

Jim McMahon OBE MP
Minister of State for Local Government and English
Devolution
2 Marsham Street
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By email

**The Leader's Office
Oxfordshire County Council
County Hall
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Councillor Liz Leffman
Leader of the Council

10 January 2025

Dear Minister,

Congratulations to you, your teams and officials on the publication of the White Paper. It has been considered in great detail locally and we are delighted to see such close alignment among Oxfordshire with the government's position on structural reform to local government and devolution.

This great county requires the governance structures necessary to optimise the ambitions of its current and future residents, businesses, investors and institutions. A county that brought the world one of the first Covid-19 vaccines is operating at the cutting edge in its thinking and its actions, but we recognise that in order for this county to continue to flourish we need to embrace governance change.

This letter serves as a response to your letter of 16 December 2024. We wish to state clearly at the outset that we wish to join a 'fast track' in which to accelerate our local government reorganisation ambitions that will enable us to unlock devolution.

Devolution

All Oxfordshire Councils are committed to progress at pace towards devolution which we recognise will lead to the creation of a Mayoral Strategic Authority. Whilst we are not yet in a position in which to agree a deal, we will continue to engage positively with our partners across the Thames Valley.

Oxfordshire understands the importance of the Thames Valley to the government and we want to state our commitment very clearly to work with you and partners to enable a Mayoral Strategic Authority to cover this vital sub region. We will work tirelessly to make this happen. Conversations are progressing with relevant authorities and our next meeting has been scheduled for 31 January. Brought together, this area will cover a serious group of councils and key strategic geographies and institutions across health, police and fire and rescue services. We are in no doubt that it will leverage the full benefits of such a Strategic Authority that will amplify and accelerate economic, social and cultural objectives for this place and the places that sit within it.

Oxfordshire is one of only a handful of places in the country which makes a net positive contribution to the Exchequer and sits within the South East, which remains one of the highest performing economic regions. But neither the county nor the region have the optimal governance, powers and influence needed to deliver inclusive, sustainable economic growth locally, regionally, nationally and internationally at the pace that is essential for the UK.

Local Government Reorganisation

Oxfordshire County Council has held conversations about this element of the White Paper with its Cabinet and all Leaders of its political groups. There is total support for reorganisation at pace.

The county council has had, and will continue to have the benefit of the clearest direction and support from government, conversations with the Leaders of each district council (Cherwell, Oxford City Council, South Oxfordshire, Vale of White Horse and West Oxfordshire). The District Councils of Cherwell, South Oxfordshire, Vale of White Horse and West Oxfordshire have agreed to work together to seek to identify the best approach to unitarisation across Oxfordshire. We will continue to work positively with Oxford City Council as this is a shared endeavour.

The councils of Cherwell, South Oxfordshire, Vale of White Horse and West Oxfordshire have shared correspondence outlining support for reorganisation in line with the ambitions clearly set in the White Paper.

All our councils have fifty years of dedication to the place and places of Oxfordshire, but all governance systems work to a point. We collectively believe there are benefits to be gained from unitarisation and recognise how unitary local government complements the work of a strategic authority. To that end, we are strongly encouraged by the government's position.

Making Progress Now

Oxfordshire authorities have delivery plans for sustainable growth that show how immediate investment can accelerate the delivery of high-quality jobs, environmental investment, housing and economic growth in the next two to three years.

We have the structures and ambition to deliver this now. With the support of government, we can be in the best possible position to transition this active sustainable growth programme into new structures. We would therefore welcome a cross-departmental discussion on our position and our offer in tandem with reorganisation and devolution ambitions.

Resources

With regard to resources to move this ambitious programme of work forward, we recognise the government's intent to offer secondments. We welcome this and wish to enter formative discussions on how we can practically take this forward. We and our local authority partners will be having conversations throughout January and beyond to understand and plan the necessary workforce requirements and budgetary implications – we would wish to build a collective team based on the talents of all councils to progress this extensive work.

Elections

The postponement of ordinary elections is a significant concern. Our commitment to reform at pace is absolutely clear, but we strongly believe democracy is best served by the public having clarity over when and what elections will take place.

To that end, we would be seeking commitment from government that elections to a shadow authority/authorities would take place in May 2026 if a postponement of county council elections in 2025 is essential. This would mean a new authority/authorities would 'go live' in 2027 or 2028.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Liz Leffman', written in a cursive style.

Cllr Liz Leffman
Leader, Oxfordshire County Council
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