

chiefexecutive@oxfordshire.gov.uk

Dear Minister,

Interim Plan for Oxfordshire

Thank you for your letter and accompanying statutory invitation to all Councils across Oxfordshire to progress local government reform. This plan has been arrived at to support our response and ensure a strong connection to Oxfordshire's devolution ambitions.

Local Government reform provides many opportunities for residents, businesses, institutions and investors to have simpler arrangements for accessing local services and democratic representation. All Councils are embracing this significant opportunity and we share a commitment to doing what is right for the place and places of Oxfordshire. We have been working together to arrive at high level options as to what a refreshed local government landscape could look like.

Partners across Oxfordshire recognise a set of common challenges to progressing this work, especially in relation to capacity. We are working together, as far as we can, to share resources and information to support one another to arrive at a response to this first milestone. Ultimately, we want to ensure that proposed changes to the system of local government in Oxfordshire will stand the test of time and reflect the interests of the residents, businesses and communities that we collectively serve.

Support for Devolution

Oxfordshire Councils are supportive of devolution at the fastest pace possible for our region, for residents' and businesses' benefit, and are actively progressing plans alongside local government reorganisation. Discussions with Berkshire Councils about a potential Strategic Authority are highly productive, and a summit on 24 March will continue our talks on this matter.

New Councils Under Consideration

Three high level options are being developed in parallel for unitary local government in Oxfordshire, using common or shared data sources where possible.

Each option has been arrived at using the guidance and annex shared with us in the statutory invitation. All Councils across Oxfordshire are at varying stages of detail for their options and the extent of that progress is identified within each option submitted.

In summary, the options are for a single council for Oxfordshire (Oxfordshire Council), two councils (Ridgeway Council and Oxford City, West Oxfordshire and Cherwell Council using existing district council boundaries), or three councils (Greater Oxford Council, North Oxfordshire Council and Ridgeway Council) – with the latter two options both involving the inclusion of West Berkshire Council.

Indicative Costs, Planning Arrangements and Transformation

Oxfordshire County Council has created an initial reserve of £5m to progress Local Government Reorganisation and Devolution ambitions with a further investment of £5m to be made at Cabinet in March 2025. Initial costs of reorganisation are likely to be in the region of £20m based on estimates and lessons learned elsewhere. It is the intention that this pool of funding is supplemented by District Councils to facilitate essential LGR and devolution activity.

Local Engagement

Each Council has taken different approaches to undertaking light touch engagement with political group leaders, partners, MPs and other stakeholders. Following this submission, Councils will commit to a coordinated programme of engagement after feedback from Government is known.

Indicative Costs of Preparing Proposals, Standing Up An Implementation Team and Capacity Funding

Efforts locally have been focused on developing high level proposals, however, transition plans can be arrived at, collectively, using plans that already exist and tailored to suit the future reorganisation needs of Oxfordshire. These can be sharpened using the lessons learned from previous reorganisations. Very early discussions have taken place to develop a team to progress Local Government Reorganisation and Devolution and following submission on 21 March, we will seek to return to those conversations and make subsequent decisions.

Cross Council Engagement and Value for Money

Oxfordshire authorities are seizing the benefits of a bold agenda of local government reform and devolution as well as renewed efforts to activate growth plans across Oxford to Cambridge Growth Corridor and within Oxfordshire through a dedicated Oxford Growth Commission.

We recognise the importance of maintaining strong partnership working with each other and with wider partners to continue delivery of projects of strategic importance and improvements to services and the place of Oxfordshire.

We cannot afford to create a 'planning blight' across this place. We have agreed to undertake this work efficiently and calmly and ensure delivery of planned growth and public services stays on track. We have also agreed to do as much work in house as possible, relying on professional bodies and representative organisations for support, and will use external organisations sparingly to develop proposals and/ or challenge our assumptions and overall thinking.

Oxfordshire Leaders and Chief Executives are meeting regularly to provide guidance on the development of proposals but decision making is for individual Councils through their legal and constitutional frameworks.

A joint meeting of s151 officers and Monitoring Officers has been highly successful in drawing attention to the immediate governance, finance and ethical nature of this work. Working collectively we can support the system of local government in Oxfordshire ensure that a successor Council or Councils are able to deliver, safely, legally and with confidence on day one.

Yours,

Cllr David Hingley, Leader - Cherwell District Council

Cllr Susan Brown, Leader - Oxford City Council

Cllr Liz Leffman, Leader - Oxfordshire County Council

Cllr David Rouane, Leader – South Oxfordshire District Council

Cllr Bethia Thomas, Leader – Vale of White Horse District Council

Cllr Andy Graham, Leader - West Oxfordshire District Council

****Letters to be signed pending outcome of individual Cabinet or Executive meetings****