perfect neighbourhood governance arrangements might look like.

**More detail on the methodology adopted for the work can be found at Appendix A.**

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<sup>1</sup> We have commented on a future model for the municipal governance of the City of Oxford, in doing so recognising that Option 3 involves the creation of a "Greater Oxford" council, the context for which would involve a different approach to neighbourhood governance.

# Executive summary

This report is divided into three main parts.

**In the first part, we have explored the current landscape.** We have sought to define what neighbourhood governance is, to explore the role of parishes, principal authorities and wider community activism in what happens at the most local level. We have sought to set out what this means, overall, for what a future model for neighbourhood governance in Oxfordshire will need to look like.

**In the second part, we have explored what others do.** We have looked at the UK and beyond, reviewing the various models that exist to support public bodies and local people to work together at a local level. We have drawn out some lessons from that review, by way of setting out what are the key components of making neighbourhood governance work.

**In the third part, we have explored what this means for Oxfordshire.** We have laid out some design principles to inform the construction of a model for neighbourhood governance across the county. We have then – by way of illustration, not as a recommendation – laid out a possible future framework which centres the possible establishment of new area committees – with a core duty relating to neighbourhood planning – as having connected functions relating to supporting, and building capacity, within existing communities and neighbourhoods, rather than (for example) as bodies to themselves make decisions or to direct operational spending.

**In the fourth part, we have applied some of these ideas and principles specifically to the city of Oxford,** to explore what a model for municipal governance might look like if Government chooses a structural option which involves the abolition of the existing city council.

## Exploring the existing landscape

We define “neighbourhood governance” as involving three principal activities:

- **Design of place.** This is about discussing, setting out and pursuing a vision for the local area.
- **Decision-making about place.** This is about local people influencing and informing decisions made by others that might affect them.
- **Delivery in place.** This is about local people making ongoing arrangements to meet their own needs and the needs of their fellow residents by directly delivering services and/or carrying out connected community action.

Across Oxfordshire there is a huge range of activity that connects to these three tasks.

- We looked at **the work of parish councils**, and the work of principal authorities, in engaging with local people.
- We looked at **how certain services for which principal authorities are responsible are designed and delivered in partnership with local people** – practices that reflect a complex patchwork which cannot easily be mapped.
- Finally we looked at **the wider array of community activity which happens across the county area** – formal and informal work, of substantial breadth and scope. All of this work enhances community resilience and much aims to make practical, positive differences to local people's lives. Most happens at a highly local, human scale.

But there is **very little capacity in the system**, and risks attached where those capacity challenges are most acute. In some cases, important parts of the social fabric are supported by a small number of people, or key institutions, which may not see themselves as being “anchors” or enablers of what others around them are doing.

We have looked at Oxfordshire's future needs, and the major strategic plans that aim to create a more inclusive future for growth and productivity in the local economy – we have also thought that about inevitable challenges that come with growth and development, and how these play out at the most local level.

**Underpinning all of this is the need for neighbourhood governance to support, and grow, community resilience.**

We have tried to use our understanding of this overall picture to frame what Oxfordshire's needs are in respect of future neighbourhood governance. We think these needs are:

- **Interconnectedness with wider public service objectives.** Investing in neighbourhood governance is also an investment in the wider goals of inclusive economic growth, tackling deprivation, and improving life chances. Strengthening neighbourhood governance helps to build the social fabric that underpins these outcomes – by enabling resilient, self-supporting communities to take a more active role in shaping the places they live in.
- **Messiness.** Sustainable arrangements for community action within neighbourhoods look messy. The presence of messiness reflects the fact that neighbourhood governance arrangements are not ones that can be easily “held” by a new principal authority or authorities. Community activity is organic and reflects the places within which it operates – neighbourhood systems operated by councils and other public sector bodies need to fit around that existing reality.
- **Informal vs formal.** Some community action happens through formal means – legal, public decision-making, formal partnerships and agreements, and activities undertaken by formally constituted bodies that often hold specific accountabilities to

local people. Much more is informal in nature and the “formal” activity often supports the informal in ways that are not apparent to policymakers and decision-makers.

- **Asymmetry as a core feature.** Asymmetry is an inherent characteristic of neighbourhood governance. Different parts of the ecosystem operate with varying levels of capability, legitimacy, and ambition — even among larger town councils, there is no single, shared understanding of purpose or role. Any attempt to devolve power or responsibility uniformly across an area is likely to fall short.
- **Consistency.** There is a need for certain services to be subject to area-wide consistency, and for some services to be subject to the formality associated with a rules-based system. This is particularly the case for personal services that are built around rights and entitlements set out in statute, but also those services provided universally.
- **Capacity building** where people already are anchored in a realistic and long term approach to resourcing. The need to build and maintain community capacity is a necessary prerequisite of meaningful neighbourhood governance.
- **Visibility.** No-one can or should expect to be able to see the whole system. But there needs to be an awareness of the presence of a wider ecosystem around community activity that acknowledges the messiness and asymmetry that we describe above, as well as other characteristics.
- **Mindset, attitude and culture.** Amongst professionals, there is likely to be a need to shift behaviours around engagement, participation and communication with local neighbourhoods – fostering a greater spirit of trust and mutual honesty and joining up professional-led activity.
- **Community intelligence.** Insight from local people — grounded in lived experience and local relationships — can surface nuances that may be missed by even the most skilled professionals working at a distance. When shared, this intelligence doesn’t just inform better decision-making; it also builds collective understanding of local challenges and creates a stronger foundation for co-produced solutions.

## Exploring what others do

We wanted to examine what happens elsewhere in the UK, what happens beyond the UK and what “good practice” tells us about developing more inclusive approaches to the involvement of local people in shaping and taking action in their own areas.

We conclude that there are three components to making effective neighbourhood governance “stick”:



- **Shifts in behaviour.** Evidence from elsewhere suggests that moving to a more purposefully designed approach to local places (in how places are shaped, how decisions are made, and how services are delivered) requires more than structural reform. It requires behavioural shifts. These shifts involve public service professionals stepping into the spaces where communities already operate — developing a deeper, more holistic understanding of civic infrastructure, and working collaboratively to respond to local needs and opportunities.
- **Ensuring central democratic control and oversight.** How do we empower neighbourhoods meaningfully while maintaining system-wide integrity and accountability – in particular, accountability for democratically-elected politicians who have been elected to represent local people? Control systems are necessary, but they should be light-touch and enabling, not bureaucratic and restrictive.
- **“Docking in” new arrangements with existing, more traditional, parts of the governance landscape.** Local participation must be meaningful, enduring, and taken seriously. That means not treating community-led governance as an optional extra or one-off experiment but embedding it into how a council makes decisions. To achieve that, participatory and neighbourhood governance must be able to 'dock into' formal systems of public decision-making. This isn't about limiting local agency — it's about giving it weight, status, and permanence. If communities are to play a real role in shaping places, decisions flowing from that involvement need to have legitimacy in the eyes of the law and the wider public.

## Exploring the possibilities for Oxfordshire

**In defining an approach that might work for Oxfordshire, we want to establish some design principles against which various different approaches and models for neighbourhood governance can be judged.** Our design principles draw on our statement of Oxfordshire's neighbourhood governance needs – they are:

- **Supporting the legitimacy and role of elected politicians.** Representative democracy is the central bulwark of our democratic system. Any approach to strengthen neighbourhood governance will need to give elected councillors – at principal and parish level – a central role.
- **A rules-based approach.** People need to be assured that they are dealing with public institutions that will work consistently and transparently. This is particularly important when needs and appetites for services and local interventions will be quite different from area to area. Absolute transparency will be needed to avoid the risk that this kind of asymmetry is seen as favouritism.
- **Effective management and ownership of risk.** When services are designed and delivered with local people – when we use different approaches to work with them

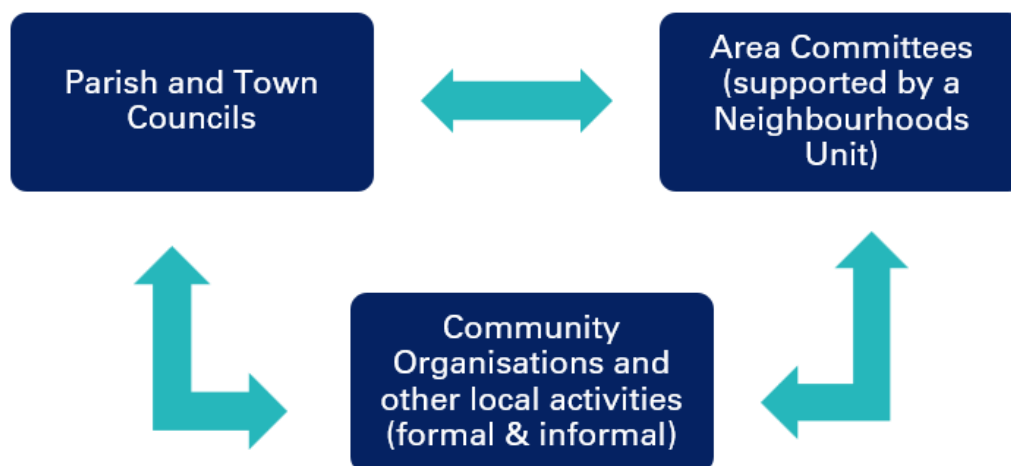
and within their neighbourhoods – this could be seen as producing a diffusion of accountability, and a lack of ownership of risks.

- **Framed around public service partnership.** Through designation as a Marmot Place, the county wants to expand on this capability; there is a recognition (through CAGs and other mechanisms) that there is a need to strengthen this approach, and neighbourhood governance systems can and should be a facilitator.
- **A strengths-based approach building on what already exists.** Across the county, a huge variety of arrangements exist for neighbourhood and community activity, some of it supported by principal authorities but much of it not. The focus will need to be on the strengthening of the connective tissue associated with neighbourhood-based activity rather than necessarily “doing more” of that activity – thereby increasingly community resilience. This is why we see this work strengthening and deepening the commitments made by councils across the area through the Oxfordshire Charter.
- **Providing opportunity for debate and discussion on tensions and tradeoffs, anchored in neighbourhood planning.** A big challenge for the county area is management of the tensions and disagreements arising from growth and development. Neighbourhood governance arrangements should be anchored in neighbourhood planning – a process with statutory definition that will help local areas to manage these tensions and tradeoffs, and place them in a wider context.
- **County-wide consistency, but with significant local divergence.** This sounds contradictory – and it is. On the one hand it would be unfair and inequitable (and in some cases illegal) for principal authorities to offer services on a dramatically differential basis depending on geography. On the other hand it is right that public services flex to meet local need and capacity.

Based on these design principles we set out **one potential approach** – the establishment of a system of area committees. We do also set out a range of alternative and/or complementary models at the end of the report, in section 3F.

Because defining “neighbourhoods” is challenging, we suggest that these bodies would cover a wider geography, covering an area of several (new) councils wards.

These would not be decision-making bodies but bodies designed to support and enable wider community development activity – bodies existing to support, and to act as anchor institutions for, the wider range of community activity happens from place to place. To carry out this role these committees would need to be supported by a part of a new council that we have called a “Neighbourhood Unit”.



*Illustration of core relationships. Arrows denote flows of insight and intelligence, and resource and support.*

Area committees would enjoy a particularly close relationship with parish councils, as democratic partners and as institutions which area committees could themselves support – while ensuring that parishes retain their independence.

In our model these committees would do three connected things, which echo and reinforce our descriptions of neighbourhood governance in part 1 of the report:

- **Mapping and understanding – seeking to develop a common understanding of the “place”**
- **Providing support, capacity and resource – being incubators for community activity**
- **Providing direction and oversight – on certain operational decisions, and on other matters**

**In support of these three activities area committees would have a core function – holding responsibility for neighbourhood planning – to give them a formal role around shaping the place and ensuring that the future design of that place is managed in a way that is inclusive.**

## Exploring the possibilities for Oxford

The City of Oxford has its own distinct needs with regard to governance. In commissioning us the county councils asked us to look at options for Oxford specifically – reflecting the fact that under two of the three options for reorganisation, Oxford will lose the distinct, independent municipal governance that it has enjoyed for a millennium.

This is an experience that other towns and cities have gone through in recent years. We wanted to explore – in part based on their experiences – two issues:

- Which aspects of neighbourhood governance – design, decision-making, delivery – might usefully be carried out city-wide in Oxford?
- Which structures might be established, and maintained, in order to do this?

**In terms of duties**, we think that there is a case for city-wide decision-making (and delivery) on the following issues:

- Management of community assets / community facilities
- Management of parks and green spaces
- Community development and the management of cultural activities
- Business and economic development, and tourism
- Licensing and planning decision-making (although the legality and remit of these tasks would need to be subject to review – see below)
- (Social housing) estate management, where appropriate

**In terms of structures**, for many the first obvious option is the establishment of a new first-tier city council for Oxford – covering the same boundaries as the current district but with a smaller range of duties and responsibilities befitting the status of a community council. This would either involve a community governance review leading to the abolition of the four existing parish councils in the area or the establishment of a new council to cover the existing unparished area of the city.

The new council would be by some distance the most populous first-tier authority in England. Government's willingness to agree, as part of LGR, to the proposed establishment of a new parish council of this size, presumably with precepting powers, is difficult to read. It could be seen as seeking to recreate two-tier government by the back door.

Alternatives involve a federated model – the establishment of a small number of new parishes which are "grouped" with the existing parish councils in the city of Oxford to form a kind of federation, which makes decisions on city-wide matters collectively – but this would be a novel form of governance for England even if it has precedents from overseas.

The option that we would be keen to see explored further is the use of the **charter trustee** arrangements which a new council would otherwise need to establish in order to retain Oxford's city status and Royal Charter as a way of composing an area committee which has an enhanced range of decision-making responsibilities for the city.

## Provocations

- How can governance systems reflect the lived identity of places — beyond administrative boundaries?
- Can we design governance in a way that builds civic identity, especially in places where formal structures are missing?
- How can we build local structures that are flexible and proportionate to each place?
- Who holds power at the local level — and how do they become accountable for it? How important is it who the key decision-makers are?
- How (and should) can councillors and officers shift from gatekeepers to enablers of shared leadership?
- What institutional architecture supports long-term, community-powered governance?
- What institutional architecture supports communities, neighbourhoods and areas to be more resilient?
- How can we ensure equity when capacity and confidence vary so widely across places?
- What kinds of investment and support make shared governance viable?
- How can we ensure equity when capacity and confidence vary so widely across places?
- What kinds of investment and support make shared governance viable?
- What does meaningful participation look like in the next phase of local democracy?
- Can we turn one-off engagement into a standing system for collaborative decision-making?
- How can co-production move from the health and care sector into the mainstream of local governance?
- What makes deliberation truly powerful and policy-relevant?

# 1. Exploring the existing landscape

## 1A: Context

In December 2024, the Government announced its wish to reorganise the boundaries, roles and responsibilities of councils in two tier (district and county) areas in England.

In February 2025, Jim McMahon MP, Minister of State for Local Government, sent a formal letter to councils in two-tier areas across England, including in Oxfordshire, inviting areas to submit proposals for change. Councils were told that initial proposals needed to be submitted by March 2025, with detailed proposals submitted by November 2025.

Councils in Oxfordshire submitted three different outline proposals.

- **Option one** was for a single county unitary, and was supported by Oxfordshire County Council.
- **Option two** was for two unitary councils – one in the north of the area and one in the south, also encompassing parts of neighbouring county areas. This option was supported by shire district councils in the area.
- **Option three** was for three unitary councils – one in the north of the county and one in the south alongside a “Greater Oxford” council. This option was supported by Oxford City Council.

The letter was accompanied by guidance setting out the overall criteria that Government would be using to choose which option to take forward.

This guidance did not set out specific expectations for how submissions should ensure that a future council or councils would have the arrangements in place to ensure accountability at local level, including the establishment of locality or neighbourhood arrangements for the delivery of local services, or to ensure effective local engagement in the business of the new authority or authorities.

Government has said that its preference, in areas undergoing local government reorganisation, is that councils will establish area, or neighbourhood, committees, and considers that this will be an important component in support for community development. The Minister of State for Local Government said in a statement to Parliament in June<sup>2</sup>:

“A simplified and standardised system of local area-working and governance is needed, and neighbourhood Area Committees, led by frontline ward councillors,

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<sup>2</sup> Hansard, 3 June 2025: <https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-statements/detail/2025-06-03/hcws676>

are the best route to achieve this. Neighbourhood Area Committees support local authorities to deliver their commitments to community partnership-working at a neighbourhood level. There are also opportunities to bring in other service providers into broader membership of neighbourhood Area Committees, for instance town or parish councillors where they exist, and co-opted members from other local community organisations. This allows for the benefit of structural efficiencies from Local Governance Reorganisation while deepening localism and engagement across every community.”

Provision for the establishment of new neighbourhood committees has been made in the English Devolution and Community Empowerment Bill, with the detail to come in forthcoming (at the time of writing) Regulations.

## 1B: Defining neighbourhood governance

For the purposes of this report, CfGS defines “neighbourhood governance” as the way in which local people, either directly or through their elected representatives, can undertake action in **three main areas**:

1. **Design of place.** This is about **discussing, setting out and pursuing a vision for the local area**. In some areas, neighbourhood planning is the anchor for this activity – the kind of long-term discussion about what people want the area to look like now and in the future.
2. **Decision-making about place.** This is about **influencing and informing decisions made by others that might affect them**. This influence might be through informal dialogue with decision-makers, or more formal mechanisms like engagement with traditional “consultations”. It can also involve the use of deeper, participatory methods in which local people co-produce, and co-design, aspects of local services with decision-makers who might be from the local council, the NHS or another public body.
3. **Delivery in place.** This is about **local people making ongoing arrangements to meet their own needs and the needs of their fellow residents by directly delivering services and/or carrying out connected community action**<sup>3</sup>. This might be through organisations or groups which are formal (like a parish council, or a formally constituted group or association) or informal (like a group of neighbours

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<sup>3</sup> Calling all of this activity “delivery” is perhaps a public service-centric view of the breadth of what this community action – much of it based on local, social relationships – does. We think that it is likely that, in talking about activity here, people involved in subsequent conversations will need to break this down and develop a perhaps more sophisticated typology.

or volunteers who might come together to do things to make the local area better).

This is not a definitive description. In the interviews we conducted, there was a very wide range of understanding and expectations about what “neighbourhood governance” might be.

Words like **neighbourhood, community and locality** are used sometimes interchangeably by different people. The use of a variety of different terms can serve to obscure meaning, and can make it difficult to even begin a conversation about the fundamental premise associated with neighbourhood governance that we have described above.

For example:

- the word “neighbourhood” has a clear geographical focus, but some people might use it to describe an area of a few square miles while others (the NHS, for example) use the word to describe a far wider geographical area.
- some people use the word “community” to mean the same thing as “neighbourhood” but for others a “community” might not be something defined by geography but by life experience or need – so for example there may be a “community” of carers across the county of Oxfordshire.
- some people’s thinking about what neighbourhood, locality or community working might look like might lean towards one of our three descriptors more than another.

For example for some neighbourhood governance is about advocacy – campaigning and influencing public sector bodies to do or not do certain things. For some it is about direct, street by street community action – typified by things like mutual aid. And for others it is about the presence and operation of more traditional structures, like parish councils.

**Developing a shared understanding about what these concepts mean will probably be necessary for stakeholders in Oxfordshire as they continue to explore how neighbourhood governance arrangements can be designed to be meaningful.**

We think that these conversations will need to be framed in such a way as to be practically meaningful – using as a base the kinds of examples and approaches we set out in parts 2 and 3 of this paper. As part of this exercise, local stakeholders might want to carry out some deeper local mapping to expand on existing knowledge and where, and how, local networks, connections and relationships between organisations exist, and their strengths and weaknesses.

## **1C: The work of parish, town and community councils**

We start our detailed consideration of what neighbourhood governance looks like across Oxfordshire by reviewing the role carried out by parish councils.

The county is fully parished, apart from the main part of the City of Oxford. Oxford has three long-standing parishes, reflecting areas brought within the city boundaries at the time of the



1974 local government reforms, and another parish, Blackbird Leys, established more recently<sup>4</sup>.

In some parished areas with fewer than 200 electors, and where there is no parish council in place, annual parish meetings<sup>5</sup> may be convened to carry out certain duties, and to hold certain powers in statute which would otherwise be exercised by a parish council.

While some parishes do co-ordinate their work – and may contract jointly for things like grass cutting – there are no formal grouping arrangements for parishes within the county<sup>6</sup>.

The recently agreed Oxfordshire Councils Charter<sup>7</sup> sets out a framework for better partnership working in Oxfordshire, defined by two strategic aims:

- Stronger partnership working between Oxfordshire councils, and;
- Enhancing local democracy.

The Charter also sets out “shared principles” – which provide useful context to the way that behaviours inform the quality of neighbourhood governance. These are:

- Mutual respect (about recognising commonalities and differences and acting in good faith);
- Transparency and accountability (about sharing information and being transparent about things like decision-making);
- Relationship-building (about fostering collaborative relationships and removing the barriers to doing this that might exist).

This framework (accompanied by shared commitments, and plans for implementation) is likely to provide a basis for ongoing conversations around neighbourhood governance. Some interviews told us that the quality of communication between parishes and principal authorities is not always as good as it could be, although the presence of the Charter aims to make things more consistent and systematic.

## Parishes’ activities relating to neighbourhood governance

We want to set out how we see parishes currently contribute to the three aspects of neighbourhood governance that we described in the introduction – **design, decision-making and delivery**.

In doing so there are two foundational issues that we have identified that will need to

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<sup>4</sup> In comparison with other parishes Blackbird Leys is slightly unusual in that it holds no explicit service delivery responsibilities. Its principal areas of focus have been neighbourhood planning and place-shaping, and more general community development in what is one of Oxford’s most deprived areas.

<sup>5</sup> Further to provisions in the Local Government Act 1972, ss9, 13 et seq

<sup>6</sup> Grouping is provided for under s11 of the Local Government Act 1972. Further guidance on grouping can be found in “Guidance on community governance reviews” (DCLG / LGBCE, 2010): <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a78e983ed915d0422066530/1527635.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> “Oxfordshire Councils Charter”: <https://www.oalc.org.uk/oxfordshire-councils-charter>

inform conclusions about what current practice tells us about plans for the future.

*Firstly, parishes, as institutions, are part of a wider local ecosystem of “neighbourhood governance”.* Some interviewees spoke about parish and town councils as being, in their eyes, one and the the thing as the idea of “neighbourhood governance” generally. However, they are more correctly seen as part of a wider ecosystem of local organisations and groups.

This does not however mean that parishes carry out a formal role in co-ordinating this community activity – though such co-ordination may happen informally.

For example, in some areas:

- members of a parish council may play a role on other organisations – providing an informal connection.
- parish councils may provide small grants or other forms of assistance to local groups or bodies, or support volunteer community activities.
- parish councils may own and rent out for a relatively small fee a local hall.

In each case the council is acting as a facilitator of wider community activity without this necessarily being acknowledged as such – as well as providing vital community capacity and capability to support the wider local ecosystem.

*Secondly, parishes have varied capacity, capability and appetite for carrying out the broad range of “neighbourhood governance” roles that we have identified.* In all areas, the capacity, capability and enthusiasm of parish councils to carry out our three roles for neighbourhood governance.

Some are large institutions with substantial budgets and a number of permanent staff – some town councils fall into this category. Many however are very small, enjoying the support only of a part time clerk.

Town and parish councils struggle to fill councillor vacancies, even through co-option<sup>8</sup>. This creates a challenge for perceptions of legitimacy, as few seats are contested in elections. We have been told that some councils rely on a comparatively small number of committed, long-standing (and ageing) members. We were told that people might be put off from involvement because of old fashioned ideas of what parish councils do (including the use of the word “parish”).

We were told that the presence of a comparatively small number of particularly active and engaged elected members at parish level was what made the difference in terms of the overall capacity and capability of many councils – which raises challenges around the resilience of some of those institutions, and the potential need for further capacity support<sup>9</sup>.

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<sup>8</sup> This is not unique to Oxfordshire, and reflects a wider national challenge.

<sup>9</sup> See part 3

## Dealing with capacity and capability: setting up new parishes

New parishes may be set up as a result of a community governance review (CGR) carried out (in a two-tier area) by a shire district<sup>10</sup>. CGRs have been periodically carried out by districts across Oxfordshire. In many cases this involves minor changes to boundaries, but it can also involve the creation of wholly new parishes. For example, associated with the western expansion of Didcot, a Western Valley Parish Council was recently established, to cover Great Western Park and parts of Harwell.

Associated with the production of the Headington Neighbourhood Plan, Oxford City Council held a consultation in 2020 to assess appetite for a new parish for the (unparished) area concerned. Local people voted, narrowly, against the establishment of a new parish council.

Government has recently (mid-2025) indicated that it wants to proceed with caution on the establishment of new precepting parishes as part of the reorganisation process<sup>11</sup>.

Bearing these factors in mind how, then, does the role of the parish map onto our three main roles for neighbourhood governance?

- **Parishes shaping the place (“design”)**: Parishes have played, and continue to play, a role in “place shaping” in a way that is framed by formal neighbourhood planning arrangements. Parishes have variable capacity to engage with this visioning activity – and some have limited interest in it. We have been told that high level planning activity can feel disconnected from the practical circumstances in which people live their lives. This is even the case for major plans and strategies with a significant impact on local communities. This is a challenge that has long been recognised as a feature of the plan-led development system in England, but also cuts across to the way that local people think of the future of their towns, villages and areas from a more social perspective. Where this locally led visioning activity does happen, it is often built around proposals for development, such as through the Homes England-supported “Garden Communities” initiative<sup>12</sup>. We are, however, aware of exceptions – such as the activity undertaken by the county council to develop “community insight

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<sup>10</sup> Further to provisions for such reviews in the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007.

<sup>11</sup> “Minister warns against recreating two-tier structures via parishes” (Local Government Chronicle, 4 July 2025): <https://www.lgcplus.com/politics/devolution-and-economic-growth/minister-warns-against-recreating-two-tier-structures-via-parishes-04-07-2025/>

<sup>12</sup> “Garden communities toolkit” (Homes England, 2019): <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/garden-communities>. See also “Garden communities set to flourish across England” (Government press release, 24 May 2022): <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/garden-communities-set-to-flourish-across-england>

profiles” (CIPs)<sup>13</sup> – documents that aim to describe local communities and to use the insights arising to put in place managed interventions to support local people’s lives.

- **Parishes engaging with principal authorities (“decision-making”):** Parish councils feed into the work of principal authorities in a variety of ways. Again, this varies by council and by topic, contributing to a complex tapestry of engagement. We were told that some less interested in contributing to partnership decision-making with principal authorities or do not have the capacity to do so. Parishes may also carry out work relating to neighbourhood planning<sup>14</sup>. Here, as elsewhere, capacity and experiences vary significantly. Co-production, and co-decision-making, between parishes and principal authorities is we think affected by the fact that principal authorities generally have their own arrangements to co-produce and co-design policy directly with local people – through formal consultation and more innovation approaches to involvement<sup>15</sup>. These arrangements do not cut out parish councils but they reflect the fact that parishes are seen as lacking – overall – the capacity to deal with those wider community objectives, rather than focusing on delivery.
- **Parish-led services (“delivery”):** It is true that parishes, overall, have the potential to carry out a number of activities relating to our three overall objectives of neighbourhood governance (deliberation, decision-making, delivery). Again, however, parishes’ capability means there is substantial variability across Oxfordshire as to which councils do what. Parish councils may hold a range of service delivery responsibilities. Some of these may include:
  - Providing universal amenities: this may include public toilets, parks and recreation grounds, litter bins and street lighting;
  - Community support: organising festivals and other events, and carrying out activity to support local businesses and encourage tourism;
  - Ownership and management of certain community assets: councils may operate community halls or other public buildings which may be used as a base for wider community activity;
  - Operation of leisure facilities;
  - Management of allotments;
  - Provision of public car parking.

## Case studies: parish involvement in design, decision-making and delivery in Oxfordshire

<sup>13</sup> Accessible on the Oxfordshire Data Hub: <https://data.oxfordshire.gov.uk/health-and-social-care/community-insight-profiles/>

<sup>14</sup> See section 2C

<sup>15</sup> See section 2C

### ***Dog waste bins***

Under a county-wide arrangement the county has contracted for the emptying of these bins and charged part of the cost back to parishes. More recently, the county council determined that it needed to recover more of its costs and would therefore need to charge parishes closer to cost price for the service. Some parishes determined that they would make separate procurement arrangements for waste bin emptying but found that quality and performance management was much more difficult than when arrangements were made county-wide. This highlights the capacity challenge of how to manage delivery of even a relatively “straightforward” operational service.

These and other experience highlight the need for conversations about the onward devolution of services to be couched in realism. We have been told that people don’t mind who delivers services to them – just that they are delivered. Of course, the issue of who holds responsibility is, actually, pertinent to whether things are delivered or not, because understanding what successful delivery means involves understanding local communities sufficiently to translate their needs into action.

If we are to accept the idea that there are some services, and matters, where delivery arrangements are best managed at a local level, this commitment requires ongoing, meaningful capacity-building support.

### ***OXTOG: joint action on local transport***

OXTOG (Oxfordshire Together) is a county council initiative whereby the council comes together with town and parish councils, and the wider community, to explore and understanding local priorities on local transport and to take action. This involves supporting local volunteering (such as sign cleaning), and the delivery of certain highways and transport services by parishes.

It also includes verge cutting. This came up repeatedly in conversations as an example of a superficially straightforward matter that can be “devolved” to communities and to volunteers that is actually complex. In different communities, there are different expectations – on the frequency of grass cutting, on whether it should be done at all for environmental reasons, and on the relative importance to road safety of close-cutting verges. These are local disagreements that communities need to navigate, and they may need support to do so.

This work connects to Community Action Groups (CAGs<sup>16</sup>).

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<sup>16</sup> See section 1E

## 1D: Wider community activity across the county

Community action is of course not limited to parish councils. We have already noted that they are only part of a wider ecosystem of local community activity.

There are a huge range of individuals, groups and organisations carrying out work which in some way contributes positively to the local community. This work builds “community infrastructure” – the underpinnings that neighbourhoods need in order to feel like proper communities. This work also contributes to creating the conditions in which neighbourhoods are able to take on some of the tasks associated with the three objectives for community governance that we set out in the introduction – design, decision-making and delivery.

Some of the features of this activity that we have heard about include:

- Activity is in many places built around existing social and support networks. Informal community activity is sometimes ad hoc and difficult to separate from ordinary “social” activity;
- Activity is informed by different views about what a “place”, neighbourhood or community is. The description of “neighbourhoods” and “localities” by different people and organisations does not lend itself to the drawing of lines on maps. A consistent sense of place is elusive – individuals will themselves hold overlapping sense of the different “communities” and “neighbourhoods” with regard to which they feel a sense a belonging. For example, we were told that some towns are siloed in their community activity – there are links between neighbourhoods, communities and groups within towns but little between towns, which may have implications for community resilience;
- The most visible, cross-community and well-organised activity is often that which is galvanised by external threats and pressures. Proposals for Botley West solar farm and the Abingdon reservoir are examples of these perceived threats acting as a focus around which community action can coalesce.
- A lot of community activity (in particular, support networks for vulnerable people and groups, by existing networks and through mutual aid) developed significantly over the course of the pandemic, but the prospects for its sustainability and future growth are uncertain. In part this is because of a lack of ongoing support in community “stewardship” and capacity building (for example Government’s decision to withdraw funding from neighbourhood planning activity<sup>17</sup>). We were told that in some areas there had been a collective community exhaustion in the aftermath of the pandemic.
- Rurality has a big impact. Oxfordshire is the least densely populated county in south east England. Rurality has an impact on deprivation (and the visibility of deprivation) and on things like transport connectivity. It also contributes substantially to people’s

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<sup>17</sup> See section 2C

sense of place. People in more rural areas are unlikely to consider themselves as being connected to or “part of” their nearest town (see our comments above on “sense of place”).

## **Making community activity more resilient: “anchor” institutions and support**

Some community activity is undertaken by organisations that are independent, but which may have a commissioning relationship with, councils in the area. While this may not always be acknowledged

For example:

- Healthwatch Oxfordshire operates on a statutory footing, with its work commissioned by the county council. It has a role (subject to Government’s announcement in June 2025 of its abolition) around patient advocacy that links clearly to the Marmot outcomes describes elsewhere in this paper.
- Citizen’s advice services in Oxfordshire, delivered by institutions whose boundaries are not coterminous with those of the county, will contribute significantly to community resilience.
- The county council contracts with Carers Oxfordshire to provide information, advice and support to adult carers.

There are grant making organisations and other connected bodies, some of them area-specific. Oxfordshire Community Foundation is a county-wide grant making body; Oxfordshire Community and Voluntary Action’s (OCVA) Connected Communities Fund provides micro-funding for activities specifically designed to support creating places that “support the people of Oxfordshire to live well in their community, remaining fit and healthy for as long as possible”.

At area level, initiatives like the Didcot Powerhouse Fund have been established to make grants to support local people to tackle specific instances of deprivation and community need.

These, and other kinds of organisations and initiatives in the area, will all contribute to the presence of community infrastructure which will, in turn, facilitate other community activity – although interviewees have noted that for the most part (as is very typical) funding and support is not available to cover organisations’ core costs. We were told by interviewees that more could be done to recognise the presence of “anchor” organisations by recognising the need for this additional resource and capacity, to recognise the wider work they do to facilitate neighbourhood governance, and to provide them with more capacity and resource to do so in a way that links up with wider public service outcomes.



# 1E: How public bodies contribute to neighbourhood governance

## Work by principal authorities

The county council, the districts and the city carry out activity using varying degrees of locality working. Area-wide, the county council has divided itself into 9 locality areas. Districts, and the city, have their own locality arrangements. For example, Oxford City Council operates a Localities Team that works across the four city council-designated localities in the city to provide support to community groups and organisations.

The overall picture is one of a broad range of different arrangements in place, that are not all managed in such a way as to enhance community resilience. There is the potential that these kinds of arrangements, taken together, could reduce the overall capability and capacity of neighbourhoods and communities to engage on their own terms. We have been told of the risk and reality of “consultation fatigue”, and we have been told that principal authorities do not always bear in mind limited capacity when they do seek to engage.

## Case study: enhancing community resilience in the delivery of adult social care

The county council’s adult social care strategy, “The Oxfordshire Way”, is framed around the development and delivery of support arrangements to adults with disabilities and long-term illnesses, further to the council’s statutory duties under the Care Act 2004.

The strategy is framed around a strengths-based approach to support – focusing on supporting people to be independent within a supportive community environment, relying on informal networks and circles of support. The strategy cites an intention to “develop new services and partnerships to provide more choice and flexibility for people who need care and support, creating a flourishing network of support for people. For example, micro-enterprises supported by our partners Community Catalysts, and small voluntary sector organisations supported by our Connected Communities Fund”.

The centrality of community led activity is important here, further emphasising that strong and resilient communities are central to the delivery of people-related services.

Other arrangements include (but are not limited to):



- **Community action groups (CAGs)**<sup>18</sup>. A network initially established in 2001 to take local action on waste management, CAGs have been funded by the county council since 2004, most recently through the independent organisation “CAG Oxfordshire”<sup>19</sup>. CAGs’ focus has expanded to cover sustainability more generally; some are now social enterprises. The model of incubation and support provided by long-term funding (and the resultant impact) provides a good example of how capacity-building support can develop civic infrastructure within communities and neighbourhoods.
- **Community place shaping** through the Garden Communities initiative<sup>20</sup>. This Homes England programme, managed and delivered through South and Vale Councils, involves support activity in two designated “Garden Towns” – Didcot and Berensfield. This has provided a mechanism to manage challenges associated with significant urban expansion.
- **General outreach by the political leaderships of individual authorities** (West Oxfordshire operates an “executive on tour” programme which involves the Cabinet meeting in different local communities to discuss matters of importance);
- **Flood risk management** (where communities are able to bid into pots of money to take local flood risk action, and where flood wardens and supervisors are appointed within the local community).
- **Friends’ Groups attached to libraries**, in some cases involving the co-management of library services by volunteers.
- **Work on street trees**, where the county council has sought to appoint volunteer “Tree Guardians” to provide aftercare following planting. There has also been local decision-making relating to the placement of street trees, facilitated by OCC.
- **Community asset transfer**. Asset transfer<sup>21</sup> is something which has been a feature of county council activity for some time<sup>22</sup>. Interviewees, speaking to us about asset transfer, highlighted the dangers attached to a lack of consideration of the transfer of liabilities alongside assets, and the need for capacity-building support to be able to manage assets appropriately. There is a risk that asset transfer is seen as an example of local authorities dumping physical facilities on the local community if maintaining those facilities is difficult or expensive.

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<sup>18</sup> Current funding arrangements, and priority activity, for the network can be found at <https://www.oxfordshire.gov.uk/waste-and-recycling/oxfordshire-recycles/community-action-groups#paragraph-15660>

<sup>19</sup> <https://www.cagoxfordshire.org.uk/about>

<sup>20</sup> See footnote 12 above

<sup>21</sup> Sometimes confused with the “Community Right to Bid”, the formal process under the Localism Act 2011 which provides for local people to bid to take on responsibility for Assets of Community Value if their owner proposes to dispose of them. Modern approaches to asset transfer, meanwhile, date from the 2007 Quirk Review. More information can be found at <https://mycommunity.org.uk/files/downloads/Download-Understanding-Community-Asset-Transfer.pdf>

<sup>22</sup> Oxfordshire County Council has transferred around 80 buildings to community and voluntary groups since 2011. The council has stated that, “this is primarily as a result of significant service changes driven by austerity measures”: <https://www.oxfordshire.gov.uk/residents/environment-and-planning/land-and-premises/community-assets>

- **Activities relating to the county area's designation as a Marmot Place<sup>23</sup>** – creating duties that cut across a range of areas and services, including co-production in respect of certain aspects of adult and children's services (connected to the above).

Together these arrangements reflect a patchwork of overlapping relationships between councils and communities. This brings about some capacity-based risks, but the resulting messiness is not necessarily a bad thing. It reflects the reality of the way that communities and neighbourhoods actually exist and function. But complexity and messiness can, equally, make the landscape difficult to navigate for those individuals, and organisations, not already familiar with the community and council ecosystem.

## By other organisations in Oxfordshire

We have not looked in detail at community engagement activity undertaken by other bodies, although we have reflected briefly on the consequences for neighbourhood working in the NHS. We think it is likely that further work will need to be done by principal councils, and other partners, to undertake some mapping to understand where some of the principal public service activities are that interact with local people. In particular, this is likely to involve reflection on policy areas like:

- **Policing and community safety:** where partners come together to take action on the kinds of visible measures that can support a sense of community, and the sense of risk and safety within that community;
- **Further education and higher education:** given the important role that such institutions play in the shaping of place, from the perspective of local people's life chances and the wider economy;
- **The social security system, including JobCentre+.**

## 1F: Summarising Oxfordshire's needs

A future model of neighbourhood governance will need to engage with the existing models of how local people currently work together, and work with public institutions, to get things done – which is why we have started by looking at what things look like in the present.

Such a model will also need to engage with an understanding of the county area, its circumstances and requirements. We set some of these things out in Appendix B, where we review in more depth some of the wider public policy context for the area. Below, we briefly set out our findings on Oxfordshire's possible future, and our reflections on what this future might mean for the approach taken on neighbourhood governance.

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<sup>23</sup> We discuss this in its strategic context at section 1F

## Oxfordshire's future

Enterprise Oxfordshire's Strategic Economic Plan<sup>24</sup> highlights challenges around social inclusion – connected to “substantial disparities in relation to income and wealth”. The Strategy cites average household incomes of £48,000 in North Central Oxford compared to £26,300 in Blackbird Leys as evidence of particular disparities in Oxford itself, but evidence also exists of significant disparities elsewhere.

The fact that Oxfordshire is the 10<sup>th</sup> least deprived of the 151 upper tier authority areas in England<sup>25</sup> hides specific, localised deprivation – an extremely salient factor when considering the need, capacity and appetite for models of neighbourhood governance.

The Strategy says<sup>26</sup>:

*“In the context of a county that can genuinely claim some of the world's foremost science and technology assets [...] this juxtaposition sits very uncomfortably. Growth within Oxfordshire needs to be inclusive. It needs to be ‘distributed across society and create opportunities for all’ [Oxfordshire Health and Wellbeing Strategy, 2024-30]. This is a key goal for Oxfordshire.”*

This presents a challenge to the design of neighbourhood governance arrangements – ensuring that they where possible provide an opportunity to share the fruits of growth, and that they provide an environment where discussion and decision-making about growth, and its consequences (positive and negative) for social fabric can be expanded.

As a place, Oxfordshire is undergoing significant change. There is ongoing pressure for housing growth, and further economic development. Enterprise Oxfordshire's strategies for growth and development are framed around inclusion and sustainability; this needs to be squared with pressure for physical development – the construction of new housing, new business premises and the infrastructure to support it.

Alongside these plans are those owned by other organisations – jointly and separately. Documents such as the joint strategic needs assessment<sup>27</sup> (JSNA) provide the basis for partnership planning on health and care matters – plans that are closely aligned to those relating to economic growth. Oxfordshire is a Marmot Place, with the county council having recently launched cross-partnership plans to contribute to the wider determinants of health by taking forward plans to reduce health inequalities. Objectives are linked to both social

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<sup>24</sup> We have used the Strategic Economic Plan as a way to frame our understand of Oxfordshire's likely future – but recognise that it is one plan, from one organisation, and that there are many other possible futures. One of the tasks for councils, their partners and local people as work on neighbourhood governance evolves will be to stake out a fuller sense of what the future for the county looks like through social, economic, cultural and other lens. “Strategic Economic Plan” (Enterprise Oxfordshire, 2023): <https://www.enterpriseoxfordshire.com/what-we-do/strategies-plans-reports/strategic-economic-plan/>

<sup>25</sup> At the time of the publication of the Strategy (November 2023)

<sup>26</sup> SEP, p22

<sup>27</sup> Accessible in electronic, interactive form at the Oxfordshire Data Hub: <https://data.oxfordshire.gov.uk/jsna/>

inclusion and economic development – highlighting the close links between the two and the need for an approach for community development that links closely to inclusive growth.

This in turn contributes to Government, and local, plans for public service reform – the idea of knitting together partners and partnerships in order to ensure a common understanding of the strengths and weaknesses, enablers and constraints, of the community infrastructure of the area.

There is a general vision, associated with public sector partners across the area, about the way in which growth across Oxfordshire can be managed in such a way as to be inclusive, sustainable and equitable, inasmuch as growth can be a driver for the reduction of social disparities.

## **What Oxfordshire's future means for neighbourhood governance**

For us, this vision of a possible future connects strongly and directly to new councils' objectives around neighbourhood governance and locality working. Growth is about large-scale spatial planning (which may, in due course, be owned and overseen by a strategic authority covering a wider area than Oxfordshire alone). But it must also be about the intensely local activity which contributes to community capacity and capabilities. Sustainable growth that works across the area will not be possible without a corresponding growth in civic and social infrastructure.

Arising from this, we think that some of the key needs that Oxfordshire has in relation to future neighbourhood governance are:

- **Interconnectedness with wider public service objectives.** Broad public service priorities across Oxfordshire are deeply interconnected — and closely tied to the resilience of local communities and neighbourhoods. We believe there is a compelling case that investing in neighbourhood governance is also an investment in the wider goals of inclusive economic growth, tackling deprivation, and improving life chances. Strengthening neighbourhood governance helps to build the social fabric that underpins these outcomes — by enabling resilient, self-supporting communities to take a more active role in shaping the places they live in.
- **Messiness.** Sustainable arrangements for community action within neighbourhoods look messy. Different arrangements operate in different areas and while a degree of “mapping” might be both desirable and possible, trying to sketch out the way that councils (principal and local) and communities relate to each other now, and how they might relate to each other in future, is difficult to do comprehensively. The presence of messiness reflects the fact that neighbourhood governance arrangements are not ones that can be easily “held” by a new principal authority or authorities. Community activity is organic and reflects the places within which it operates – neighbourhood systems operated by councils and other public sector bodies needs to fit around that existing reality.
- **Informal vs formal.** Some community action happens through formal means – legal,

public decision-making, formal partnerships and agreements, and activities undertaken by formally constituted bodies that often hold specific accountabilities to local people. Much more is informal in nature and the “formal” activity often supports the informal in ways that are not apparent to policymakers and decision-makers. This leads to an environment of strength where different aspects of community activity are self-supporting but also paradoxically, weakness - where if one part of the ecosystem weakens suddenly (because of a loss of funding or because a key individual leaves) other parts of the ecosystem may begin to weaken in ways that can be unpredictable.

- **Asymmetry as a core feature.** Asymmetry is an inherent characteristic of neighbourhood governance. Different parts of the ecosystem operate with varying levels of capability, legitimacy, and ambition — even among larger town councils, there is no single, shared understanding of purpose or role. Any attempt to devolve power or responsibility uniformly across an area is likely to fall short. In contrast, an approach that embraces asymmetry recognises the need for councils to support community activity in flexible, tailored ways, responding to the distinct contexts and capacities of each place. This means building from where capability and energy already exist and demonstrating the value of that engagement by visibly reinvesting the dividends of success from local action back into those communities.
- **Consistency.** There is a need for certain services to be subject to area-wide consistency, and for some services to be subject to the formality associated with a rules-based system. This is particularly the case for personal services that are built around rights and entitlements set out in statute, but also those services provided universally.
- **Capacity building** where people already are anchored in a realistic and long term approach to resourcing. We have been told that while grant funding is available for a variety of community projects long-term capacity building opportunities are not always present. Recommissioning and decommissioning of certain services (including by organisations beyond local government) can have a significant, negative (and unexpected) consequence for community resilience. For us, the need to build and maintain community capacity is a necessary prerequisite of meaningful neighbourhood governance.
- **Visibility.** No-one can or should expect to be able to see the whole system. But there needs to be an awareness of the presence of a wider ecosystem around community activity that acknowledges the messiness and asymmetry that we describe above, as well as other characteristics. At the most local level, those working in and around communities (and in parishes) may not currently understand the wider ecosystem either – this is not necessarily a problem but is something that might need to be addressed if wider aspirations for neighbourhood governance take flight, and greater neighbourhood-level grip of civic infrastructure is desired or seen to be needed.
- **Mindset, attitude and culture.** Amongst professionals, there is likely to be a need to

shift behaviours around engagement, participation and communication with local neighbourhoods – fostering a greater spirit of trust and mutual honesty and joining up professional-led activity.

- **Community intelligence.** The evidence we've gathered highlights the powerful role of hyper-local community intelligence in shaping solutions that are closely attuned to the specific needs of neighbourhoods. This kind of insight — grounded in lived experience and local relationships — can surface nuances that may be missed by even the most skilled professionals working at a distance. When shared, this intelligence doesn't just inform better decision-making; it also builds collective understanding of local challenges and creates a stronger foundation for co-produced solutions.

## 2. Exploring what others do

This part of the paper explores some of the possible approaches that are available, and that have been adopted in the UK and further afield. It uses an exploration of those possibilities to draw out some general principles about what makes strong, sustainable neighbourhood governance work.

### 2A: Examples from the UK

#### New approaches to neighbourhood governance following local government reorganisation

**New parishes.** Recent local government reorganisations have seen the establishment of sometimes very large new parish/town councils in previously unparished urban areas.

The largest parish council in the country by population is Northampton Town Council, with 130,000 residents. The council was created at the same time as the reorganisation of Northamptonshire, which created two new unitary authorities. Other parish councils created alongside reorganisation include Shrewsbury and Salisbury.

#### Case study: Salisbury, a new city council

In Salisbury, a new city council was established at the same time as the local government reorganisation in Wiltshire in 2009. The population of the area served by the council is around 40,000.

The council holds responsibility for some service delivery, as well as playing an important role in local place-shaping through two mechanisms:

- A Neighbourhood Development Plan. This Plan was developed by the council and adopted by way of a local referendum into Wiltshire Council's planning framework in early 2025.
- The Salisbury Place Partnership, an unincorporated voluntary partnership bringing together public and private sectors in the interests of managing the city centre and the city's cultural offer. The Partnership is advisory, with no ability to drive the policies of its individual members, but there is an expectation that resources and activities will be aligned with plans and priorities agreed collectively.

**Other approaches to neighbourhood governance and locality working.** In many parts of the country, reorganisation has provoked councils to establish new arrangements for locality



working, and to foster connection between new authorities and the communities they serve. These arrangements will often build on previous practice, and tend to coalesce around a set of committees or forums that have duties and responsibilities that reflect the “area committee” model we describe below. This is a fairly traditional approach, but some areas have been able to use it to pursue a degree of innovation. Success in doing so hinges on the extent to which expectations around community engagement, and empowerment, are baked into the fundamental operating model of a new authority – a challenge, when the focus on “safe and legal” transition of services can lead people to adopt minimum viable approaches rather than pursuing creativity and innovation.

## Case study: post-LGR locality arrangements in Buckinghamshire

Central to Buckinghamshire’s approach to reorganisation was the establishment of arrangements for local members to take decisions, and for communities to have their say, through a set of **community boards**. The vision for these boards was to improve outcomes for residents through ensuring strong connections between the Council and the people it serves.

Local insight and intelligence is used to set priorities for boards to take forward – boards produce reports, and carry out projects. Each board has a dedicated Chair and Vice-Chair (with wider membership being comprised of local people), and a Board Manager whose job it is to ensure that links are forged with local people.

## Wider locality working arrangements

The establishment of new locality arrangements is not unique to councils going through reorganisation. Across the country the approaches taken to locality working are however different from council to council.

In some places, localities offer a convenient way of dividing up operational delivery arrangements. In others, locality working involves the creation of local teams, which may be embedded in the local community specifically to provide community support or capacity, and to ensure that “low level” operational, place-based matters are dealt with effectively.

Locality arrangements are common on social housing estates, where estate offices (and housing officers) have sometimes become unofficial nodes for community activity because social landlords have responsibility for a significant amount of the built environment. In this model, housing officers may have wider duties relating to person-centred services; some estates may contain sheltered housing units or other care facilities whose presence might accentuate this person-centred focus.

## Area / ward committees

Councils in many parts of the country have established area or ward committees, with a



variety of functions. These kinds of committees went through a brief phase of popularity in the 1990s and 2000s, and at the time had powers such as:

- The power to make grants, up to a certain value;
- The power to spend a limited “ward budget” on operational services – usually universal “clean and green” activity or cultural and community activity;
- The power to make certain planning decisions.

These committees have sometimes provided a space for more general discussion of local priorities, which may involve local partners. For example, they can provide a space for agreement on local community safety priorities, and an opportunity for partners to come together to engage with local people. As we noted above the establishment of these kinds of bodies often forms a part of wider local government reorganisation.

### **Case study: Tower Hamlets neighbourhoods experiment**

Although instigated a long time ago, probably the most significant and long-lived experiment in total decentralisation, and a push for almost all service delivery down to the most local level, was in the London Borough of Tower Hamlets under the 1986-1994 Liberal administration<sup>28</sup>.

Under this model seven Neighbourhoods were created, each to be run by a separate local committee. Each Neighbourhood had its own CEO, and its own staff complement, and was provided with the budget to deliver the bulk of local services itself with some residual functions still being delivered corporately.

Contemporary, independent evaluations found a significant improvement in resident satisfaction arising from this radical decentralisation but problems with regard to control and central grip on area-wide services. A weak centre, overall, had contributed to inefficiencies especially with regard to services that might have been better left centralised<sup>29</sup>.

### **Case study: District electoral areas (DEAs) in Northern Ireland**

Each of the 11 unitary council areas in Northern Ireland (except Belfast) is divided into 7 district electoral areas (DEAs). DEAs are a long-standing feature in Northern Ireland’s local

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<sup>28</sup> Summarised in “The Tower Hamlets Neighbourhoods 1986-1994” at <https://lccmunicipal.com/2017/07/12/rediscovering-the-tower-hamlets-neighbourhoods-part-1/>, summarising earlier research undertaken by David Rosenberg, Janice Morphet, Vivien Lowndes and Gerry Stoker.

<sup>29</sup> This work happened at a time when councils’ corporate cores did not look as they do now, and service departments are generally considered to have held significantly more power.

government geography. DEAs are made up of multiple wards, and are necessary because local government elections are conducted using proportionate representation rather than first past the post (FPTP). Arrangements for the boundaries and naming of DEAs has been handled by a DEA Commissioner, an independent appointment.

DEAs are the basis for data gathering and statistical analysis below council level, but also provide a basis for councillor leadership on issues of local importance.

For example in **Antrim and Newtownabbey** the DEAs are used as the basis for consultation and engagement in the council's community planning process, whereby a range of local and regional organisations and agencies have come together to determine how services can be delivered better together. Each DEA has a "Place Shaping Forum" which uses statistics and local insight to identify DEA-specific priorities for the Community Plan, which have then been recommended to the Community Planning Partnership for action<sup>30</sup>.

Area committees can, however, feel formal – and sometimes toothless. They are traditional mechanisms for engagement that many councils have found to be of limited utility. Furthermore, the use of area committees of this type has become less common in the past decade or so, principally because of financial constraints but also because of concerns in some councils that money allocated to committees to undertake their work was not always being spent wisely.

## 2B: Examples from outside the UK

Reviewing approaches to neighbourhood governance in non-UK jurisdictions requires caution. The political culture of other countries, and the weave of those country's social fabric, will be very different. Legal frameworks differ substantially. However, although examples from overseas may not be easy to transpose wholesale, there will be lessons from their design and implementation that are likely to be useful for policymaking in the UK.

Some of these examples relate to formal structures and relationships – in others, the focus is on the building of capacity for informal, organic relationship building. In all cases, however, there is a common theme – the integration of more distributed and decentralised ways of working into the heart of organisations' formal governance arrangements.

- **Incorporated and unincorporated areas (USA)**<sup>31</sup>. In the USA, all areas are covered by state-level and county-level government, but not all areas benefit from city or

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<sup>30</sup> This could be seen as an example in practice of some of the citizen science principles discussed on the next page.

<sup>31</sup> See, for example, Leon-Moreta A, "Municipal incorporation in the United States" (2015) *Urban Studies* 52(16) 3160-3180

municipal governance. Those that do not are “unincorporated” areas, where services are provided directly by the county. When an area is “incorporated”, it gains greater power to plan, direct and delivery its own services – incorporation therefore provides greater control and autonomy over services to local people. In the USA, incorporation also brings with it the power to bring in its own tax revenue for service delivery. This is an example of where local government can be asymmetric – ie, where certain parts of a wider area can benefit from local government systems that enjoy a greater sense of local control.

- **Agglomeration communities (communautés d’agglomération) (France)**<sup>32</sup>. These are one of a number of grouping models for communes, the smallest unit of French local governance. Under these arrangements communes may create a new legal structure – an agglomeration – that takes on those powers (and income from taxes) that individual communes decide to delegate. It is a similar process to grouping, but more formal in nature and directed towards specific service delivery objectives around economic development (and connected matters).
- **Digital micro-governance (Taiwan)**. Taiwans approach to digital engagement through platforms such as <https://join.gov.tw/> offers a compelling example of how digital infrastructure can support hyper local participatory democracy. The platform enables citizens to submit policy ideas, crowdsource proposals and co-create solutions with local and national government. It is an example of how digital tools can enable continuous participation and relational accountability.
- **Participatory budgeting at scale (Spain, Brazil)**<sup>33</sup>. The Porto Allegre example of participatory budgeting has long been a fixture of social research literature<sup>34</sup>. Having begun in 1989, the process involves three streams of meetings:
  - Neighbourhood assemblies, which meet to discuss budget allocations for specific areas across the city
  - City-wide assemblies, which deal with thematic, non-neighbourhood specific issues
  - Meetings of the Council of the Participatory Budget, consisting of district delegates, which meets to consider recommendations from neighbourhood and city-wide assemblies, considered against the parameters set by the city government previously, and which then submits an agreed position to elected

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<sup>32</sup> “Qu’est-ce qu’une communauté d’agglomération?” French Government (in French): <https://www.vie-publique.fr/fiches/20126-quest-ce-quune-communaute-dagglomeration>

<sup>33</sup> Case study on the Local Government Association website (2016): <https://www.local.gov.uk/case-studies/case-study-porto-alegre-brazil>

<sup>34</sup> Although open budgeting was trialled by several English councils it has not become a consistent feature of how councils manage their budget arrangements. A number of reasons have been suggested for this – the cost of the exercise, the limited discretion that English local authorities have on budget allocations and a sense that it significantly constrains the ability of an authority’s political leadership to set its own direction, reflective of its electoral mandate.

## 2C: Inclusive methods for design, decision-making and delivery

Many public bodies have moved away from a purely “extractive” approach to consultation and engagement (one that gathers insight and intelligence from local people to be analysed by professionals), towards one that is more inclusive and mutually supportive (where people collaborate to find and agree on collective futures). In this section we explore the practical ways of working that can support a continuation of this kind of approach, and that effective neighbourhood governance might be able to support.

### Neighbourhood planning

Neighbourhood planning is a statutory process by which local people can play a role in shaping the areas in which they live and work<sup>35</sup>. Neighbourhood plans form part of a principal authority’s development plan, which gives a neighbourhood plan force as an important factor in determining planning applications.

Neighbourhood planning benefits from an incentive, in that communities that draw up a plan and secure agreement in a local referendum can benefit from 25% of the revenue from the community infrastructure levy (CIL) arising from development in the area.

Government used to provide support to areas taking forward Neighbourhood Plans through a grants process administered by the charity Locality, but chose to withdraw this support in early 2025.

### Citizen science

Citizen science – research conducted with the participation of the public – can provide the means to ensure that there is an understanding of the needs of an area, what services and support it needs, and how that support should be delivered, through a deeper understanding of that area’s features (and the features of those living in that area).

### Case study: citizen science and the natural world

Citizen science has long been a feature of research into the natural world. Records of temperature and weather conditions, and conditions of flora and fauna, have for many years been gathered and aggregated at national level to provide a sense of the health of

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<sup>35</sup> Government guidance can be found at <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/neighbourhood-planning--2>

the natural landscape.

Some councils have adopted similar mechanisms to ensure that they understand biodiversity: Test Valley Borough Council is a good example<sup>36</sup>. The Environment Agency is currently leading work nationally to explore how citizen science can be used to support research into the natural world more systematically<sup>37</sup>.

In helping to map out areas, their needs and their strengths, citizen science has the potential to help public bodies to rethink the way that public services are designed. There is developing practice globally on the use of citizen science to support understanding of local health and care needs; the use of the model to describe and better understand “place” is more well-developed.

## Co-production

There are a huge range of approaches that councils and communities can take towards the co-production of services. In the UK co-production is a tool of long standing of the health and care sector, allowing patients and other service users to help to design services. Co-production is specifically mentioned in statutory guidance to the Care Act 2014, and as such has made significant inroads as one of the dominant methods of policymaking in that sector in the past decade – though it has made less impression in some other policy areas.

### Case study: co-production and adult social care

In 2022 the Adult Social Care Committee of the House of Lords, having been established for this express purpose, published a report on reforms to adult social care. The report investigated in detail practices on co-production and had this to say about the way in which area-based co-production of adult social care services was maturing around the country<sup>38</sup>:

“Local Area Coordination (LAC) has existed in England and Wales for over 10 years, and there are now [as at 2022] 12 local authorities across England and Wales that have implemented it. The LAC Network relies on Local Area Coordinators, who are employed by local councils and work across neighbourhoods of approximately 10,000 people. Coordinators are integrated into the local community: they have hyper-local knowledge of people, families, groups, organisations and services. Their role consists of approaching individuals who might have care and support needs, or be at risk of needing support, and

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<sup>36</sup> More information can be found at <https://www.testvalley.gov.uk/aboutyourcouncil/corporatedirection/environmentandsustainability/citizen-science>

<sup>37</sup> The Citizen Science Technical Advisory Framework: <https://environmentagency.blog.gov.uk/2025/03/18/citizen-science-and-the-environment-agency/>

<sup>38</sup> “A gloriously ordinary life: spotlight on adult social care” (House of Lords, 2022): <https://committees.parliament.uk/committee/580/adult-social-care-committee/publications/>

to help them build their own vision for a better life, with the objective of drawing on personal, family and community resources to find pragmatic solutions to any challenges they face.

“For example, one case study in Derby City Council saw a resident get in touch with a Local Area Coordinator because she was dealing with various physical and mental health issues following the recent loss of her husband. After several conversations, an opportunity to improve her life emerged as it became clear that she had enjoyed looking after her garden with her husband but was not capable of gardening anymore due to her declining health. The Coordinator arranged for her to meet with a local resident who they had also been helping, and who had been looking for opportunities to volunteer. They agreed to help with her gardening, in an arrangement that also resulted in both residents feeling less socially isolated.”

There are examples of co-production in other areas but use is more scattergun. For example, in 2022 Toynbee Hall published the product of a participatory action research project on adult education in London<sup>39</sup>. This work involved a group of peer researchers with direct lived experience co-designing and co-producing the research project which involved in-depth interviews with people from across London. This demonstrates the cut-across between this way of working and citizen science, as discussed in the previous section.

Co-production, inevitably, takes resource. The quid pro quo in the spending of this resource is that services, once designed in this way, are significantly more attuned to the needs of those who those services are meant to support. In relation to health and care, co-production arrangements are closely aligned to the design and delivered of methods of working designed to tackle health inequalities.

## Deliberative methods

**Citizens’ assemblies and citizens’ juries** are among the most well-known deliberative practices in the UK. These offer structured opportunities for a randomly selected group of residents to engage deeply in a policy area’s ‘wicked issue’. Unlike traditional consultation, which often captures a snapshot of opinion, these processes are designed to deepen understanding, build consensus, and develop collective judgment. Participants hear evidence, deliberate together, and make informed recommendations. They are particularly useful in areas where there is no easy consensus, or where legitimacy and trust in decision-making needs to be rebuilt.

Increasingly, some areas are exploring how to move beyond one-off events and embed these processes more permanently. This includes the idea of **deliberative committees** — standing bodies that pair residents and elected members in ongoing, structured dialogue.

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<sup>39</sup> “More than just education: a participatory action research project on adult education in London” (Toynbee Hall, 2022): <https://www.toynbeehall.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/TH-GLA-Adult-Education-Report-Feb22-Digital.pdf>

One pioneering example is in Belgium, where the Parliament of the Brussels-Capital Region has created formal deliberative committees that enable citizens and politicians to work together on policy proposals.

### **Case study: Deliberative committees in Brussels, Belgium**

In 2019, the Parliament of the Brussels-Capital Region introduced a groundbreaking model of democratic innovation by embedding deliberative committees directly into its parliamentary structure. This reform followed calls to tackle democratic fatigue and rebuild trust between citizens and institutions, and it aimed to create a formal space for citizens and elected representatives to deliberate together on key issues.

Each committee is composed of 15 parliamentarians and 45 citizens, randomly selected via a civic lottery to reflect the diversity of the population — including age, gender, ethnicity, education level, and geographic spread. The citizen members are compensated for their time, receive briefing materials, and are supported by independent facilitators and expert speakers to ensure they can meaningfully engage.

Committees meet over several sessions (typically four to six), during which members learn about the topic, discuss options, and co-develop a set of recommendations. These are then submitted to the full parliament and relevant ministers, who are required to formally respond — creating a clear line of accountability and influence.

Unlike one-off citizens' assemblies, these committees are ongoing, institutionalised mechanisms for participatory policymaking. Their integration within the legislative process ensures that deliberation is not just advisory but linked to formal decision-making — offering a bold example of how participatory and representative democracy can be woven together.

## **2D: Reflecting on what makes neighbourhood governance work**

We think that the evidence set out across this section highlights three main areas which contribute to effective neighbourhood governance.

### **Shifts in behaviour**

Evidence from elsewhere suggests that moving to a more purposefully designed approach to local places (in how places are shaped, how decisions are made, and how services are delivered) requires more than structural reform. It requires behavioural shifts.

These shifts involve public service professionals stepping into the spaces where



communities already operate — developing a deeper, more holistic understanding of civic infrastructure, and working collaboratively to respond to local needs and opportunities.

But these shifts are not easy. Behaviour change is simple to describe but difficult to achieve. It hinges on how councils perceive and manage risk. Ceding power and creating greater local autonomy can be seen as threatening the coherence of public service delivery, raising concerns about fragmentation or inconsistency — especially where councils remain legally responsible for ensuring the quality and equity of statutory services.

## **Ensuring central democratic control and oversight**

This brings us to the second of the four areas we want to highlight, and a core tension. How do we empower neighbourhoods meaningfully while maintaining system-wide integrity and accountability — in particular, accountability for democratically-elected politicians who have been elected to represent local people?

The solution lies not in resisting asymmetry or retreating to create more systems of control, but in developing a clear and shared framework for neighbourhood governance.

Such a framework must provide certainty, consistency, and transparency — not only in how decisions are made and services delivered, but also in where responsibility lies. It should guard against past mistakes, such as poorly planned asset transfers that pushed liabilities onto under-resourced community groups.

Control systems are necessary, but they should be light-touch and enabling, not bureaucratic and restrictive. The behavioural shift required is not simply about councils stepping back, but about them stepping differently: investing in community capability, sharing power responsibly, and recognising that investment and commitment to neighbourhood governance is necessary for public bodies' wider objectives to be deliverable.

## **“Docking in” new arrangements with existing, more traditional, parts of the governance landscape**

Local participation must be meaningful, enduring, and taken seriously. That means not treating community-led governance as an optional extra or one-off experiment but embedding it into how a council makes decisions.

To achieve that, participatory and neighbourhood governance must be able to 'dock into' formal systems of public decision-making. This isn't about limiting local agency — it's about giving it weight, status, and permanence. If communities are to play a real role in shaping places, decisions flowing from that involvement need to have legitimacy in the eyes of the law and the wider public.

CfGS explored this issue in depth between 2020 and 2022, in research part-funded by the JRSST Charitable Trust. Our central argument was that if councils are to reimagine their relationship with local people, they must also reimagine how those relationships connect to



the legal and constitutional structures that underpin local authority governance. This led to a paper intended to provoke further debate on the topic<sup>2</sup>.

These structures matter. The rule of law, delegated authority, and formal oversight exist to ensure that decisions are made with transparency, accountability, and proper regard for all relevant considerations. But they should not be seen as barriers to participation — they should be scaffolding that supports and secures it.

Those arrangements are there because they are the best way we have to offer real assurance that decisions are made that take into account all relevant considerations – and that those decisions are subject to meaningful oversight and accountability.

## **The relational constitution**

Central to the principles behind “docking in” is the need, at the local level, to be able to specify what the relationships should be between traditional governance arrangements and new systems for deliberation, co-production and co-design.

All councils are obliged to agree a constitution to set out the way that it will function as an institution. We have suggested an evolved model – a “relational” constitution – that seeks to explore and define how the council will work with its partners, and the local community – setting out clear, consistent and transparent rules and arrangements.

A relational constitution would therefore not just be about how the council makes decisions but about how people from across the area (and public service partners) come together to deliberate and decide.

We consider that a prerequisite to making a meaningful approach to neighbourhood governance “stick” would be to ensure that its practical arrangements are described, in some detail, in such a document.

We have published more information about relational constitutions at <https://www.cfgs.org.uk/resource/relational-constitutions-a-provocation-for-rethinking-local-governance/>

## 3. Exploring the possibilities for Oxfordshire

In this final section, we consider what principles should underpin councils' and communities' next steps, and the different options that might be considered as part of the ensuing conversations.

In undertaking this work we wanted to leave policymakers and local people in Oxfordshire with a possible draft framework within which a variety of models of neighbourhood governance might be built.

What we have done below is to:

- Set out a range of design principles which we have extracted from the outcomes of our research and which we feel meet the overall needs for neighbourhood governance in Oxfordshire.
- Set out a single possible framework for the future, in some detail, with its pros and cons. This is informed by a clear sense of what a “neighbourhood” and an “area” is – with the geography being an important component in making new arrangements work properly. This single framework is one in which various different models and approaches to neighbourhood governance – as discussed in this report – could comfortably fit, depending on local appetite.
- Set out some further models and options for citizens and policymakers to explore their thinking on this topic.

Our framework – built out from Government's preferred approach of neighbourhood/area committees – is designed to draw together threads from our research to form something that is both holistic but also, we hope, sufficiently tangible for it to provoke action.

We then take the outcome of this exercise and apply it to the city of Oxford, in part 4.

### 3A: Design principles

Informing the eventual design of a framework needs to sit a set of design principles. These derive both from our research and from wider learning presented elsewhere in this report. They are not, we think, a conclusive articulation of all of the most important issues in play. Instead, they represent a first attempt at setting out something comprehensive, which will need to be subjected to further refinement as part of a wider, local conversation about these issues:

- **Supporting the legitimacy and role of elected politicians.** Representative democracy is the central bulwark of our democratic system. Any approach to strengthen neighbourhood governance will need to give elected councillors – at principal and parish level – a central role.
- **A rules-based approach.** People need to be assured that they are dealing with public institutions that will work consistently and transparently. This is particularly important when needs and appetites for services and local interventions will be quite different from area to area. Absolute transparency will be needed to avoid the risk that this kind of asymmetry is seen as favouritism.
- **Effective management and ownership of risk.** When services are designed and delivered with local people – when we use different approaches to work with them and within their neighbourhoods – this could be seen as producing a diffusion of accountability, and a lack of ownership of risks. Arrangements will need to be made to ensure that risk and liability is not devolved to individuals and groups ill-equipped to manage it – that capacity, resource and support is provided with risk and need being central considerations.
- **Framed around public service partnership.** One of the benefits of existing arrangements for neighbourhood working is that they can be very effective at bringing together partners at a very local level. Through designation as a Marmot Place, the county wants to expand on this capability; there is a recognition (through CAGs and other mechanisms) that there is a need to strengthen this approach, and neighbourhood governance systems can and should be a facilitator.
- **A strengths-based approach building on what already exists.** We have discussed how in areas across the county, a huge variety of arrangements exist for neighbourhood and community activity, some of it supported by principal authorities but much of it not. Arrangements will need to maintain the ecosystem of neighbourhood governance where it is already strong and bolster it where it isn't – reflecting our earlier findings on asymmetry. The focus will need to be on the strengthening of the connective tissue associated with neighbourhood-based activity rather than necessarily "doing more" of that activity – thereby increasingly community resilience. This is why we see this work strengthening and deepening the commitments made by councils across the area through the Oxfordshire Charter.
- **Providing opportunity for debate and discussion on tensions and tradeoffs, anchored in neighbourhood planning.** A big challenge for the county area is management of the tensions and disagreements arising from growth and development. We have noted the way that this had caused challenges in Oxfordshire, a rural county under significant housing need pressure. Whatever neighbourhood governance arrangements look like, we think that they should be anchored in neighbourhood planning – a process with statutory definition that will help local areas to manage these tensions and tradeoffs, and place them in a wider context.

- **County-wide consistency, but with significant local divergence.** This sounds contradictory – and it is. Local people will need to think carefully about how they manage the tension between what at first sight seem like two contradictory aims. On the one hand it would be unfair and inequitable (and in some cases illegal) for principal authorities to offer services on a dramatically differential basis depending on geography. On the other hand it is right that public services flex to meet local need and capacity. The presence of strong neighbourhood governance arrangements should be able to hold these two competing demands equally.

## Acknowledging enablers and constraints within principal authorities

The adoption of a sustainable approach to neighbourhood governance will require agreement on the presence of enablers and constraints within councils, and how people will work together to manage them.

Enablers and constraints primarily relate to **culture and behaviours**. Cultural attitudes towards neighbourhood governance inform and influence things like the resources that principal authorities might be prepared to invest in the system, and the extent to which public service partners are willing to design (or redesign) their ways of working in order to accommodate the need for greater local control and direction.

Critically this is about changes in behaviours and attitudes within principal authorities – not about requiring that those now doing work in neighbourhoods and communities should change the way that they work in order to accommodate the needs and preference of those already in positions of power and authority.

## 3B: Defining neighbourhoods and areas

Government has stated their aspiration for neighbourhood/area committees to be the default option for new authorities to wire a connection to local communities.

Conventionally these might have been committees designed to work in the old style – some light grant-making, periodic meetings to discuss local concerns, perhaps semi-regular attendance by the police or other external partners. This would not be a particularly exciting model but would probably be the “minimum viable” approach.

We have in mind something quite different. In order to explain it we need to first explain what a “neighbourhood” and an “area” are.

### Defining a neighbourhood

There is a circularity about the way that a “neighbourhood” might be defined for the governance purposes we talk about in this report.

On the one hand, knowing first what a “neighbourhood” is helps us to then think about what the most appropriate arrangements might be for its governance. On the other hand,

understanding the powers and rights that we might consider when we think about neighbourhood governance helps us to determine what form we should associate with those functions.

For us, therefore, we think that neighbourhoods – their identity and who they serves – should be a matter for local people to define. Some services and relationships may coalesce around towns and their immediate hinterlands – we know that this idea of controversial for some. However, we feel that trying to redesign things (services, especially) around very small geographies is likely to be difficult. In short, we ultimately think that form should follow function – and that, following our principles around messiness, the “neighbourhood” as a unit for delivery, and a unit for dialogue and democracy, may be different for different issues.

## **Defining an area**

We have concluded that “neighbourhoods” are multifaceted and cut across different geographies. A principal council needs to organise itself in such a way that helps it to engage with those within those neighbourhood, where they are.

For this purpose we think there is value in considering a geographical unit which provides the link between the neighbourhood governance that we have discussed in this paper and with area-wide council services. We think that the geography of these new area committees – which we have explored below – can be at a geographic scale larger than a ward, or multiple wards – and by so being can offer a sustainable model as a permanent, formal body. In the absence of a better word we would describe these units as “areas”. An areas would cover a large number of geographically-overlapping and loosely-defined neighbourhoods.

We have seen a number of different ideas about how lines for these areas should be drawn. If we are to determine that area committees, as established, will be responsible for supporting and enabling activity in local neighbourhoods, rather than as nodes for decision-making and delivery themselves, the geography is we think less important (but still important in relative terms). We discuss some possible options in the next section.

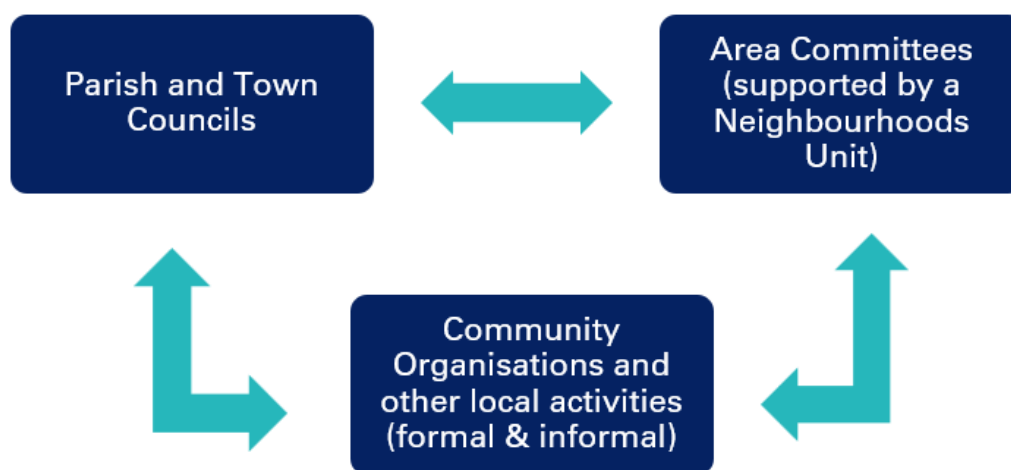
## **3C: The area committee**

### **Introducing a reinvented “area committee”**

The work of this paper is not to make specific recommendations. One option for us would have been to lay out a wide range of structural options and their pros and cons. But we felt that delving into one specific option in more detail – and unpicking some of it’s mechanics – would offer an opportunity for more reflective analysis.

**This option is the establishment of a number of area committees<sup>40</sup>** – fulfilling Government’s expectations – with those committees acting as catalysts, enablers and supporters of existing and future community activity. In this model area committees are a kind of highly localised anchor institution, providing the capacity and support needed to strengthen the neighbourhood governance that we talked about earlier in this report. To carry out this role these committees would need to be supported by a part of a new council that we have called a “Neighbourhood Unit”.

In presenting this option here and in the sections below, we want to emphasise that we are doing so as an illustration of one potential approach, and as a way of exploring what some of the practical considerations would be that would attach to any future model of neighbourhood governance.



*Illustration of core relationships. Arrows denote flows of insight and intelligence, and resource and support.*

Area committees would enjoy a particularly close relationship with parish councils, as democratic partners and as institutions which area committees could themselves support – while ensuring that parishes retain their independence. Under this model (and, indeed, others) area committees could foster an environment in which parishes within the area could be supported to enter into formal “grouping” arrangements – probably at a smaller scale than the whole area though.

The work of area committees would be focused on supporting and enabling neighbourhood and community activity, although we think it is possible that they might play a role in some decision-making and oversight on operational service delivery (which we describe in more detail below).

They would be able to draw on officer support to make available capacity, and skills, to

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<sup>40</sup> Which would be committees of a new authority or authorities.

engage in the kinds of locally focused activities that we have discussed earlier in this report. They would in providing long-term, consistent support remove some of the administrative burden which smaller groups and organisations feel exist where they want to take more responsibility for local issues, and local services. In this way we see area committees acting as **civic infrastructure bodies**, supporting, bolstering and growing community action at the most local level.

In doing this, they would also play an important role liaising with and engaging with parish and town councils – as key partners where they already hold capacity and capability, and as sources of support where they may lack capacity but have ambition to do more.

In the sections below we explore exactly what work in each of these areas might look like.

We have discussed above the need for a framework that protects, supports and enables people to support their fellow residents at neighbourhood level. That framework is we think provided by area committees. In our model these committees would do three connected things, which echo and reinforce our descriptions of neighbourhood governance in part 1 of the report:

- **Mapping and understanding – seeking to develop a common understanding of the “place”**
- **Providing support, capacity and resource – being incubators for community activity**
- **Providing direction and oversight – on certain operational decisions, and on other matters**

These things would play into a central role for area committees in holding, and anchoring, neighbourhood planning processes. This work would provide a formal core of committee activity, around which wider community support would happen.

The model we wish to set out is one that sees area committees **primarily as enablers, conveners and overseers, rather than decision-makers in their own right.**

Their role would be about empowering and supporting others to take action, and in acting as a conduit for insight and intelligence between the local level and the wider area covered by a new council.

We consider that to make these bodies, or something like, them, formal decision-making bodies would risk doing the opposite to that which neighbourhood governance is intended to achieve. It might produce a system of “local centralisation”, in which agile, dynamic community action is hobbled by the presence of an institution that – because decisions need to pass through it – acts as a throttle on innovation and capability, rather than as an enabler.

But this lack of “authority” means that some councillors – and others – might question the value in such committees’ existence. We think that these competing interests are likely to need to be explored fully.

## **Function 1: neighbourhood planning**

We have in mind a process where the statutory neighbourhood planning process is the framing device for the work and activity of area committees.

Neighbourhood planning can be held by individual parishes or across a wider geographic area. Whatever the geography, it involves reflecting on understanding that area, its needs, and how it might grow, change and develop in future.

Building stable communities is about:

- **general infrastructure** – schools, GP surgeries, shops and the people who staff them
- **civic infrastructure** – the community links we describe in this report.

We think that if area committees, or something like them, held and supported the neighbourhood planning process it would enable local people to work through, understand and act on the trade-offs inherent in growth and development, and to use discussion and deliberation to find a way through what is otherwise a complex and difficult process. It would marry together these two conceptions of infrastructure. Two interviewees talked about how the views of local people, expressed through neighbourhood planning, could be used to “hold developers’ feet to the fire” – which we understand is an important policy objective for those who see challenges around the provision of infrastructure to support development.

## Function 2: Mapping and understanding

We have already set out the wide range of community and neighbourhood-based action that takes place across a range of subject areas. An area committee could play a role in seeking to deepen understanding of where and how that activity happens – to identify gaps, constraints, strengths and areas where support might be needed.

Importantly, this work would also help to identify differing levels of appetite for different levels of council-supported community and neighbourhood activity, building the environment for the “asymmetric” approach we have described elsewhere.

Some of these constraints and challenges could be down to structural barriers that might not be immediately apparent to professional policymakers but those with a greater understanding of local communities could help to explore those barriers – which might relate to the fact that people are from marginalised groups or hold protected characteristics under the Equality Act.

Using citizen science approaches, councillors, local organisations and local people could come together to explore these issues and find solutions. This approach would also allow people from across an area to understand each others’ capabilities. Where possible and necessary this could involve supporting people, organisations and communities to reflect on the need for a more holistic understanding of how what they do links in to the work of others.

We are conscious that not everyone would wish to be involved in these more “holistic” discussions but being able to talk about who does what, and where, might help to spark



interesting conversations about opportunities for greater alignment between people's work at the most local level.

In this way we think that area committees would be able to bring together "patch understanding" – a granular knowledge of a local area – with wider awareness of the "system" at a more strategic level, provided by officers and other professionals.

### **Function 3: Providing support, capacity and resources**

With existing arrangements across an area mapped, and understood, to the greatest extent possible, area committees would be able to understand what work they might need to do in order to enhance local capacity and resilience at the neighbourhood level.

We know from the evidence we have gathered that small amounts of resource can seed significant community activity, but councils are likely to need to do further research to understand how and where money can be invested most wisely (mapping, as discussed above, may help with this).

Providing capacity is necessary to avoid continuity risks where individuals, or small groups of individuals, carrying out important community support activities leave their roles – whether due to a change in personal circumstance or something else. It is a way of enhancing resilience, and spreading risk, by supporting community arrangements to move away from models based on single "hero leaders" who may be burdened with too much expectation around the work that they do.

Some capacity building can be managed on a peer-to-peer basis – it is not the case that resource and support will universally be provided by a council into local community organisations.

### **Resourcing a Neighbourhoods Unit**

In order to carry out their work area committees would need to have meaningful officer resourcing. Although our expectation would be that building resilience and capability within neighbourhoods and communities would, over time, result in the strengthening of civic infrastructure, and the neighbourhood "ecosystem", in such a way as to pay back from that investment, there is no question that well into the medium term this would involve new councils making a substantial commitment to making these arrangements work.

At the moment a range of officers across the county and districts play a role in supporting co-production, community action and locality working. The creation of a relatively small Neighbourhoods Unit within new councils would be able to draw on (and better co-ordinate) some of that existing activity, bolstering it with new officers, to provide capacity to support growth in neighbourhood activity. This might involve (and this is not an exhaustive list):

- Capacity-building support for asset transfer
- Assistance in accessing external funds to support local activity
- Help to link up complementary activity to support local people in different neighbourhoods and areas
- Supporting town and parish councils in the area
- Assistance in building new user-centred services and facilities

This support would need to be designed to complement that already offered and provided by sector support bodies like OALC and OCVA.

The reason why we suggest that this officer support should be organised council-wide, rather than dedicated to individual areas / area committees, is to allow flexibility and to reduce the risk of siloing. Our sense is that this activity would be seen as corporate in nature rather than sitting in a specific service department. Individual area committees would draw down support from a central team in a way that would be transparent and accountable – based on the needs identified through the mapping exercise set out in the previous section.

Providing this support would involve careful handling and management. Advocacy organisations, which may benefit from support, might also seek to campaign against and oppose council action in certain areas. The provision of support and resource cannot be contingent on the support, tacit or explicit, of council policy in certain areas – equally, councils have to be careful not to use public resource to support lobbying activity. Ultimately, the council and local communities will have to determine the rules of engagement for this kind of support – which by definition would need to be more flexible and open-ended than support and resourcing currently provided, in order to achieve its objectives.

Importantly, this support would need to be explicitly framed around providing core support for organisations and local groups – supplementing and supporting ongoing project-based support where it exists. This meets the need, identified earlier, for central support on capacity.

In our view the presence of resource, capacity and support, through this mechanism or something quite like it, is a necessary element of making sure that neighbourhood governance can function effectively.

## **Function 4: Providing direction and oversight**

There are a number of areas where area committees could provide direction and oversight over the work being carried out by others.

- Relating to the management of local services;
- Relating to the co-production and co-design of area-wide services;
- Relating to a more general community oversight role.

***The management of local services.*** We want to set out, by way of illustration, what arrangements would look like for operational delivery and the role of area committees in supporting that delivery.

This is how the framework we have described accounts for asymmetry across the area, and differential demands and appetites for different approaches to governance. We think that what then sits within the framework is a clear menu for individual organisations and neighbourhoods to do more to support local people – an offer that says that where there is local appetite, the council through its area committees (and backed by officers) will support work to enable people within neighbourhoods to be able to meet those aspirations.

In this way area committees would be incubators for community and neighbourhood-based activity – supporting local people (including the individual “activators” who we have been told are so important in making things happen at local level) to navigate new ways of working either until they can become self-sustaining or until the council can put in place a long-term funding model for them.

This model of incubation removes the barrier which local people and organisations will inevitably face when wishing to extend and deepen some community action – the pressure to formalise work in order to access further funding and support.

## **Operational delivery supported by area committees**

Area committees, under the framework we have described, would not be responsible for making detailed decisions on local operational issues themselves. But they would be responsible for supporting local delivery and ensuring that local people have an influence on those decisions made – by officers, executive-side councillors and others.

Here we set out what some of those areas could be where area committees could support ongoing influence over aspects of operational delivery. Again, we should stress that under this model it would not be area committees “doing” this activity – they would be supporting local people, in neighbourhoods, and other actors – like parish councils – to be able to have the capacity to do some of this work.

- Planning decision-making, including local determination on the use of CIL
- Infrastructure planning and provision, especially in the context of development
- Local transport activity
- Maintenance arrangements for parks and green spaces
- Community development, including youth services
- Flooding and flood risk
- Nature recovery

- Markets, festivals, leisure and cultural activities.

This list deliberately mirrors the description of the kinds of services managed and delivered by some parish councils, and links to some of the existing engagement activity currently managed through OXTOG, CAGs and so on. As noted above area committees can provide a way of ensuring that this activity is well co-ordinated – and can assist parish councils to take on new services, and to manage their business in a different way, where there is the appetite to do so.

It mirrors the example of incorporated/unincorporated areas in the USA – that is, where parishes have the will, appetite and capability they can manage these services directly but where that does not exist, area committees may hold some of those services ready for them to be drawn down to the more local level when considered appropriate. This provides a clearer route for parishes to enhance and deepen the nature and level of services that they provide (either individually or through grouping) – but without an explicit expectation that they should do so.

***Assisting in the co-production and co-design of county-wide services.*** We have discussed in earlier sections how co-production is an important part of some service design activity. Where such co-production activity is being carried out across a geographically wide area, area committees provide an opportunity to centre that activity in local places – and to provide a democratic anchor for those processes where they do happen.

***Carrying out a more general community oversight role.*** A further potential role around decision-making would be to allow area committees to hold to account and oversee wider council locality working, area by area. There may be value in designing this kind of local “overview and scrutiny” powers into area committees to provide local people with the opportunity to more immediately hold to account decisions made in their name that have a specific local flavour. Whether and how this happens would however depend on a new council or councils’ choices on the adoption of wider locality working arrangements, however.

Councillors might, through this process, have an input in local resource allocation – although no decision-making power. This would help to manage concerns over local infrastructure, and a way to assure a degree of equity in how the council and its partners use resources. This might come back to the idea that growth should benefit local communities in how assets are made use of – for example, influence over CIL and investment in local infrastructure to reflect the presence of particular development stresses. This fits with our wider idea of area committees being anchored through the neighbourhood planning process.

### 3D: Practical arrangements for area committees

We have discussed the core components of area committees – what their roles might be, how they might be supported. Given those matters, we now turn to two complementary considerations – who would sit on these committees and what geographies they would cover.

## What geography would area committees cover?

In establishing area committees to provide enabling support, we have already established that geography is less important because councillors and officers part of that committee setup will be seeking to understand how they can support people in their existing neighbourhoods, rather than trying to reorganise those neighbourhoods and their ways of working to fit within the committee's own boundaries.

This highlights the way in which this way of operation can account for the inherent “messiness” that we have already described. Lines on a map will never fully reflect that messiness; boundaries will never be perfect, and so the focus should be on an approach which:

- Takes advantage of scale and the opportunities that scale brings to bring connections and to make best use of resources.
- Is sufficiently local to allow a proper, reasoned understanding of place, and to offer support within that place in a way that is locally relevant and needed.

If future councils adopt this model it will be down to them, alongside the communities they serve, to define an appropriate geography that meets both of these needs.

Any approach will need to broadly reflect ward boundaries for the new authorities which may end up being different following LGBCE's first electoral review for the area. New councils would therefore need to expect that

## Possible geographies

- **Current district boundaries (6 area committees):** already well understood and provides new councils with the opportunity for creative opportunities around the aggregation and disaggregation of services associated to local government reorganisation. But maintaining these boundaries in a formal way could be seen as working against the need for new councils to adopt a whole council approach to working – and the districts as they currently stand may still be too big to allow for the more granular approach that we set out here. (A slightly different approach to this might still be undertaken usefully in Oxford, which we describe in Appendix A).
- **Current county localities (9 area committees):** offers the benefit of consistency with certain other arrangements, but may need to be reviewed.
- **A more local arrangement (10+ committees):** offers a greater opportunity for a more granular understanding of local neighbourhood, communities and their

needs – and provides more opportunity for better engagement with parish councils. But a large number of committees inevitably means that resource is taken up with the administration of those bodies rather than the work that they do.

## Who would sit on an area committee?

We start from the principle that area committees would be established by the relevant principal authority and that they would need to be politically proportionate. The question is would this be political balance:

- Reflective of the balance *across the whole authority's area*, or;
- Reflective of the balance *within the area in question* (which would be our assumption).

Irrespective of the above it would go without saying that councillors would only be nominated to sit on the area committee relevant to their specific ward.

If area committees are committees of the Council their membership would count as part of the authority's wider political balance arrangements, which might affect membership numbers. There is a way around this if full Council takes a *nem con* vote to disapply political balance arrangements for specific committees – but this would not necessarily apply for an Oxford-wide committee (see appendices).

## Number of councillor members

If there were – for the sake of argument – 9 area committees across Oxfordshire and, under a future governance model, 100 councillors, then each area committee would probably cover either 3 or 4 wards of a new authority with between 9 and 12 members each – if all councillors for the area in question are on the committee (and if, therefore, it is agreed that these committees do not need to be politically proportionate across the whole council area).

## Number of other members

Non-voting co-option would provide the most effective and efficient way of engaging non-council members; we think that this would be best effected through the involvement of parish councillors. We think that a way would need to be found to ensure that a representative spread of parish councillors were represented – recognising that each area committee might cover an area across 20 or 30 parishes.

Depending on need and local interest others could be co-opted onto committees. However, we are conscious that for non-elected individuals, there would be question marks about legitimacy that might be justification for membership to be restricted to elected councillors only.

If these committees *were* to hold decision-making powers, membership would need to be

organised differently because there would be a need for voting on matters of consequence.

## 3E: Other potential models

The framework, and models, set out above are just one example of how a range of design options can be brought together in a coherent manner – but there are a wide range of building blocks available.

Here are some ideas to provide an illustration of the different directions that designers might wish to explore. These should be considered in light of the government's views about local area committees and establishing new towns and parish councils. All of the below possibilities could be designed into a system which conforms with the design principles we laid out in section 3A.

**Hybrid Area Committees** - Reinvent former district-based democratic forums as Area Committees chaired by unitary councillors, with local budgets and advisory powers. These can bridge gaps between strategic and local levels and serve as scaffolding for community-led governance.

**Local Boards** - Establish boards aligned with district boundaries that bring together councillors, officers, and community representatives to shape local plans, direct budgets, and lead place-shaping work. These provide a meaningful, accountable layer of local leadership inside a unitary system.

**Codify localism in the constitution** - Embed co-decision mandates into the constitution of a new unitary – requiring key local service and planning decisions to be made *with* locality structures. This protects local accountability and avoids re-centralisation.

**Reframe the role of place in governance** - Embed the recognition that local identity isn't just about geography but about lived experience, shared assets, and patterns of everyday life – like market towns with rural hinterlands or commuter belts with multi-use town centres. Governance should reflect and reinforce these place identities.

**Charter renewal and codification** - Strengthen the existing Oxfordshire Town & Parish Charter into a framework that sets out shared standards, expectations, and commitments around co-production, devolved responsibility, and scrutiny.

**Neighbourhood forums and panels** - Especially in unparished areas use participatory mechanisms such as Citizens' Assemblies to shape new area or community councils. This builds local identity from the ground up – rather than imposing governance structures from above. Create citizen-led local panels in every area – not just as consultative bodies but as standing forums for shaping service design, local priorities, and oversight.

**Municipal assemblies for Oxford City** - Introduce standing, citizen-led assemblies in Oxford to recognise the city's distinct identity and complex neighbourhoods. These would reflect



the city's demographic and community diversity and create a platform for place-based co-governance.

**Co-operative/Sortition based Councils** - In new or reformed town/parish councils, explore cooperative membership models — giving residents, local businesses, and civil society equal say. This creates shared ownership and better reflects the range of local actors involved in neighbourhood life. One way to achieve this is to use a sortition process for selection. Based on a sampling framework which matches the local demographics, this can enable a better reflection of people in a local area.

**Community Commissioners** - In areas of disadvantage or historic under-representation, appoint trusted local figures to act as policy brokers and community catalysts — sitting between the council and neighbourhoods to surface issues, build confidence, and help distribute decision-making power fairly. Oxfordshire has already moved to adopt a similar approach through the appointment of “Community Catalysts” through the Oxfordshire Way initiative.

**“Councillor as Convenor”** - Further develop councillors' focus from casework or committee oversight to local facilitation and leadership — acting as convenors of networks, co-producers of local services, and brokers of partnership. Support them with locality teams and democratic infrastructure.

**Parish clusters** - Address capacity gaps by enabling small parishes to join in federated arrangements. These can pool resources, share clerks, or run joint services — without losing local identity or accountability.

**Participatory Budgeting** - Open up a portion of the council's budget to participatory decision-making — through locality assemblies, online voting, or theme-based forums (e.g. youth services, climate action). This creates visible pathways from voice to impact.

**Digital micro-governance platforms** - Build civic tech infrastructure where residents can propose, vote on, and track hyper-local projects. This would allow people to engage flexibly and meaningfully in shaping services — without always needing to attend meetings.

**Community wealth building zones** - Pilot locality-led public service ecosystems focused on inclusive economic development — with anchor institutions, devolved commissioning, and local procurement rooted in community priorities.

**Investment in locality teams** - To deliver any of these models, resource is key. Locality teams — staffed with officers skilled in community engagement, commissioning, and governance — can support councillors, forums, and residents to make decisions that are legal, feasible, and fair.



## 4. Exploring the approach for Oxford

There is an appetite for the establishment of a new citywide parish/town council in Oxford, or for similar action that would “fill in the map” of the current unparished area.

As we have noted, Government, however, has more recently become more equivocal about the establishment of new parishes with precepting powers. It has stated that its preference is to see the use by new principal committees of neighbourhood committees to secure engagement with local people. This option is discussed in more detail below.

A new parish or parishes would need to be a solution that arises from a community governance review (CGR). This process (which needs to be run by a relevant principal council) is usually seen as bureaucratic – but could be enhanced with a process that involves a greater degree of co-production and co-design with local people. We explore this when talking about future governance for Oxford city.

### Implications of reorganisation for the city

The reorganisation of local government across Oxfordshire to create a single unitary council, or two unitaries, would mean that Oxford would no longer have its own distinct form of municipal governance.

In commissioning us, the county council specifically asked us to consider which city-wide options for governance might be viable. In doing so, we should stress that – as with the rest of this paper – our reflections should be seen as the beginning of an ongoing conversation that needs to centre the needs and aspiration of the people of the city and their elected representatives.

This part of the paper explores this by looking at two issues:

- Which aspects of neighbourhood governance – design, decision-making, delivery – might usefully be carried out city-wide in Oxford?
- Which structures might be established, and maintained, in order to do this?

### 4A: City-wide functions in Oxford

Our wider work has identified a spectrum of services and issues that can be managed at the most local level and we think that this holds for the city as well – with some amendment. We think that there is a case for a form of city-wide governance that engages with decision-making on the following issues in particular. Again, these would be seen through the prism of neighbourhood planning:

- Management of community assets / community facilities
- Management of parks and green spaces
- Community development and the management of cultural activities
- Business and economic development, and tourism
- Licensing and planning decision-making (although the legality and remit of these tasks would need to be subject to review – see below)
- (Social housing) estate management, where appropriate

## Neighbourhood planning for the city

Oxford City Council is a planning authority and benefits from its own local development framework. On council reorganisation, local policies will be saved, but in the long term we think it likely that there will continue to be an appetite for supplementary plans, under a new council's Local Development Framework, that speak to Oxford unique position and needs.

A city-wide supplementary planning document (SPD) is likely to be one component of this. Our model whereby

## 4B: Structures available to carry out the work

### A new city-wide council

Some interviewees spoke positively about the prospect of a new city-wide council. This would either cover the currently unparished parts of the city area, or could involve the abolition of those existing councils (further to a community governance review) and the creation of a new fully city-wide council.

This would need to be delivered by way of a community governance review either carried out by Oxford City Council as currently constituted in advance of local government reorganisation, or by a successor council subsequently. If carried out subsequently, charter trustee arrangements (see below) would be needed in the interim.

A new council for the city area would take on the city's Royal Charter and civic plate, and would have responsibility for certain other ceremonial matters.

Although attractive we think that policymakers would need to think carefully about the viability of a new city-wide parish council for Oxford. It would – depending on boundaries – be by some distance the most populous parish council in England. Government's messaging around its willingness to accept new precepting councils might make a new council of this nature difficult to agree, given its size and profile.

That having been said, this is the main way to preserve an independent model of municipal governance for the city – and if policymakers and others consider that to be of overriding importance, it may be worth the argument.

## **Filling out and federating the parish map**

One option that stops short of the creation of a new, very large, council would be the establishment of several smaller ones to cover localities of the city – supplementing those parishes that are already present. This would mean that the city of Oxford would be “fully parished” – but with those parishes each being of a similar size to (say) two or three existing Oxford City Council wards.

These parishes, formally grouped, would be able to co-ordinate their work and ensure that, together, they are able to manage and deliver services on behalf of the whole city; probably alongside an area committee as set out earlier in this section. Representatives of parish councils could come together alongside the area committee, or could sit on it, to influence and support city-wide decision-making.

This would be a novel model for England. The downside of this approach remains Government’s unwillingness to establish new parishes; and the logistical challenge associated with establishing several new parish level authorities and then making arrangements to design and embed a “federated” model for their operation.

## **A possible approach: a model linked to charter trustees**

If it is not proposed to establish a new city-wide body to replace the current district-level city council, then one of the first matters to be considered will be the establishment of charter trustees. While usually considered a technical requirement to

City and borough status is conferred by Royal Charter. Oxford’s Royal Charter dates to 1605.

Where reorganisation results in the abolition of “city” or “borough” councils it has been necessary to establish committees of charter trustees in order to ensure a continuity of ownership of these charter arrangements.

The charter trustees would be those councillors representing wards, on the new authority, whose geographic area corresponds with the boundaries of the city as they currently exist.

This means that charter trustees would cover all parished and unparished parts of the City of Oxford.

The charter trustees would elect a Lord Mayor for Oxford on an annual basis (so this civic tradition would continue); the charter trustees would “hold” civic plate and other ceremonial material.

An approach which might be more effective and which would eliminate the need to create wholly new institutions would be to provide the committee of charter trustees with the remit of an area committee.

This, too, is a novel model, and the legality of such an approach would need to be assured. But if legally possible it would provide a way of marrying a required, ongoing set of civic functions with the practical activities set out elsewhere in this report.

# Appendices

## Appendix A: Methodology

The methodology combined desk research and a series of structured conversations to understand how neighbourhood governance is working in Oxfordshire today, and how it might be strengthened in future. The aim was to gather a wide range of views on what currently supports or hinders local working, what people value about it, and what changes could make it more effective and sustainable.

We invited people to take part in one-to-one interviews or small group discussions, each lasting between 45 and 90 minutes. These conversations explored participants' lived experience and perspectives across four core themes: identity and sense of place; local power, leadership and accountability; community engagement and participation; and the practicalities and support needed to make neighbourhood governance work well.

A segmentation framework was used to ensure a mix of perspectives across Oxfordshire's diverse geography and roles. The findings were then triangulated with research into national and international models, helping to generate a set of insights, provocations and options that are grounded in Oxfordshire's context but informed by wider learning. The outputs are not intended as a blueprint, but as a resource to support local deliberation, design and decision-making.

### Interviews

We spoke with **52 individuals** from **eleven organisations** during July 2025, through a combination of sixteen interviews and five focus groups.

Participants were primarily elected members and officers from across Oxfordshire's local government community, alongside representatives from key organisations with a stake in the future governance of the county.

The conversations were semi-structured, with participants receiving a short topic guide in advance to outline the broad areas we aimed to explore. Questions were tailored to each participant or group, reflecting our stakeholder-led approach and the diverse roles and contexts represented.

All participants took part on the understanding that their contributions would remain anonymous, and that no individuals would be identified in the final report. This aligns with CfGS's standard practice for qualitative research of this nature. Findings were triangulated across multiple conversations, ensuring that no single interview or viewpoint was used in isolation to justify conclusions.

## Desk research

We undertook a high-level review of documentary evidence to support two key aims:

- To build a clearer understanding of Oxfordshire as a place (summarised in the appendices);
- To identify a range of options for future locality governance, drawing on good practice from across the UK and internationally.

Sources included material produced by principal authorities, voluntary and community sector bodies, town and parish councils, and other relevant local organisations. The review was conducted in two phases: an initial scan to understand the local governance landscape, and a second round later in the process to follow up on themes and references raised during interviews. One key reference point was the **Oxfordshire Councils Charter**, which outlines shared commitments to strengthen local partnership working and support a vibrant local democracy.

## Appendix B: Oxfordshire as a place

### History

Modern local government in Oxfordshire dates back to the nineteenth century, although forms of local governance for and within the county date back much longer – the city of Oxford, in particular, benefits from a history of nearly a millennium of municipal government.

For most of the county area, however, the formalisation of local government began with the Municipal Corporations Act 1835. This saw existing municipal corporations being reformed into municipal boroughs. In what is now Oxfordshire, four corporations were affected – Abingdon, Banbury, Oxford and Wallingford.

Over the subsequent decades existing poor law unions became conjoined with urban and rural sanitary districts which themselves, in due course, became elected urban and rural district councils, following the model elsewhere in England. Oxfordshire County Council was itself established in 1889, action that involved the shifting of the county's boundaries.

Although the history of governance in Oxfordshire is a long one, the area currently covered by the current county of Oxfordshire has only followed its present boundaries for a comparatively short period. Following the boundary shifts of 1889, further major changes occurred in 1974, when the reorganisation instigated by the Local Government Act 1972 brought into Oxfordshire areas currently covered by the Vale of the White Horse and South Oxfordshire that had previously been in Berkshire.

## **The current shape of the area: the place**

Although there is no such thing as a “typical county area”, Oxfordshire is particularly distinctive. The presence of two major universities, as well as major manufacturing, makes the city of Oxford a more significant economic “node” than many other county seats – accentuated by the conurbation’s importance to the wider regional objectives relating to the OxCam Arc.

Oxfordshire is, of course, about much more than Oxford. Community identity is mixed – as is usual in areas with a mix of urban and rural geography people are more likely to identify with the town or village within which (or near which) they live than they are with “Oxfordshire” as a place.

The pursuit of growth – and the management of the tensions and pressures that come with it – has been a feature of development in the county for many years. Oxford’s green belt has long constrained significant (housing) development within the city. Housing growth has instead focused on nearby towns, many of which grew significantly in the latter years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Bicester, Wantage (and Grove) and Didcot in particular are now experiencing further rounds of major urban extension. As we go on to discuss, opposition to these changes to the urban and rural fabric often centre on concerns over infrastructure and resources, in particular the lack of community facilities for large, new developments constructed in recent years. This raises questions about the strength of civic fabric that we discuss in more detail in the next section.

These pressures, amongst others, galvanise opposition when particularly major, highly visible, developments are proposed. The prospect of the construction of a reservoir near Abingdon has once again, as it did in the 1990s, led to a well-organised grassroots campaign of opposition. The plans for building a solar farm west of Botley have resulted in a similar community reaction. It is not unusual that communities are catalysed into coming together in response to an external threat like this, but in Oxfordshire an awareness of these challenges (and the need to be able to contribute meaningfully to discourse about the benefits, drawbacks and trade-offs of growth) is keenly felt by elected and non-elected policymakers.

## **Limits to growth: the current partnership perspective**

Enterprise Oxfordshire (previously OxLEP, the Oxfordshire Local Economic Partnership) published in late 2023 a Strategic Economic Plan. This plan described the Oxfordshire economy in the following broad terms:

- The innovation ecosystem – assets in STEM in associated areas – is particularly strong, with strong investment from both the private and public sectors – contributing to a strong “virtuous circle” of growth. Spinouts from the University of Oxford have contributed positively to this;
- This has led to substantial pressures – including a substantial shortfall in lab space, which is being partially addressed through major developments including

at Oxford North and Milton Park. Other pressures relate to the presence of labour and skills;

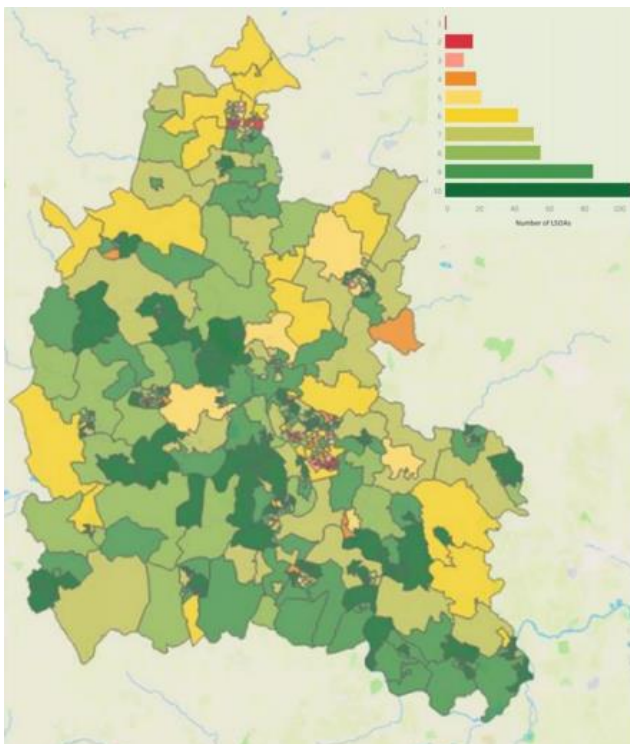
- Investment in STEM seems to be effecting wider economic transformation in Oxfordshire;
- Oxfordshire's "foundational" economy – economic activity relating to local demand (health, education, local services) employs 60% of those in employment in the area but faces challenging, around low pay, housing costs and challenges associated with labour shortages post-Brexit. EO argue that these connected challenges are widely understood amongst partners.

The presence of Oxford's two universities has a significant impact on the economic profile of the whole county. Harwell and Milton Park, both important economic nodes in their own right, at least in part owe their presence to the halo effect of Oxford's position as a centre of research. This, in turn, has had a significant effect on the demographics of neighbouring towns and villages.

As noted in the box above connectivity is a challenge across the county – despite the drive for growth and the presence of significant, and growing, economic activity. Oxfordshire is home to some of England's largest non-railway towns, and this (along with variable road transport connectivity) contributes to an environment in which the sense of place can be seen to focus on towns and their immediate hinterland.

## The current shape of the area: the people

Understanding the demographics of Oxfordshire is important because it helps to get a sense of the capacity, and resilience, of the population to participate in the forms of neighbourhood governance that we described in the introduction.



*Deprivation in Oxfordshire (Local Transport and Connectivity Plan, OCC 2022). Red is most deprived.*



Oxfordshire has a rural population that is ageing. Housing affordability, as noted above, presents a significant challenge in attracting and retaining younger people. This creates challenges around community resilience.

Another challenge is the presence of transient populations. In Oxford itself, these populations are dominated by students, leading to a significant, ongoing ebb and flow which makes assessments of community need more difficult.

This is not as simple as to say that Oxford's demography is typified by a division between "town and gown", because Oxford (as we have already noted) is not a typical "university town" – it has its own centres of economic geography wholly distinct from that of its universities (not least Plant Oxford at Cowley). This itself has a significant impact on the demographics of the city and its surrounding areas. Beyond the city, visible affluence in some towns and villages sits alongside, and sometimes hides, significant deprivation (see below).

Oxfordshire is a multi-ethnic place; particularly its urban areas. Governance, consultation and involvement mechanisms are not always organised in such a way as to take account of this mix. Some interviewees told us that most public service professionals, and elected representatives, are white and that this may hinder people's ability to understand the need to design and deliver services with the needs of people from a wide range of backgrounds in mind.