Supplement for

Scrutiny Committee

On **Wednesday 5 November 2025** At **6.00 pm**

Agenda Item 6 Local Government Reorganisation - Report and Appendices - Three Unitary Authorities Proposal - Greater Oxford, Northern Oxfordshire and Ridgeway

Contents

Cabinet, at its Special meeting on 10 November 2025, will be presented with three final unitary proposals and decide which proposal should be submitted to Government by Oxford City Council on 28 November 2025.

All Oxfordshire Councils have been invited to submit proposals for Local Government Reorganisation, replacing existing two-tier councils with a single 'unitary' layer of local government. Oxford City Council has been developing a proposal for the creation of three unitary councils across Oxfordshire and West Berkshire. Proposals for two unitaries (covering Oxon & W Berks), and a single unitary (covering Oxon) being developed by other councils in Oxfordshire and West Berkshire.

The Committee is asked to consider the item and agree any recommendations.

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Oxford City Council, Town Hall, St Aldate's Oxford OX1 1BX

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OXFORD CITY COUNCIL

To:	Cabinet
Date:	10th November 2025
Report of:	Caroline Green, Chief Executive
Title of Report:	Full response to Government Statutory Invitation to submit proposal for Local Government Reorganisation

Summary and recommendations	
Decision being taken:	To agree a preferred option for the creation of three unitary councils in Oxfordshire and West Berkshire as a proposal to Government for Local Government Reorganisation (LGR); and to submit the proposal to Government by the 28 November 2025.
Key decision:	Yes. FORWARD PLAN ENTRY
Cabinet Member:	Councillor Susan Brown, Council Leader
Corporate Priority:	Good, affordable homes.
	Strong, fair economy.
	Thriving communities.
	Zero Carbon Oxford.
	Well-run council.
Policy Framework:	The Government's Devolution White Paper published December 2024.
	The Council Strategy 2024 to 2028.

Recommendation(s): That Cabinet resolves to:
1. **Note and consider** all three LGR proposals that have been developed by Oxfordshire and West Berkshire councils for the creation of unitary local government across Oxfordshire, which are presented in the appendices:
Three unitary authorities (Greater Oxford, Northern Oxfordshire and Ridgeway) developed by Oxford City Council
Two unitary authorities (Oxford and Shires, and Ridgeway) developed by West Oxfordshire District Council, Cherwell District Council, South Oxfordshire District Council, Vale of White Horse District Council and West Berkshire Council

One unitary authority (Oxfordshire Council) developed by Oxfordshire County Council.

2. **Agree** that Oxford City Council's preferred LGR proposal is for the creation of three new unitary councils covering Oxfordshire and West Berkshire, as set out in Appendix One;

3. **Delegate** authority to the Chief Executive, in consultation with the Council Leader, to make any further minor amendments to the LGR proposal before its submission to Government in accordance with its prescribed process and requirements to ensure a fully compliant proposal, provided that such amendments do not materially affect the substance of the proposal. This may include the addition of explanatory graphics and case studies, and the design layout of the proposal.

Appendix No.	Appendix Title	Exempt from Publication
Appendix 1	Three unitary councils: Greater Oxford, Northern Oxfordshire, and Ridgeway	No
Appendix 2	Two unitary councils: Oxford & Shires and Ridgeway	No
Appendix 3	A single unitary council: Oxfordshire Council	No
Appendix 4	Risk Register	No
Appendix 5	Equalities Impact Assessment	No
Appendix 6	Appendix 3UA Oxford City Council LGR Proposal	No
Appendix 7	Appendix C Volterra Oxfordshire LGR Economic Growth Report	No
Appendix 8	Appendix F Oxfordshire Unitary Models – Waste, Recycling and Environmental Services Transformation Programme (WESP)	No
Appendix 9	Unmodified 3 unitaries proposal – not involving boundary changes	No

Background - Local Government Reorganisation

1. On 16 December 2024, the Government published the Devolution White Paper. The paper sets out the most significant reforms to local government since the Local Government Act 1972, including the ambition to create unitary – or single tier – councils in all existing two-tier areas of England, including Oxfordshire.

2. Government has been clear that it sees local government reorganisation as an enabler to moving towards devolution of powers and funding to Mayoral Strategic Authorities.

3. On 5 February 2025, the Government issued to all councils in Oxfordshire a statutory invitation to prepare proposals for Local Government Reorganisation (LGR). Government requested that any councils wishing to submit LGR proposals should provide an Interim Plan updating on progress towards developing those proposals by 21 March 2025, followed by Full Proposals by 28 November 2025.

4. Government requested that councils within two-tier areas work together to develop a single Interim Plan for their area which may include more than one proposal in development. Oxford City Council worked with all other councils across Oxfordshire to develop three LGR proposals within a single interim plan.

5. Following submission of the Interim Plan, this report proposes the submission of a Full Proposal for the creation of three unitary councils in Oxfordshire and West Berkshire Council. This would see the existing City Council area form part of a larger Greater Oxford unitary council broadly aligned to the geography of the existing Oxford Green Belt. A second new unitary council with the working title of 'Ridgeway' would cover the rest of the existing areas of South Oxfordshire, Vale of White Horse and West Berkshire; and a third new unitary council with the working title of 'Northern Oxfordshire' would cover the entire existing area of West Oxfordshire and the rest of Cherwell.

6. Final proposals are to be submitted by 28 November 2025. The Government will formally consult on compliant proposals in spring 2026 with the Secretary of State deciding on which proposal is selected before summer parliamentary recess.

7. The Government has confirmed its intention that a new unitary council or councils will go live in May 2028 with shadow elections to the council or councils expected in May 2027.

Introduction

8. The Government wishes to see local government transitioning from the current two-tier system of district and county councils to new unitary councils. It also wishes to see councils working in combination to form Strategic Authorities at the sub-regional level where these don't already exist.

9. While the Government has not prescribed a specific model, local authorities are expected to collaborate on proposals that deliver efficiency, high-quality services, and stronger local engagement.

10. Government guidance sets out six key principles:

    i)   Establishment of single tier local government for the whole area, involving sensible economic areas and geographies that will increase housing supply and help meet local needs;

    ii) Creation of unitary local government at the right size to achieve efficiencies, improve capacity and withstand financial shocks. New councils should serve a minimum population of 500,000, with exceptions considered where this ensures structures are locally appropriate, including for devolution. Decisions

will be made on a case-by-case basis. The proposed three-unitary model addresses this requirement;

iii) Unitary structures must prioritise the delivery of high quality and sustainable public services to citizens;

iv) Proposals should show how councils in the area have sought to work together in coming to a view that meets local needs and is informed by local views;

v) New structures must support devolution arrangements;

vi) Unitary structures should enable stronger community engagement and deliver genuine opportunity for neighbourhood empowerment.

11. Councils across Oxfordshire and West Berkshire developed three interim options:

i) Three unitary councils covering all of Oxfordshire and West Berkshire (Greater Oxford, Northern Oxfordshire, Ridgeway) - developed by Oxford City Council.

ii) Two unitary councils covering all of Oxfordshire and West Berkshire (Oxford & Shires, Ridgeway) - developed by West Oxfordshire District Council, Cherwell District Council, South Oxfordshire District Council, Vale of White Horse District Council and West Berkshire Council.

iii) A single unitary council covering Oxfordshire (Oxfordshire Council) - developed by Oxfordshire County Council.

12. Interim proposals for proposals were published in March 2025, outlining the case for creating three, two and one unitarity authorities. On 3 June 2025 all Oxfordshire's councils received feedback from the MHCLG on the interim proposals.

13. Since then, detailed work has been taking place to develop Full Proposal for the three options. All six Oxfordshire councils and West Berkshire Council have worked collaboratively to share data sets, provide teach-ins for officers across a range of specialist service areas and, where appropriate, to work together to engage with key stakeholder groups.

14. While officers are recommending the approval of the three unitaries proposal as for submission to Government, all three proposals are included in the Cabinet papers for Members to consider.

Three Unitary Authorities

15. The reorganisation of local government is a once in a generation opportunity. This is a key moment both locally and nationally to restore trust in local government by creating organisations which are fit for the future while reflecting the people and places they represent.

16. Introducing three unitary councils creates a unitary city on expanded boundaries, as well as northern and southern unitaries. This would include West Berkshire, which makes it a 'Type C' proposal under the Government's criteria: a single tier of local authority covering the whole of the county concerned, or one or more districts in the county; and one or more relevant adjoining areas.

17. It would also involve boundary changes, to create Greater Oxford on a footprint broadly aligned with the city's existing Green Belt. While Government has stated that it requires strong justification to depart from using existing district areas as the

building blocks for new unitaries, officers believe the Proposal fully meets this threshold.

18. Following MHCLG guidance, legal advice has been taken on how best to present the three unitaries proposal in a way that is consistent with the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007. This is because while the Statutory Invitation allows for LGR proposals involving boundary changes, the 2007 Act does not make provision for this and the English Devolution and Community Empowerment Bill 2025, which does include such provision is not yet enacted. The 2007 Act does allow the Secretary of State to make modifications to a submitted proposal.

19. Based on the legal advice received, this proposal is presented as a requested modification to the three unitary authorities proposal, as it better meets the criteria set out in the Government's statutory invitation in terms of financial sustainability, sensible economic areas, increased housing supply to meet local needs, robust public services, neighbourhood empowerment and supporting devolution.

20. It should be noted that MHCLG officials have advised officers that the majority of the 21 areas undergoing LGR include proposals that would involve boundary changes.

21. The proposal for three unitary authorities:

i) responds directly to Government's ambition to reshape local government around local priorities and opportunities: to unlock renewal of our public services, economy and society through deep connection to the distinct places and communities within our region. Three unitary councils are the best route to realise this vision and fully unleash the huge economic potential of our county, while retaining its strong character and environment.

ii) maintains and builds on the great strengths of Oxfordshire. It focuses growth of housing and employment growth around the city so that the wider area can access these opportunities and benefits whilst protecting and enhancing the character of the rural communities and countryside and delivering appropriate and proportionate levels of growth in those areas.

iii) has at its core councils, communities, and partners working together to co-deliver early intervention and preventative outcomes in efficient and inclusive ways. This is a huge opportunity to work with our residents, communities and partners on what matters to them most.

22. The LGR proposal strikes the balance of Oxfordshire's diverse needs in serving three distinct geographies and their communities across the county and into western Berkshire, which shares long historic links with southern Oxfordshire. It enables complementary and connected co-existence into the future across a geography that will be much more closely connected through the expected creation of a Thames Valley Mayoral Strategic Authority.

Case for three Unitaries

23. The proposal for three unitary authorities is fundamentally designed to deliver the best possible outcomes for the people, places, and economy of Oxfordshire. It is a direct response to the clear needs and ambitions of the area, providing a blueprint for a modern, effective, and equitable model of local government.

24. The three unitaries will deliver a future where Oxfordshire achieves its full potential across six critical dimensions:

- where **prosperity** is unlocked and shared through Oxford's economic engine;

- where good affordable **homes** are available to all, and are delivered in a way that enhances sustainability;

- where **quality of life** is enhanced through preventative, integrated services;

- Where local community **identity** is strengthened rather than diluted;

- where democratic **voice** is empowered at every level; and

- where our local authorities are financially sustainable and **future-fit** and financially sustainable.

25. The case for three unitaries is built on the conviction that the right geography of governance is the foundation for success. This model uniquely delivers across these six elements by creating authorities of the right scale and character to meet Oxfordshire's diverse needs, while reconnecting the southern areas of the existing county and West Berkshire with which they share a long history.

26. It gives Oxfordshire the powers and space to drive transformational prosperity through new homes, jobs, and infrastructure, while ensuring the distinct identities of Oxford, Northern Oxfordshire and Ridgeway are preserved and strengthened through local decision-making. In doing so, it strengthens prosperity alongside health, wellbeing, and inclusion, restores clear and accountable leadership, and ensures that Oxfordshire's diverse communities are recognised and protected, not diminished by scale.

Engagement

27. Oxford City Council, as a proposer of a three unitary solution for Oxfordshire and West Berkshire, has undertaken a very extensive programme of engagement. This has involved many thousand interactions with residents and a broad range of stakeholders.

28. The engagement involved meetings with more than 75 stakeholder organisations including universities, developers, major businesses, parish councils, Members of Parliament, statutory bodies, and neighbouring local authorities.

29. A public survey of Oxfordshire and West Berkshire residents received 1,580 responses, of which 61% of respondents were from outside of the city. 340 residents were engaged through 11 drop-in events across Oxfordshire and one in West Berkshire. The Council's Residents' Panel was also surveyed, and there was a dedicated survey of businesses.

30. Community engagement and inclusivity were enhanced through targeted digital outreach, achieved more than 2.6million impressions and strong interaction across six platforms, with TikTok boosting youth engagement

31. The proposal was brought to the Group Leaders' meetings 6 times, and 4 all Member workshops were delivered as part of the Council's 3 Unitary Authority Local Government Reorganisation proposal. Each workshop focused on key themes, were led and facilitated by one of the Councils senior officers and were open to all Members.

i) Housing delivery and economy

ii) Transport

iii) Social Services, communities and housing integration

iv) Governance and local representation

32. The input and contributions from all political groups were valued, ensuring a collaborative approach.

33. This comprehensive engagement programme has been central to the development of the three-unitary proposal. Feedback from this process demonstrates strong support for councils that are smaller, closer to their communities, and more responsive to local needs. Businesses highlighted the importance of proximity to the city and support for going beyond the Government's minimum targets for housing delivery.

34. Responses from residents, businesses, and partners consistently indicate a preference for a locally responsive governance model that:

i) Delivers tailored services

ii) Strengthens local representation

iii) Balances economic growth with heritage and environmental priorities

35. This feedback underpins the Council's commitment to enhancing democratic participation through formal engagement structures that reflect both urban and rural perspectives. Each new authority will be rooted in its community, preserving local identity, enabling distinctive service models, and creating councils that residents recognise, trust, and feel part of.

36. The three unitaries proposal reflects these priorities by:

37. Preserving historic and cultural identities while aligning governance with community boundaries.

38. Empowering residents through stronger local voice and participatory governance.

39. Supporting economic growth and delivering affordable housing in sustainable locations.

40. Integrating health, education, and social care services.

41. Embedding principles of transparency, co-design, and tailored strategies for urban and rural needs

Other Options Considered

42. As part of the Council's work to develop a three unitary authority proposal, alternative options for Local Government Reorganisation in Oxfordshire were considered. The three alternative potential options are defined as follows:

i) **Single Unitary Authority for Oxfordshire:** Amalgamation of all councils into a single unitary authority for the whole of Oxfordshire, where Oxfordshire Council is responsible for all services for Oxfordshire residents.

ii) **Two Unitary Authorities:** Replacing the current two-tier, six-council system with two unitary councils. Oxford and Shires Council created from the existing district councils for Cherwell, Oxford City and West Oxfordshire; and Ridgeway

Council, created from the existing district councils of South Oxfordshire, Vale of White Horse and the unitary council of West Berkshire.

iii) **Three Unitary Authorities:** Introducing three unitary councils that create a unitary city on existing boundaries, as well as northern and southern Unitaries, also including West Berkshire. These would be Oxford, Northern Oxfordshire and Ridgeway. This is presented as a compliant proposal under the Local Government and Involvement in Public Health Act 2007.

43. The Cabinet may wish not to submit any LGR proposal to Government. Given Government's stated expectation that areas should submit proposals and that others in Oxfordshire are planning to do so, this option is not recommended.

44. Officer's recommendation is that the Cabinet endorse the preferred LGR proposal for the creation of three new unitary councils covering Oxfordshire and West Berkshire, on expanded boundaries, as set out in Appendix One for the reasons set out in this report and the Appendix One.

Corporate Priorities and Policies

45. The Council has set five strategic priorities it is working to achieve and will seek to progress further through local government reorganisation:

Good, affordable homes

Strong, fair economy

Thriving communities

Zero Carbon Oxford

Well-run council

46. Progression of reorganisation ambitions will provide a successor council or councils in Oxfordshire with broader responsibilities to progress social, economic, environmental and operational objectives on a greater footprint than the existing Oxford City Council.

47. Local government reorganisation will require partners to ensure democratic participation and voice is protected and where possible, strengthened as part of this process.

Financial implications

48. Financial modelling undertaken as part of the LGR proposal, and reviewed by Pixel Financial, has shown the transitional costs of merging seven existing local authorities into the proposed three new unitary councils will be £36.2million. This is in line with the level of transitional costs experienced in previous local government reorganisations.

49. The balance sheets of the current authorities were disaggregated into balance sheets for the 3 unitaries by a Finance Specialist at LGFin. This showed that, from a balance sheet perspective, the new authorities would have a sufficient level of assets and resources to be financially sustainable. Various measures of financial health show that the new authorities will start on a strong financial basis when compared with like authorities.

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51. Government has set a clear expectation that the transition costs of LGR must be met by local authorities themselves through efficiencies achieved.

52. Savings will arise from the move to successor unitary authorities from the removal of duplication and rationalisation across a range of services.

53. Strong balance sheets and significant future growth benefits underline the financial sustainability and resilience of the three unitary councils.

54. A manageable revenue position on formation of the unitaries based on disaggregation of their 2025-26 budgets.

55. Payback of transitional costs of £36.2 million and the transformation of services could be achieved within a 4-year period with- no need for any Government support.

56. By year 5 annual net savings of £48.6 million per annum will be achieved through transitional and transformational efficiencies

57. Oxfordshire County Council has already committed £10m from earmarked reserves for local government reorganisation and devolution, which can be used towards the cost of local government reform and devolution (£1.2m of which will be used for devolution). Oxford City Council's Budget 2026/27 is also expected to allocate a provision towards meeting LGR and devolution transitional costs, and it is expected that this pool of funding will be further supplemented by the District Councils to facilitate LGR and devolution activity.

Legal issues

58. The legal basis for the statutory invitation having been issued is the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007. This report, and the resulting decisions of Government, would signal the continuation of a significant legal and constitutional process. This is set out in detail within this report, with the Council proposing a Type C proposal.

59. Whilst District areas should be considered the building blocks for the proposals more complex boundary changes can be considered where there is strong justification. The Council has sought advice on the format and structure of its proposals. This has confirmed that:

60. A proposal within the existing boundaries and a request to government to modify/a supplementary proposal with boundary changes can be submitted together on a cross-reference basis.

61. A proposal involving boundary changes should include as much information as possible in order to ensure the "strong justification" is demonstrated in the submission.

62. The Secretary of State can then determine the submissions made in line with the above.

63. The decision regarding the submission of a proposal for a single tier of local government under Part 1 of the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007 ('the 2007 Act'), is an executive function, in accordance with Part 3: Responsibility for Functions as out in the Council's Constitution. This report and recommendation complies with the provisions of the Local Government Act 2000 and the Local Authorities (Functions and Responsibilities) (England) Regulations ("the Functions Regulations").

64. Upon submission to the Secretary of State, under Part 1 of the 2007 Act (Section 7) they may, by order, implement the proposal, with or without modification or decide to take no action. The Secretary of State may not make an order implementing a proposal unless he has consulted every authority affected by the proposal (except the authority or authorities which made it), and such other persons as he considers appropriate.

Level of risk

65. The Secretary of State can decide to take forward proposals that are submitted by areas with or without modification. Furthermore, the Government has the power to initiate and implement LGR, even if local councils choose not to propose changes.

66. It is, therefore, important to submit a compelling, evidence-based vision for LGR to the Government that fully reflects the needs, opportunities and challenges of Oxfordshire's diverse places and communities. (See Appendix Four)

Equalities impact

67. Equality, Diversity & Inclusion of local government services are key aspects of local government reorganisation and service transformation. LGR provides an opportunity to further enhance Equality, Diversity & Inclusion across public services and features prominently in our proposed service delivery model, particularly in structuring services around the principles of Early Intervention and Prevention. (See Appendix Five)

Carbon and Environmental Considerations

68. New unitary authorities will be responsible for meeting government targets on greenhouse gas emissions and setting and agreeing Net-Zero targets. As such this decision should not impact North Norfolk District Council's immediate Net Zero commitments.

69. However, during the time in which LGR is agreed and implemented, there is the potential for delays in the implementation of Net Zero actions for the improvement of community assets and buildings. Should decisions and investment be delayed due to uncertainty of LGR, progress towards Net Zero could be limited, and this would increase the need for accelerated action in the future to meet government targets.

Conclusion

70. The preferred LGR proposal for the creation of three new unitary councils covering Oxfordshire and West Berkshire, on expanded boundaries (as set out in Appendix One), delivers three local councils that:

- Are of significant size and scale.

- Have economic opportunities which can unlock new homes, new skills and new jobs for local people in the most sustainable way, anchored in the character of Oxfordshire's distinct historical city, towns and villages.

- Have different communities and geographies with distinct needs which are best served by locally tailored and delivered public services which ensure local voices are heard and identity retained; and

- Are financially sustainable, safe and legal, with real opportunities to drive efficiencies, savings and local benefit not only through economies of scale but meaningful reform which reduces demand for services and ensures the most people have access to fulfilling lives.

71. Officers are satisfied that the preferred LGR proposal for the creation of three new unitary councils covering Oxfordshire and West Berkshire, on expanded boundaries (as set out in Appendix One), fully meets the government criteria set out in the Statutory Invitation and includes an options appraisal of the other proposals, which score lower.

Report author	Mish Tullar
Job title	Transition Director
Service area or department	Corporate Resources Directorate
Telephone	07483 010 499
e-mail	mtullar@oxford.gov.uk

Background Papers:
List the background documents and, if possible, link to them.
All background papers must be listed in accordance with the Local Government (Access to Information) Act and The Local Authorities (Executive Arrangements) (Meetings and Access to Information) (England) Regulations 2012. This includes, any material which discloses facts or matters on which the report or an important part of it is based and which have been relied on in the preparation of the report Each document must be listed and a copy of each document made available to members and the public on request, (or they should be directed where to find it if it is already published on the Council's website). All confidential, exempt, copyrighted and published works are EXCLUDED from this requirement.

1	Interim Plan for Oxfordshire, March 2025
2	Interim Oxfordshire and West Berkshire Three Unitary Option
3	Interim Oxfordshire and West Berkshire Two Unitary Option
4	Interim Oxfordshire Single Unitary Option

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OXFORDSHIRE
LOCAL GOVERNMENT REORGANISATION
Three Unitary Authorities Proposal

Empowering People, Growing Prosperity, Building Communities

CONTENTS

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1 Foreword

Local government reform is not simply a matter of administrative change — it is an opportunity to reshape how we deliver for our communities for generations to come.

Across Oxfordshire and West Berkshire, our councils have a proud record of service, partnership, and local leadership. Yet we face challenges that demand bold thinking and collaborative action: a housing crisis decades in the making, rising demand for care and support, growing pressures on local infrastructure, and an economy whose full potential remains constrained by outdated structures and boundaries.

Our proposal for the creation of three new unitary authorities represents a once-in-a-generation opportunity to design a system of local government that is simpler, more effective, accountable, and financially sustainable — and above all, close to the people it serves. It sets out a clear, evidence-based vision for councils that are capable of tackling the big issues of today while preparing for the opportunities of tomorrow.

At its heart, this proposal is rooted in place — in the distinct identities, strengths and ambitions of our communities. The creation of Greater Oxford, Northern Oxfordshire, and Ridgeway Councils will align decision making with the geography of people's lives and the economic realities of our region.
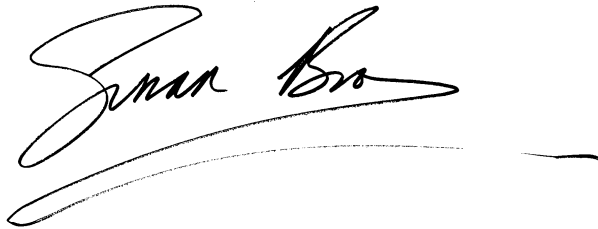
Each will be responsible for all council services in their area and empowered to deliver better outcomes for residents and businesses alike. Together, they will form the foundations of a modern, connected region — one that works in partnership through a Mayoral Strategic Authority to drive growth, investment and innovation across the wider region.

This is not simply about doing things differently; it is about doing them better. By consolidating seven councils into three, we can unlock over £48 million in annual efficiencies and reinvest in front-line services designed around local needs. In doing so, we will finally be able to tackle Oxford's housing crisis and deliver the homes we need. It will unlock Oxfordshire's full economic potential — contributing an estimated £170 billion to the national economy while ensuring that the benefits of growth are felt locally, through new jobs, skills, and investment opportunities for residents and businesses alike. Just as importantly, these reforms will ensure that decisions are taken locally, by people who understand their communities and are accountable to them.

This is a plan not just for more efficient local government, but for stronger, fairer, and more forward-looking councils that deliver the homes, jobs, and services our people deserve.

The proposals set out in this document have been shaped through extensive engagement with residents, businesses, and partners. Their message has been clear: people want councils that are closer, more responsive, and more ambitious for their places. The three-unitary model delivers on that vision — empowering people, growing prosperity, and building communities that can thrive long into the future.

This proposal marks the next step in that journey. It presents a compelling, evidence-based case for change — one that will create councils fit for the challenges and opportunities of the twenty-first century, and for the generations to come.

Councillor Susan Brown
Leader, Oxford City Council

2 Executive Summary

The reorganisation of local government is a once-in-a-generation opportunity to deliver more effective, accountable, and financially sustainable local governance. More than that, it's a chance to design councils capable of driving meaningful change, addressing the challenges communities and public services face today and those in the decades to come.

Our proposal is rooted in the ambitions and needs of communities, and the governance structures that are best able to empower communities and deliver the homes, jobs, infrastructure and services essential to their wellbeing. But in doing so, our proposals will advance national objectives for housing supply, prosperity, and public sector efficiency.

Our proposal to create three new unitary councils spanning Oxfordshire and West Berkshire will:

- Create **three financially sustainable and robust councils delivering £48.6m efficiencies annually** rooted in achieving better results, not just from economies of scale.
- Deliver new **homes at the scale and where they are needed** to tackle the area's decades-long housing crisis in the most sustainable way;
- Unlock Oxfordshire's constrained economic potential**, contributing £170 billion to the national economy, whilst ensuring the benefits of growth are felt locally**
- **Strengthen local accountability** through councils that are closer to the people they serve, responsible for all services in there are, able to reflect the distinct identities and ambitions of their communities;
- **A community-based prevention approach** to give residents the best possible access to services that are shaped to their specific needs and support a better quality of life
- **Enable regional collaboration** through the proposed Thames Valley Mayoral Strategic Authority, ensuring alignment on major transport and growth priorities.

Growth – Oxfordshire's historic dividing line

Oxford City Council has long prioritised meeting housing needs and achieving the city's economic potential, through development both of housing and commercial space. However, Oxford's population constitutes 22% of Oxfordshire's and its pro-growth outlook is not shared in many parts of the county. An inbuilt rural majority has generally prioritised conservation overgrowth. For decades the democratic will of this rural majority has led to the return of councils across Oxfordshire's other districts and at the county level that have sought to minimise the amount of growth planned or delivered. The divide overgrowth has played out in the ceaseless tussle over how to provide for Oxford's unmet housing need, with the city unable to build all the houses it needs because of being so tightly bounded on all sides.

The need for boundary changes – Modification request

Our proposal is for three unitary councils covering the current Oxfordshire geography and extending to include West Berkshire. This requests a Modification by the Secretary of State to enable boundary changes that will see the creation of **Greater Oxford Council** based on the city and its Green Belt. It also creates **Northern Oxfordshire Council** merging West Oxfordshire and most of Cherwell, and

Ridgeway Council that unites most of South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse with West Berkshire.

We have conducted detailed work that sets out an overwhelming case for expanding boundaries for the city of Oxford. This rationale – for the creation of a Greater Oxford - forms a golden thread that runs throughout the three unitaries proposal. Expert analysis of the economic, geographic and demographic case for change and engagement with literally thousands of stakeholders and residents across the geography demonstrates how it best delivers on the statutory criteria set by government.

We have shaped our proposal to create places with a strong sense of identity, opportunity and accountability for residents, businesses and services. This lay-down of boundaries enables three viable unitaries, close to the people they serve, and each with a distinctive identity and profile for their people and communities.

Three unitary authorities: Six key pillars
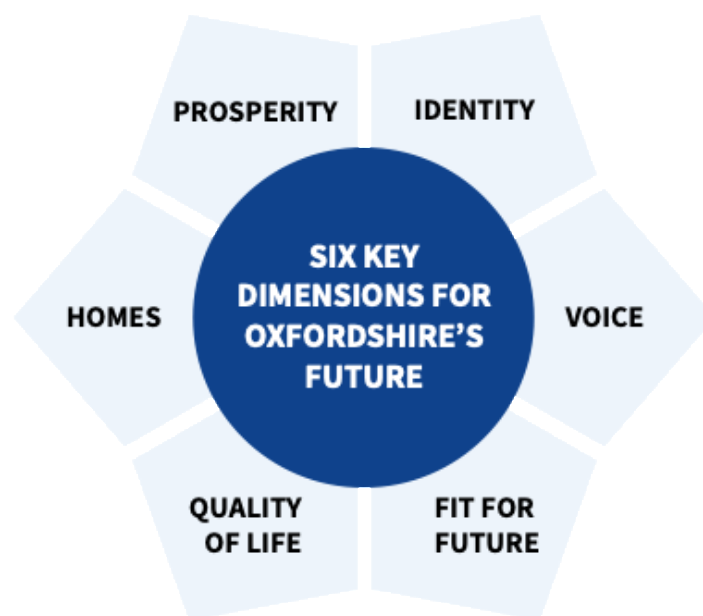
Fig 2.1: Six key dimensions for Oxfordshire's future

Our proposal is built around six key pillars, showing that the 3UA model is the best option for Oxfordshire and West Berkshire and those who live and work here in terms of prosperity, homes, quality of life, identity, voice and future fit services.

Prosperity

3UAs give Oxfordshire and West Berkshire the best possible platform to create and retain the most **jobs and prosperity locally** while also **driving nationally-significant growth for UK PLC**.

The economic opportunity unlocked by the boundary change leading to the creation of 3UAs could deliver up to 218,000 additional jobs - some 65,000 more jobs for local people than either competing proposal, and £43.1 billion more GVA than would be achieved through a single unitary authority. In Greater Oxford, the 3UA proposal will enable more growth around the city, realising the significant

economic, social, and environmental benefits that will flow from greater agglomeration and productivity.

The 3UA option will also allow the other unitaries to work with their own major opportunity areas, including Harwell, Milton Park, Bicester and Banbury to promote sustainable economic growth. Alternatively, the 2UA and 1UA options will continue to constrain Oxford and deliver fragmented and uncoordinated governance across the whole county, unable to prioritise the needs of the city, its other conurbations, and its majority rural communities. This fundamental tension, alongside their significant political and policy constraints in releasing the green belt, will mean the 2UA and the 1UA will grow much more slowly than the 3UA.

Furthermore, 3UAs best complement the strategic economic development role of the new Thames Valley Mayoral Strategic Authority (MSA), which will include responsibility for strategic matters such as inward investment, plus housing, infrastructure and skills planning, all at a regional scale. This is because 3UAs provide the opportunity and place-based leadership to promote and unlock more development in the right locations, including within Oxford's green belt. The 3UA would do this working within the strategic framework created by the MSA. The 1UA option in particular, will struggle to deliver in this space given its scale and its inherent political tensions.

3UA, with its focus and proximity to local communities and businesses, will complement the strategic economic development role of the new MSA. Oxfordshire suffers from significant pockets of deprivation and major inequalities. 3UAs will allow for a focus on place-based responses to address this, through local wealth creation and retention, which the larger unitary options will find much harder. This will include the ability to better focus on the specific sector strengths within each of the 3UAs, and on skills and supply chains at the local level.

Homes

3UA is the best way to **sustainably deliver the scale of homes** Oxfordshire needs, while protecting and enhancing our environment and villages.

3UAs will address this head on, providing each council with plenty of suitable land to meet their own housing need, within their own boundaries, for the first time. This will ensure that more rural areas outside Greater Oxford can grow in line with their own priorities rather than meeting the housing needs of the city. Moreover, Greater Oxford could go well beyond its housing target (by 1,217 homes a year) to secure a total of 40,000 new homes in 15 years via the release of only 2.6% of the green belt.

As such, 3UAs is the only option to directly address both the affordable housing crisis we face and our wider economic growth ambitions. Oxfordshire's affordable housing crisis can in large part be traced back to decisions on boundaries made in the 1970s. This constrained the city from delivering the housing it needs and put in place political fault lines that have led to major challenges in securing the right levels of housing growth across the county, not least in meeting Oxford's housing need. This in holding back growth, with objections received from the County Council and some district councils to Oxford's now withdrawn pro-growth Local Plan 2040. Moreover, where growth has happened, this has largely been beyond Oxford's Green Belt, leading to unsustainable commuting patterns and increased congestion. This all impacts on economic growth and investment because a lack of affordable and accessible homes is a key consideration for businesses looking to locate.

The 2UA and 1UA options will fundamentally fail to address Oxford and Oxfordshire's housing crisis. Even if there were the political imperative to do so, the National Planning Policy Framework means that both options will struggle to release sites at scale from the green belt. This is because of the availability of other suitable land in each of their proposed areas, which will push more growth further away from the city. Moreover, 2UA would see all of Oxford's housing need rolled in with that of Cherwell and West Oxfordshire. This will create a significant imbalance in housing provision between the north and the south of the county and is likely to prove politically challenging to deliver.

Quality of Life

3UAs give Oxfordshire the best possible chance to **deliver and enable access to services which give better quality of life** by working at a local level and whole systems approach.

80% of the 1,580 Oxfordshire and West Berkshire respondents to our public survey on LGR agree that urban and rural areas require different approaches to housing, social care, transport, education, skills, and other key council services. The 3UA supports models of service delivery that respond to this, allowing for enhanced service integration, simplified governance and increased democratic accountability, leading to authorities that are inherently closer to communities they serve.

3UA will allow for service delivery through councils that reflect local need and coordinate support across services at the local level – understanding and engaging with communities and their different requirements. There are clear advantages and improved outcomes to have placed-based and designed social care, housing and SEND offers. Economies of scale, joint commissioning and strong partnership working within social care can all be delivered at a wider scale dovetailing with support and services that better understand and respond to local circumstances.

Place-based, more agile councils are better able to focus on coordinating support around the needs of residents to deliver outcomes that matter most to individuals and families, rather than expecting them to bend around council siloes. The key is about creating a single and integrated pathway and 3UAs are fundamentally better placed to deliver this.

The 2UAs and 1UA will by their very nature create larger authorities (1UA will be second only after Birmingham by 2040) which will find it much harder to join up services and respond to varying local needs. Due to their size and proximity to the communities they serve, 3UA will also intrinsically be better placed to deliver a more preventative approach to service delivery, to address the root cause of demand and promote holistic problem-solving.

Identity

3UAs are the best way to **protect local identity** and gives the strongest possible **local representation** in decision making.

3UA much better reflect the true identities of the places and people of Oxfordshire than the 1UA or 2UA options. The histories of Banbury, Witney, Oxford and the Ridgeway towns and villages are proud and unique. Moreover, Oxford's demographic profile is very different to its neighbours, while its population also identifies directly with the opportunities brought through growth in a way other parts of the county do not.

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From a place and identity perspective, the need for Oxford to expand is clear. Areas outside of Oxford, like Botley, Kidlington and Kennington and Sandford-on-Thames have become a near contiguous conurbation with Oxford. While Wheatley and Berinsfield are both separated from the city, most of their residents have regular work, family or leisure connections there and all struggle with the chronic congestion in and around the city. The 3UA proposal addresses these by creating a Greater Oxford, a completely new authority belonging as much to these places, as to the Oxford of today. The 2UA largely ignores these on the ground realities and will serve to prevent residents in these areas (except Kidlington) from having a say in how the city is run.

The 2UA and 1UA options also both fail to recognise the need for a place-based and locally responsive approach that most residents want. When compared to the 2UA option, the 3UA option will serve to protect the identities of the market towns and rural areas of the current West Oxfordshire and Cherwell within a separate Northern Oxfordshire unitary. These would otherwise be brought together with Oxford - and indeed its housing need. The 3UA option also directly supports the principle of the Ridgeway proposal, as set out in the 2UA option, but seeks to alter its northern boundary with Oxford, with the Greater Oxford taking in around 40,000 residents close to the city. The 1UA will quite simply wipe out centuries of governance arrangements linked to place and identity.

Voice

3UA are the best way to **empower local communities with representative democracy** which supports genuine resident-focussed design, aligned to the places and communities in which people live.

The 3UA option establishes the right powers, at the right scale, to deliver real change for our communities and places, leading to services and places designed with and for residents. It empowers Oxfordshire's towns and villages to speak strongly for their residents and businesses. At the same time 3UA provides vital city-scale governance for Oxford that has the focus and clarity of vision to help realise its full potential as a city of global significance. The 1UA and 2UAs simply cement in the decades old dynamic that has seen the interests of city and rural areas represented together in a vehicle which is unable to effectively speak for either. Oxford's population would represent only 22% of the wider 1UA population, meaning those making the decisions for the city, will not be nearly as accountable to those that live there as with the 3UA option.

The creation of Neighbourhood Area Committees (NACs) will grant communities a direct voice in contributing to and shaping priorities, real influence over decisions, and stewardship of local budgets, as well as building capacity and capability. We will ensure the NACs are fully coterminous with the planned Health Neighbourhoods set out in the NHS 10-year Plan. This hyper-local focus and voice, alongside the place-based scale of the 3UAs will create a local governance system that works best with the new MSA.

3UA is the only option that will give the city of Oxford a seat at the table on what will be the new Thames Valley MSA. This is critical and will ensure the needs and priorities of the city are heard loud and clear at the strategic regional level, alongside the existing unitary conurbations of Reading, Slough, Bracknell and Swindon. The 3UA is also best for the wider county. It gives one urban voice and two rural voices for Oxfordshire on the MSA, each able to advocate for its own priorities. The 3UA option is also the best fit for the new national hierarchy of local government, as a significant amount of the MSA powers will move from the County Council level, including strategic transport planning

and delivery, inward investment and skills. This shifting of responsibility to the MSA undermines the case for larger more strategic unitaries like the 1UA option, which will lack distinctiveness with the MSA. Moreover, it underlines the case for effective placed-based unitaries that will complement the delivery of these more strategic functions at the MSA level.

Future-Fit

3UA will create three councils are **financially robust and sustainable** from Day 1, and which will provide **quality services that work** for the current state and through future transformation, with a continuous focus on prevention and growth.

Our 3UA proposal is self-financing and does **not** require or seek Exceptional Financial Support (EFS) or any central government subsidy to fund the transition. Instead, it is underpinned by local resources — including reserves and the Flexible Use of Capital Receipts allowances. Our proposal **fully pays back in 4 years**, through efficiencies and transformation savings delivered by streamlining seven councils into three. **By year 5 annual net savings of £48.6 million will be delivered**. Pixel Financial, experts in local government finance and funding has reviewed the financial analysis presented in this proposal.

The 3UA provides the best opportunity for longer-term financial stability by creating the platform for both economic growth, and prevention-led services in a way the 2UA and 1UA do not. Our higher levels of growth will not only significantly increase the tax base; the delivery of new homes and jobs will increase health and wellbeing. The ability to focus more on prevention, will enable more residents to live high-quality, independent lives with reduced need for long-term intervention from the council. This includes adult and children's care services across Oxfordshire and West Berkshire where we see significant preventive opportunities that will help to ensure the delivery of better outcomes for individuals in receipt of care and support, as well as more responsive and efficient services. The funding challenges faced by statutory services are ones felt nationally. However, we believe our programme of transformation will achieve the significant benefits and saving.

The opportunity to drive public sector reform through the creation of 3UAs is greater than with the 1UA or 2UA options, because of their scale and proximity to place. The prize is councils that is efficient, modern, and responsive to local needs, utilising technology and digital solutions to provide fast, seamless support, while maintaining a strong face-to-face offer for those who need it most. The ability to work at a local level means each authority can be responsive to the priorities of the specific communities they serve.

Public engagement

We believe the 3UA is based on a clear mandate. Our extensive engagement has shown that people want governance that is closer to communities, more responsive, and more accountable. Furthermore, business and economic partnerships back the proposal for its ability to simplify planning, strengthen representation, and accelerate decisions.

Our online survey of residents across Oxfordshire and Werst Berkshire found that **69% agree** that councils are most effective when they are smaller and closer to the people they serve, enabling them to respond and adapt more easily to local needs. Moreover, **80% agree** that urban and rural areas often require different approaches to housing, transport, education and skills, and other key council

services. While **88% agree** that councils have an important part to play in supporting the local economy, including through housing, infrastructure and transport policies. This feedback aligns directly with the foundation principles of the 3UA proposal, while undermining the case and rationale for either the 1UA or the 2UA options.

As well as engaging key stakeholders and businesses through workshops and meetings, our online survey to Oxford businesses found that over **80% of respondents** said being located in or near Oxford is very or extremely important to their success. While around **68% strongly agree** that Oxford should go beyond the government's housing delivery targets, and almost **85% agree** that affordable housing near Oxford is important for business growth. Furthermore, **46% favour** building additional homes close to the city, including suitable locations within the Green Belt. (**23%** would prefer development beyond the Green Belt). **Over half (54%**) believe future development should balance new homes with employment space. This again supports the fundamentals behind the 3UA and undermines the rational for both the 1UA and 2UA options.

Feeback from these surveys and our wider engagement has demonstrated that the City Council itself is seen as the key convener in the city of Oxford and is most aligned with the ambitions and issues the city faces. Moreover, that creating the right scale of council, close to the people and places it serves is critical to ensuring local government remains in a position to take on, and expand further, into this role.

Empowering People, Growing Prosperity, Building Communities

Any model for consolidating local authorities will realise efficiencies from economies of scale and integration of services. However, this unique opportunity of LGR should be used to deliver the far greater benefits from purposeful, people-first redesign of government for future generations. At its heart, it should maximise growth while removing barriers to sharing in that prosperity - particularly through ensuring everyone has access to a good, affordable home. The **3UA model** delivers efficiencies, but more than that, it is a transformative opportunity to deliver sustainable and inclusive growth, homes, services, and community empowerment, ensuring Oxfordshire and West Berkshire thrive today and into the future.

Our submission is out over eight chapters, which together provide the detailed justification and evidence to support our proposal. Alongside the foreword and this Executive Summary, Chapter 3 sets out an Options Appraisal, our assessment of all the proposed LGR options being put forward for Oxfordshire and West Berkshire. Chapter 4 then expands on our case for three unitary authorities, set against our six key pillars. Chapter 5 provides the detail of our financial case, explaining how we will deliver savings and efficiencies by moving from 7 to 3 local authorities. Chapter 6 builds on this from a service delivery perspective. It articulates how 3UAs create the opportunity to establish a new Target Operating Model that will help drive improvements and transformation to deliver better outcomes. Chapter 7 moves on to explain our proposed implementation road map, while Chapter 8 concludes our submission with an assessment of how our 3UA option achieves the criteria for LGR set by Government.

3 Options Appraisal

In developing our case for a three unitary proposal – a city unitary with expanded boundaries, a northern unitary and a southern unitary including West Berkshire – we have compared the preferred option to alternative proposals to ensure we are proposing the best option for our region. Each option has been appraised and scored against the Government's LGR criteria.
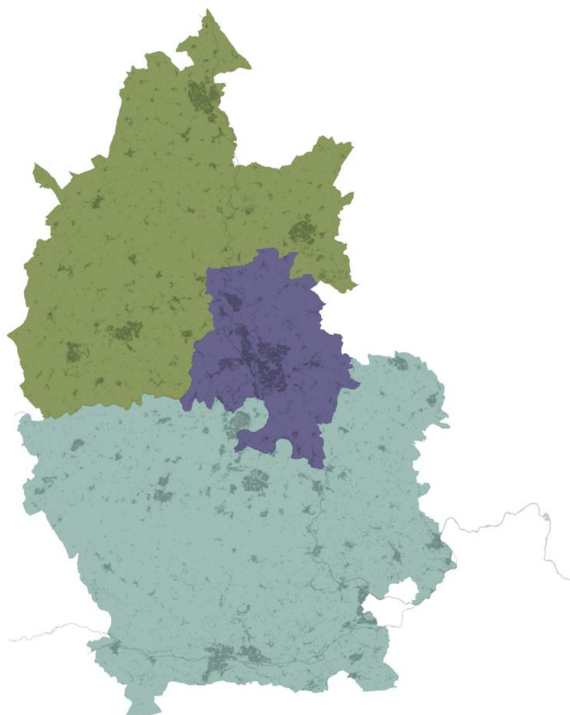
Fig 3.1: Three unitary authorities

3.1 Options considered

As part of our work to develop this proposal, we have also considered the alternative options for Local Government Reorganisation in Oxfordshire. The three potential options are defined as follows:

1. **Single Unitary Authority for Oxfordshire (1UA):** Amalgamation of all councils into a single unitary authority for the whole of Oxfordshire, where Oxfordshire Council is responsible for every local government service across Oxfordshire.

2. **Two Unitary Authorities (2UA):** Replacing the current two-tier, six-council system with two unitary councils. Oxford and Shires Council created from the existing district councils for Cherwell, Oxford City and West Oxfordshire; and Ridgeway Council, created from the existing district councils of South Oxfordshire, Vale of White Horse and the unitary council of West Berkshire.

3. **Three Unitary Authorities (3UA):**
   a. Introducing three unitary councils that create a unitary city on existing boundaries, as well as northern and southern unitary authorities, also including West Berkshire. These would be Oxford, Northern Oxfordshire and Ridgeway. This is presented as a

compliant proposal under the Local Government and Involvement in Public Health Act 2007.

b. Introducing three unitary councils that create a unitary city on expanded boundaries, as well as northern and southern unitary authorities, also including West Berkshire. These would be Greater Oxford, Northern Oxfordshire and Ridgeway and involve boundary changes. This is presented as a requested modification to the Three Unitary Authorities proposal, as it better meets the criteria set out in the Government's statutory invitation in terms of financial sustainability, sensible economic areas, increased housing supply to meet local needs, robust public services, neighbourhood empowerment and supporting devolution. The development of the modified boundaries is described in greater detail in Appendix A.

3.1.1 Single Unitary

Under this option, the County Council and six district councils are merged into a single unitary authority serving the whole of Oxfordshire. This option is being explored by Oxfordshire County Council. This is projected to bring lower growth, a lack of place-based leadership and a reduced ability to represent different communities across diverse geographies and population. The Day 1 efficiencies it would deliver are at risk of being swallowed up by need to respond to place based needs and an absence of targeted models to build in prevention and boost community resilience.

This unitary council would be responsible for all local government services across a huge geography (over 1,000 square miles and 763,200 population[1]). It is expected to grow to a population of nearly 1 million by 2040. This would put its population as the second largest unitary authority in England, behind only Birmingham. Yet, this area has a wide range of different needs – from the urban centre and challenges of Oxford to deeply rural areas.

For services such as planning, local transport system management, community services and culture, this scale would present difficulties to deliver in ways which engage and respond to the needs of local communities. Additionally, this option would look to retain the current Oxford Green Belt in its current form – even if that long standing policy position of the County Council changed it would be difficult to make the case for Green Belt release under National Planning Policy guidelines as there is available development land beyond the Green Belt, which is likely in a countywide unitary authority. This stymies development potential in the Green Belt around the city of Oxford and means that building of homes and businesses would need to take place in a more dispersed way across the wider county – requiring more of the countryside and natural environment to be placed under threat whilst failing to capitalise on the growth benefits of agglomeration. Overall, there is a risk of a fragmented approach to growth, given the need to focus on rural and urban needs, that will lead to the continuation of difficulty in prioritising Oxford's needs as a national significant economic centre.

While a single unitary may present an opportunity to realise greater efficiencies through economies of scale and reduced duplication of staffing and functions, these are considered to be marginal when considered in the context of the foregone additional business rates and council tax revenues as well as well the growth dividend to the Exchequer that the 3UA proposal would deliver.

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[1] ONS 2024

The annual savings identified through this single unitary proposal are around £30.1m per annum from consolidation, and a further £33.2m from transformation. This compares with a total £48.6m annual savings from 3UA. However, this option reduces significantly the ability to realise the latent economic growth and housing delivery opportunity within the area. This would only exacerbate the ongoing challenges faced by Oxford as a global leader in education and research. 3UA projects an additional £43.1 billion of GVA growth by 2050 – or £2 billion per annum – relative to 1UA. This provides a far greater financial impact than the potential incremental greater cost savings of £14.7m per annum that 1UA delivers over 3UA.

This model is fundamentally the wrong fit for Oxfordshire. It is too large and too remote to deliver the place-based leadership, targeted growth, and responsive services that our diverse communities need. Instead of unlocking Oxfordshire's potential, it risks diluting local priorities, stifling growth, and leaving residents lost in a system that cannot reflect or respond to their unique needs.

Fig 3.2: A single Oxfordshire unitary (not including West Berkshire)

3.1.2 Two Unitary Councils

Under this option, the County Council and six district councils are reorganised into two unitary authorities:

- Oxford and the Shires Council, created from the existing district councils of Cherwell, West Oxfordshire and Oxford City Council; and
- Ridgeway Council, created from the existing district councils of South Oxfordshire, Vale of White Horse and the unitary council of West Berkshire.

This proposal is being developed by these district councils and West Berkshire (except for Oxford City).

The inclusion of West Berkshire in Ridgeway Council reflects the strong historic and current links with southern Oxfordshire. Much of southern Oxfordshire sat within the county of Berkshire up to 1974.

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West Berkshire also shares with southern Oxfordshire very similar demography, landscapes and economies, and is within an area expected to sit within the same devolved Thames Valley MSA. Ridgeway as defined here is very similar to the Ridgeway proposed under the three unitary model, with the main difference being the treatment of Oxford's boundaries.

Although the two unitary model could enable some cashable savings through economies of scale and transformation, around £59.8m annually, these potential efficiencies are outweighed by the structural problems it creates. The core issue is that Oxford remains chronically under bounded, its boundary to the south is fixed by Ridgeway, preventing the city from expanding on three sides to meet its own housing and economic needs. While Ridgeway as a unitary makes sense for the southern area, the real challenge is that Oxford and the Shires Council would combine one of England's fastest-growing, most densely populated cities with some of its most rural and sparsely populated areas. This creates an authority with fundamentally different demographics, geographies, and priorities, making it extremely difficult to focus on the needs of either community. Additionally, this boundary cuts through the Oxford conurbation and would create significant issues for residents, such as differential access to city services like libraries and Household Waste Recycling Centres.

By amalgamating Oxford's housing need into a wider requirement for Oxford and the Shires, this model requires the city's unmet need to be met only to the north, cementing the current issues that prevent expansion to the south, east, and west. As a result, Oxford's growth is constrained, and development pressure is pushed into less sustainable rural locations, increasing the risk of scattered, car-dependent development and failing to address the city's acute challenges. The inability to release sufficient green belt land around Oxford means there is no realistic way to deliver the homes and business space needed where demand is highest, undermining agglomeration benefits and the city's role as an economic engine for the region.
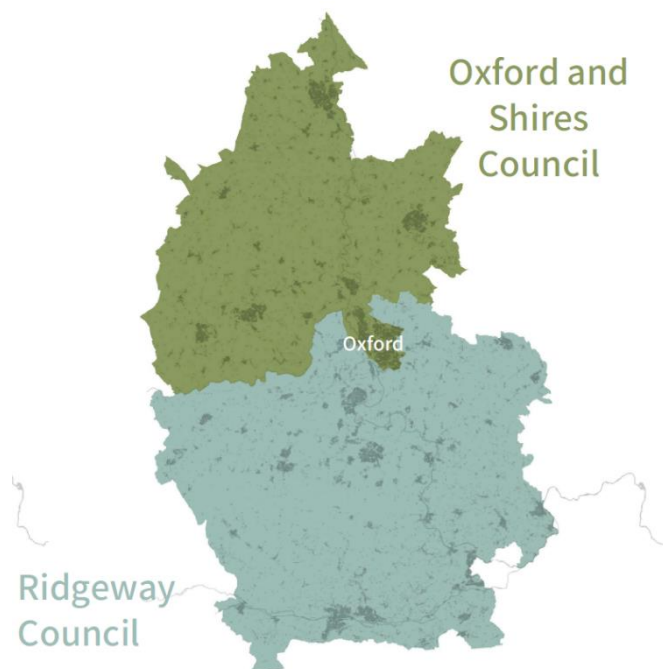

Fig 3.3: A two unitary model, including West Berkshire

3.1.3   Three Unitary Councils

The three unitary proposal would create three new unitary authorities from the current two-tier, seven authority system including West Berkshire – a Northern Unitary (Northern Oxfordshire), a Southern Unitary (Ridgeway), and a Greater Oxford. These unitary authorities largely align with existing district boundaries, except for the area of Greater Oxford which draws in parishes around Oxford's Green Belt from Cherwell, South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse. Each unitary is envisaged to cover distinct areas which share common identities, needs and challenges.

These boundaries enable the strategic release of around 2.6% of Green Belt which would enable Greater Oxford to meet its needs for homes and commercial space in ways which not only protect the wider countryside across Oxfordshire, but drive significant growth and sustainability benefits through using land value capture to fund protection and enhancement of the remaining Green Belt. These will be achieved through concentrating more, new development around the city, supporting a more viable public transport network and wider infrastructure, plus significant agglomeration benefits for businesses and research.

Greater Oxford is the economic engine of Oxfordshire: a city-region with world leading education, research and technology sectors. It has an extensive range of key industries from world leading data science, quantum technology and life sciences to advanced manufacturing, publishing, automotive industry, healthcare and tourism.

Northern Oxfordshire is made up of strong and ambitious towns working to fulfil their growth priorities while maintaining their character, including Banbury, Bicester, Carterton and Witney. It is a key tourism and shopping destination for the UK, with attractions including Bicester Village and Blenheim Palace, as well as the natural beauty of the Cotswolds. It is home to key sectors which benefit from its central location within the UK and link with the Oxford to Cambridge Growth Corridor. These include motoring and other high-tech industries form that part of the 'knowledge spine' together with logistics.

Ridgeway as defined under the three unitary authorities proposal is similar in most respects to that proposed under two unitary authorities and includes West Berkshire for the same reasons. The main difference is the northern boundary around Oxford is changed to align broadly with the edge of the Green Belt. Ridgeway balances a strong network of idyllic market towns and rural areas with cutting edge industries. It also forms part of the strong technology sector spine which runs down into West Berkshire and includes a world leading fusion energy research project, cutting-edge laboratories, and a central hub to the UK's digital infrastructure. The area already has a strong history of collaboration of services between the existing authorities to deliver highly successful shared services.

The distinct demographics and geography of each unitary and the ability to balance the voices of the rural and urban populations at a Mayoral Strategic Authority level necessitate creating authorities smaller than 500,000 residents. There is a strong economic case for this exception. This will ensure that the unitary authorities can deliver optimum economic and housing delivery strategies, place-based outcomes, manage risks and engage with their communities in service delivery at a local level. The smallest proposed authority, Greater Oxford, has a current population which is larger than many established unitary authorities, such as York, Luton and Swindon. Rapid growth as a result of housing delivery ahead of existing Government targets would see Greater Oxford population expand by 44%

by 2040, placing it among the top third largest unitary authorities in the UK based on population projections.

Our proposal has been developed by Oxford City Council and focuses on the ability of a three unitary model to deliver the growth in homes, jobs and economy within Greater Oxford. By concentrating the growth needs for the area in this authority, Northern Oxfordshire and Ridgeway would be able to pursue their strategic objectives in close partnership with their local communities without being overwhelmed by the distinct requirements of Oxford and its very different demographics, needs and geography. Crucially, they would be able to grow in ways which appropriately maintain and build upon the existing characteristics and identities of its unique settlements as Greater Oxford's release of Green Belt and focus on development in this area would greatly reduce the needs to develop across the wider countryside.

The three unitary model not only creates the right structure for Oxfordshire, it forms part of a wider opportunity across England to define a new national structure and empower cities through Local Government Reform. As set out in the *Case for Cities in Local Government Reorganisation* [2] report, enabling cities like Oxford to govern at the right scale is essential to unlocking inclusive, prevention-focused growth and delivering on national priorities. The generational opportunity is not just for Oxford and Oxfordshire but for Norwich, for Cambridge, for Exeter, for Lincoln and other small cities. The UK's small cities have historically underperformed compared to our international comparators, despite often outperforming larger cities on growth and resilience, even while under-bounded. Giving them the tools to lead, through right-sized, city-led unitary authorities, would supercharge national GVA and help tackle inequalities at their source. Modelling shows that creating unitary cities across the country would deliver major increases to national GVA above current trends, enabling UK cities to compete globally rather than against each other.
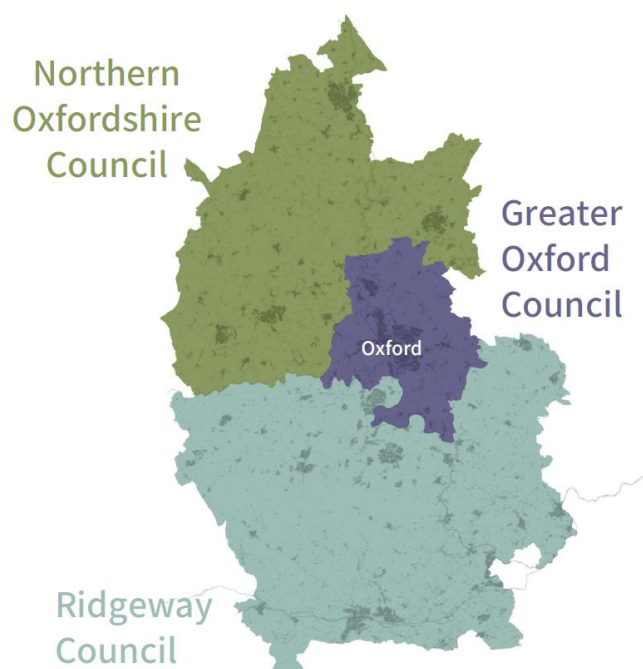

Fig 3.4 A three unitary model including West Berkshire with expanded boundaries for the Oxford city authority

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[2] https://www.caseforcities.uk

3.2 Appraisal Outcome

The three unitary model will realise efficiencies from economies of scale. However, there are far greater benefits to be gained from using the opportunity of LGR to direct a purposeful, people-first redesign of government for future generations; and to drive growth. By working with these three distinct areas, this reform will embed the principles of place-based leadership, collaboration and citizen empowerment. They will work at a level which enables joined up delivery of services within the localities which respond to local need and work to prevent issues in people's lives. It is not only the option which delivers the greatest financial benefits by reducing the need for expensive interventions and preventing need but makes the greatest positive impact to living standards and quality of life – providing and breaking down barriers to good housing and prosperity for the most people.

We have built on our initial analysis and used the criteria set out by the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) to appraise each of the primary options. The table below provides the scoring of each option against the criteria. It uses a scale of 0-3 where 0 indicates it does not meet the criteria at all and 3 indicates that it fully meets the criteria. A more detailed explanation of the scoring for each option against the government criteria is set out in the Appendix B.

Based on our assessment, the three unitary proposal with modified boundaries for Greater Oxford represents the option which best meets the government's LGR criteria, its wider growth mission and, most importantly, the needs of the residents and communities of Oxfordshire. Our three unitary model empowers locally accountable, place-based leadership to deliver services which are tailored to the needs of communities and creates significant benefits of size and scale. Greater Oxford, Northern Oxfordshire and Ridgeway would represent, co-produce with and serve areas which have their own distinct identities, context and existing partnerships. Three unitary authorities represent a model of councils with a sustainable scale and geography to work with a Mayoral Strategic Authority with a balance of voices which truly represent the communities for which they advocate.

Table 3.1: Single Unitary for Oxfordshire (excluding West Berkshire)

LGR Criteria	Score	Rationale
A single tier and sensible geography to improve housing supply and outcomes avoiding creating (dis/)advantaged areas	1	This would create the third largest unitary in the country and cover too diverse an area to deliver local priorities. It would deliver fewer homes than other proposals, and they would need to be built in areas which may change local characteristics of rural areas.
Unitary local government must be the right size to achieve efficiencies, improve capacity and withstand financial shocks	2	This option would deliver the most benefits in economies of scale and, with the largest revenue budget, increase its resilience to financial shocks. However, it would also be least able to deliver public service reform which responds to local needs to address demand and reduce the overall cost of service delivery.
Prioritise the delivery of high quality and sustainable public services to citizens	1	This would minimise disruption as many services are currently provided by the County authority. However, this would also limit the ability for public service reform around a deep understanding of local communities at a place-based level. The size of organisation would limit its ability to deliver agile and fast transformation and be flexible to tailor high quality public services to local needs.
Councils must work together in coming to a view that meets local needs and is informed by local views	1	This proposal does not respond to the clear view expressed by engagement across the county that councils should be closely linked to their communities and that bigger authorities risk losing touch with residents.
New unitary structures must support devolution arrangements	1	A single unitary would be too close in size to the MSA and would account for at least 37% of its total population. It would aim to take a strategic view over the area, duplicating the strategic role of the MSA. It would mean that Oxfordshire's rural and urban areas would only have one voice at the MSA level for its diverse views and priorities, and Oxford would have a weaker voice than the other metropolitan areas in the MSA.
Enable stronger community engagement and deliver genuine opportunity for neighbourhood empowerment	1	The size of the unitary would make it feel too distanced from the communities it serves to be able to engage and co-design most meaningfully. Having to balance the views of a major city, a network of market towns and rural communities would give too many contrasting priorities to be able to ensure specific neighbourhoods are suitably empowered.

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Table 3.2: Two Unitary Proposal (Oxford and the Shires comprising current Cherwell, West Oxfordshire and Oxford City, Ridgeway comprising South Oxfordshire, Vale of White Horse and West Berkshire)

LGR Criteria	Score	Rationale
A single tier and sensible geography to improve housing supply and outcomes avoiding creating (dis/)advantaged areas	2	This creates authorities of an appropriate population size with a sensible geography for Ridgeway. However, the merging of Oxford and the Shires combines two distinct geographies with very different priorities and demographics. This would retain the under bounding of Oxford and deliver fewer homes than a three unitary proposal, with more of these homes being built in rural areas and affecting the character of villages.
Unitary local government must be the right size to achieve efficiencies, improve capacity and withstand financial shocks	2	This would create savings through economies of scale, although less than a single unitary, and be viable with ability to withstand financial shocks. However, savings from rationalisations would be smaller than the additional costs of demand.
Prioritise the delivery of high quality and sustainable public services to citizens	2	The two unitary model would be more able to tailor services to meet the needs of its geographies than the single unitary option – particularly in Ridgeway. However, the contrasting populations, demands and priorities of Oxford and the Shires would require a constant balance to deliver appropriate services to very distinct areas within one authority.
Councils must work together in coming to a view that meets local needs and is informed by local views	2	While Ridgeway would be able to respond to local needs across its villages and market towns, Oxford and the Shires would need to balance competing local needs. This would not be informed by local views, which want councils based on areas relevant to their communities and show that the north of Oxfordshire and city of Oxford view themselves as distinct from each other.
New unitary structures must support devolution arrangements	2	This would support devolution arrangements better than a single authority. However, Oxford and the Shires would mean a single voice at MSA level would need to represent both rural and urban needs rather than distinct areas. It would weaken the voice of Oxford compared to other major metropolitan areas in the MSA.
Enable stronger community engagement and deliver genuine opportunity for neighbourhood empowerment	2	Ridgeway would be able to engage strongly and deliver neighbourhood empowerment across its towns and villages. There would be a greater challenge across Oxford and the Shires, which would need to develop distinct approaches and models for its urban and rural areas. Those living in "the shires" would feel their priorities are competing with Oxford and vice versa, reducing the feeling of empowerment and being heard in working with communities.

Table 3.3: Three Unitary Proposal (Greater Oxford comprising Oxford City and expanded borders, Northern Oxfordshire comprising West Oxford and remainder of Cherwell, Ridgeway comprising West Berkshire and remainder of South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse)

LGR Criteria	Score	Rationale
A single tier and sensible geography to improve housing supply and outcomes avoiding creating (dis/)advantaged areas	3	Creates a single tier through three unitary authorities: a Greater Oxford, Northern Oxfordshire and Ridgeway. By addressing the under bounding of Oxford, targeted green belt release will deliver the most homes, in places which minimise the impact on the environment, infrastructure and rural settlements.
Unitary local government must be the right size to achieve efficiencies, improve capacity and withstand financial shocks	2	Creates three unitary areas which are financially viable and deliver savings from economies of scale. The greater savings will be driven by the transformation of services to a preventative approach with a place-based approach to ensure that services work within each location to best reduce demand, and therefore cost, while improving outcomes.
Prioritise the delivery of high quality and sustainable public services to citizens	3	The proposal ensures services are high quality and tailored to local needs through close collaboration with the local community and partners. Decisions can focus on the needs of specific areas, and analysis has shown all unitary authorities will deliver sustainable services which focus on prevention and align with the wider public sector reform agenda.
Councils must work together in coming to a view that meets local needs and is informed by local views	3	A comprehensive and inclusive engagement programme has been delivered across Oxfordshire and West Berkshire to understand the local needs and views which this proposal seeks to answer. Through this it gives residents more say in local planning and ensures services are tailored to the specific needs of each place, meeting the desire for councils to be locally responsive and relevant to their communities.
New unitary structures must support devolution arrangements	3	This proposes a balance of three voices across Oxfordshire to the Mayoral Strategic Authority, balancing the rural and urban populations. It gives consistency of scale across the Thames Valley MSA, and a voice for a globally significant in line with the other authorities represented.
Enable stronger community engagement and deliver genuine opportunity for neighbourhood empowerment	3	Three unitaries enable governance which is more tailored and representative to local need. It will support local leaders to better understand and tackle local challenges. It supports increased community engagement in democratic processes, the design of services and community empowerment more generally. It allows each area to speak for itself and its own identity and priorities.

4 Case for Three Unitary Authorities

This proposal for three unitary authorities (3UA) is designed to deliver the best possible outcomes for the people, places, and economy of Oxfordshire – together with West Berkshire. It is a direct response to the clear needs and ambitions of the area, providing a blueprint for a modern, effective, and equitable model of local government.

The current two-tier system has proven incapable of delivering this vision. It has constrained economic growth, diluted local identity, and hindered the preventative and collaborative approaches needed to tackle deep-rooted social challenges. It is the single greatest limiting factor in the development of modern and resilient governance.

Growth – Oxfordshire's historic dividing line

The three unitaries Oxfordshire proposal is unashamedly a pro-growth proposal. Oxford City Council has long prioritised growth – both in housing and commercial space – whilst always seeking to protect the city's historic architectural treasures. This is strongly supported by Oxford's residents and businesses alike. In the Council's 2025 annual Residents Satisfaction Survey just 14% of citizens were satisfied with the number of homes being built to meet Oxford's housing needs. In the Council's 2025 survey of businesses for LGR 68% believed Oxford should go beyond the government's target for delivering new homes in and around the city.

But Oxford population constitutes 22% of Oxfordshire's and its pro-growth outlook is not shared in many parts of the county. An inbuilt rural majority has generally prioritised conservation overgrowth. For decades the democratic will of this rural majority has led to the return of councils across Oxfordshire's other districts and at the county level that have sought to minimise the amount of growth planned or delivered.

The divide overgrowth has played out in the ceaseless tussle over how to provide for Oxford's unmet housing need, which the city itself so tightly bounded on all sides cannot do alone. This has led to demands that Oxford abandon plans to develop a cutting-edge Knowledge Quarter on regeneration land in the city centre next to the railway station and instead prioritise housing. Contention overgrowth also saw the collapse of work to create the much-needed Oxfordshire 2050 Strategic Plan due to concerns by other authorities over having to agree housing numbers beyond the now defunct old 'Standard Method' approach.

Progress made last decade in securing Oxford's unmet needs sites in other districts is now being lost, where the latest Local Plans from South Oxfordshire, Vale of White Horse and Cherwell Councils have all sought to deliver lower levels of housing than new government 'Standard Method' targets by utilising transitional arrangements. While Oxford City Council did object to this approach, it is relevant to underline that Oxfordshire County Council did not, providing tacit support for their approach. However, objections to proposed levels of housing in Oxford's pro-growth 2040 Local Plan (now withdrawn) were received from the County Council, as well as South & Vale district councils. It is also material that the last time land use planning sat at County level, the Structure Plan 2016, sought overtly to constrain Oxford's growth.

Government has made clear that growth is its number one mission and set clear housing targets for every area - and therefore all three proposals for unitarisation of Oxfordshire local government will

reference housing delivery and support for business. However, the nature of the geography in either of the one unitary and two unitary proposals would create the strong likelihood of an anti-growth majority within any of these councils and putting Oxford's residents in the position of a minority voice. The democratic will of those populations is likely to lock in a status quo and stymie any real dash for growth in Oxfordshire. Conversely, with Oxford constituting 71% of Greater Oxford there is more likely to be continued majority support for an acceleration of housing delivery and the creation of skilled jobs.

Six key principles of the case for three unitary authorities

The right geography for governance is the foundation for success. The three unitary authorities model is built on this principle. The three unitary authorities will deliver a future where Oxfordshire achieves its full potential across six critical dimensions:

- where **prosperity** is unlocked through Oxford's economic engine;
- where good **homes** are available to all, and fit well into Oxfordshire;
- where **quality of life** is enhanced through preventative, integrated services;
- where community **identity** is strengthened rather than diluted;
- where democratic **voice** is empowered at every level; and
- where governance is **future-fit** and financially sustainable.

Extensive public engagement has been central to shaping this proposal, revealing strong support for councils that are closer and more responsive to the people they serve. This informs directly our commitment to enhancing democratic voice.

The following sections set out how the three unitary model delivers against the six key dimensions of Oxfordshire's future. It demonstrates why this proposal is not merely an administrative change, but the most credible and forward-looking framework to secure a better future for all of Oxfordshire and West Berkshire, now and for generations to come.

4.1 Prosperity

Prosperity: Unlocking Oxfordshire's True Economic Potential

The three unitary authorities model delivers a step change in economic growth. Significantly, it does so in a way that can fully unlock the opportunities across high-growth sectors. It will increase productivity; making growth and employment more inclusive whilst maximising our existing partnerships and coordination across each area's strengths and challenges.
This proposal unlocks Oxfordshire's full potential by aligning land, infrastructure and skills within a coherent economic geography, creating up to **65,000 additional jobs** more than either competing unitary proposal and **£43 billion more GVA** by 2050 than would be achieved through a single unitary authority (1UA).

Oxford is already a success story, central to which sits it universities. For every £1 invested in the University of Oxford, £10.30 is returned to the UK economy[3]. However, we are not fulfilling our potential. For too long, Oxfordshire's prosperity has been constrained by outdated boundaries and fragmented governance.

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[3] The economic impact of the University of Oxford

Oxford's current functional economic area extends well beyond existing administrative boundaries. It's global research base and innovation ecosystem have been held back by a lack of space to grow, limiting the scale of high-value employment and investment the county can sustain. Without addressing this imbalance, Oxfordshire risks losing its competitive edge to other global innovation hubs. The three-unitary model removes these constraints. The approach allows each distinct part of Oxfordshire to focus on its strengths, delivering growth in key sectors and collectively maximising impact.

The creation of a Greater Oxford will enable the release of strategically located employment land at the edge of the city. This will bring firms closer to the research, talent and transport connections that drive productivity – while minimising the impact on infrastructure and the environment.

This focused approach mirrors the pattern seen in the world's other successful innovation economies. As shown by Volterra's independent analysis, when Oxford can grow beyond its current boundaries, it achieves a higher rate of employment growth across Oxfordshire, around 1.5% a year compared with 1.0% under a single authority, translating into a more productive mix of sectors, stronger wages, higher tax receipts and more funding for public services across the county.

We will ensure that the growth we achieve benefits all of our residents and is genuinely inclusive, by having place-based unitary authorities which can work at the local level to create the right interventions to address barriers to better jobs. This is vital given that, despite perceptions of affluence, we have very significant areas of deprivation.

Constraints on Growth

Oxford brings together knowledge industries and technology clusters due to its world-renowned university and research institutions. Over 73% of Oxford's businesses operate in knowledge-intensive sectors — including life sciences, biotechnology, data science, and robotics — forming one of the strongest and most dynamic tech clusters in the UK. Ensuring these sectors have the space, connectivity, and infrastructure to expand is critical to sustaining Oxfordshire's global leadership in innovation and maintaining the UK's competitiveness on the world stage. It is also home to a wide range of other sectors of strength which have huge importance to the whole country, such as automotive and advanced manufacturing, publishing, healthcare and tourism.

Oxfordshire's global reputation, innovation ecosystem and demand point to huge potential for growth. However, it currently underperforms. Oxfordshire lags well behind neighbouring Berkshire and Swindon in terms of productivity. The aspiration of the proposed Thames Valley MSA is to return to annual GVA growth of 2.35% a year. However, Oxfordshire's current model risks holding that back. Historical employment growth of around 1% in Oxfordshire and productivity is only around the UK average. Despite Oxford's position as an innovation leader, the constrained nature of the city, combined with a sector profile that includes a high proportion of public sector and academic workers, currently sees it score lower in terms of productivity than the national average.

The lack of space in Oxford's tight boundaries has also driven up the cost of new commercial development. This has constrained the growth of more productive employment, pushed activity into less connected locations and weakened agglomeration and productivity benefits. At worst, it has cost the UK huge opportunities. Volterra analysis (see Appendix C) has outlined that the city of Oxford can

be a huge draw for major global firms. However, for some, where they cannot find accommodation within proximity of the city they will not re-locate around Oxfordshire or even the UK – they will invest internationally in places like Boston or Silicon Valley. Our survey of businesses on LGR (see Section 4.7) reinforces the importance of proximity to the city: with 83% this was 'very' or 'extremely important' to the success of their business.

The Chancellor has committed to making the Oxford-Cambridge Corridor Europe's Silicon valley – addressing years of underinvestment in public transport, affordable housing and infrastructure.[4] This notes a potential prize of up to £78 billion in cumulative economic growth by 2035. Ensuring that Greater Oxford has the available space for this growth, and that Northern Oxfordshire can benefit from its links to East-West rail at Bicester Village for its own technology sector, will ensure we can deliver on this key priority for the country's economic development.

A place-based approach aligned to the Mayoral Strategic Authority

3UA are best placed to complement the role of the new Mayoral Strategic Authority. The MSA will take on powers including strategic planning, inward investment, skills and both strategic transport planning and delivery. The scale and broad strategic scope of the MSA undermines the case for a larger unitary, as proposed under the 1UA option. Conversely, it underlines the case for smaller place-based unitaries, as put forward under the 3UA option.

As such, strategic economic, planning, investment and infrastructure will not be planned at the county level, instead, the MSA will provides a single, joined-up framework for leadership, investment, and delivery, enabling coordinated action at that scale. Working as three unitary authorities will enable each area to take a place-based and delivery-driven approach while the MSA coordinates strategic infrastructure and investment across the wider region.

Economists, Volterra have assessed each of the proposal LGR options to look at their likely impact on economic growth. They conclude that the 3UA provides the best possible platform for growth by creating unitary authorities that can prioritise the investment needs of their own areas, working with the MSA. However, they conclude that both the 1UA and two unitary authority (2UA) options are much more likely to deliver un-coordinated and fragmented leadership across their areas, unable to prioritise the investment needs of the city, while also prioritising the very different needs of the majority rural communities and market towns.

Realising agglomeration benefits around Oxford

The three unitary authorities option unlocks additional land around Oxford, while enabling Northern Oxfordshire and Ridgeway to focus on their own economic strengths and priorities.

The creation of a Greater Oxford unitary as part of the 3UA proposal could release green belt land around the city to deliver 13m sq. ft. of additional commercial space and up to 29,000 new jobs, alongside 40,000 new homes.

Both the 1UA and 2UA option would instead see employment growth spread across a wider area, and at a smaller scale. Both those options would have available land outside the green belt that would need to be prioritised. Setting aside any political imperative within the 1UA and 2UA not to grow the

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[4] 23 October 2025 HM Treasury Press Release

city, national planning guidance limits the ability to allocate green belt land, especially where other developable land is available in local plan areas. The 2UA does provide some potential opportunity for the growth of Oxford northward, while constraining the city to the on the south, east, and west of its boundaries. The 1UA on the other hand, for the reasons set out above, will see commercial growth focused beyond the green belt.

As such, only the Greater Oxford and the 3UA proposal would allow the city to expand in a balanced way, delivering more land to meet demand. This land will also be in the right places, close to its universities, hospitals and science parks, while protecting rural areas from dispersed and unsustainable development. By focusing jobs closer to good public transport links, it will make sustainable travel the easy choice and reduce the need for car-based commuting. Moreover, Oxford's economy would become more productive, with expansion allowing for a greater proportion of higher value jobs to come forward. The provision of additional commercial land around Oxford, facilitating a more productive sector mix, are both noted by Volterra as reasons why the 3UA option will drive more economic growth that the 1UA or 2UA options.

Research from the Centre for Cities also shows that locating development in this way around urban areas creates agglomeration, which drives even greater productivity and innovation through three interconnected channels:

- Sharing: businesses benefit from shared infrastructure and services, achieving economies of scale and lowering costs.
- Learning: regular interaction accelerates the exchange of ideas between firms, researchers, and institutions.
- Matching: dense labour markets make it easier for employers to find the right skills and for workers to secure high-quality, highly skilled jobs.

Volterra's modelling shows that this specific agglomeration effect adds a further **£5.3 billion in GVA** in addition to the direct impact of new, and more productive, jobs. The result is self-sustaining growth: firms locate near leading institutions, attract skilled workers, and in turn generate more innovation and investment.

This growth will be delivered through strong local partnerships. Greater Oxford will build on the City Councils close relationships with the University of Oxford, Oxford Brookes, the NHS, major landowners, and major employers such as BMW Mini and Culham (the UK's first approved AI Growth Zone) to shape investment, coordinate infrastructure, and ensure that new development supports both economic and environmental goals.

The City Council's ability to bring together partnerships alongside EDF Renewables, the University of Oxford, Habitat Energy, RedT and Kensa to deliver the Energy Superhub Oxford and Europe's most powerful EV charging hub demonstrates a track record in leveraging innovation to make transport clean. Strong partnerships and strategic leadership from the City Council has already brought through the re-opening of the Cowley Branch Line. This will provide vital and sustainable connectivity options to new and existing jobs.

A model that works for the whole county

We have set out in this proposal the importance of ensuring Oxford as a city realises its full potential through agglomeration and intensification of development on edge of city sites. Growth which does not address Oxford's constraints and which relies on provision spread across the County will see Oxford fail.

However, whilst a successful Oxford is vital to a prosperous region, it is equally important that all parts of the County flourish. To close the productivity gap between Oxfordshire and other parts of the Thames Valley MSA region requires a pan-Oxfordshire approach.

Northern Oxfordshire has a strong base in advanced manufacturing, logistics, and green technology, with market towns such as Banbury, Bicester and Witney providing vibrant local economies. Around 36% of residents hold degree level qualifications, and another 40% have intermediate or technical skills. With greater local control, the new council can strengthen partnerships with Bicester Motion, Banbury College and the Oxfordshire Advanced Skills Centre to deliver new training routes in sustainable industry, clean mobility and construction. There can also be a focus on the strengths of the market towns, ensuring that economic growth reflects the character and identity of much-loved communities, towns and villages, with a focus on creating new jobs across sectors such as mid tech, motorsport, tourism and agriculture.

In Ridgeway there will be the opportunity to progress Harwell's unique offer as part of the wider Science Vale and the expansion of Didcot. Alongside the Harwell Campus, Milton Park and Didcot Garden Town together host more than 250 companies working in life sciences, space, quantum technologies and renewable energy. Around 41% of residents hold degree level qualifications, supporting one of the most productive workforces in the country. The Crown Estates recent acquisition of a 221 acre site next to the Harwell Campus with potential for 4.5m sq ft of laboratory and advanced manufacturing space provides an enormous opportunity.

Under the new structure, Ridgeway and Norther Oxfordshire unitary authorities will coordinate growth across these nationally significant sites for the first time, working with the MSA.

Together, these changes will enable Northern Oxfordshire and Ridgeway to grow in ways that strengthen local economies while preserving the distinctive character of their much-loved communities, towns and villages.

The most impactful option

Volterra have undertaken modelling to look at the likely different economic futures under each of the different LGR proposals. They conclude that the 3UA option is the only one that is likely to provide co-ordinated governance, able to prioritise the needs of each of the three unitaries. Furthermore, that it is the best option to support the release of more land in the right places, and at scale, including around Oxford. As such, 3UA delivers more effective and timely investment, more, productive jobs, and greater agglomeration benefits. Volterra look at past trends and forecasts to conclude that the 3UA is best able to deliver a step change in employment growth, increasing it from its historic trend rate of 1% to 1.3% per annum, across the 3UAs.

While they conclude that both the 1UA and 2UA will both suffer from governance and leadership unable to prioritise across both urban and rural dimensions of their areas, they recognise that the 2UA does have the ability to support Oxford's growth northwards, estimating that this could deliver employment growth at 1.1% per annum. However, the political and policy constraints faced by the 1UA in releasing more land around Oxford, alongside the governance issues, lead Volterra to conclude that this option will not be able to make a step change in the county's economic growth and would continue to see Oxfordshire's jobs growth at the status quo, 1% per annum.

Table 4.1: Volterra Comparative Economic Impact of Alternative LGR Models

	3UA	2UA	1UA
Total jobs growth up to 2050	**218,000**	**180,000**	**153,000**
Direct additional GVA up to 2050 (NPV)	£37.8bn	£15.5bn	£0bn
Additional GVA from agglomeration benefit up to 2050 (NPV)	£5.3bn	£0.8bn	£0bn
Total additional GVA up to 2050 (NPV)	£43.1bn	£16.3bn	£0bn
Total GVA (NPV) to 2050	£168.8bn	£142bn	£125.7bn
Annual GVA growth	2.6%	2.0%	1.8%

As set out in the table above, Volterra conclude that the 3UA could deliver £43.1bn more in GVA than the 1UA option, and £26.8bn more than the 2UA. The 3UA could also see 65,000 more jobs up to 2050, than the 1UA option, and 38,000 more than under 2UA.

Prosperity with Purpose

True prosperity must be shared. Despite Oxfordshire's global reputation for research and invention, some communities still feel disconnected from opportunity. The three unitary model places inclusive growth at its heart, ensuring that economic success reaches every corner of the county.

The emerging MSA will set strategic policies for delivering skills across the region to ensure the needs of businesses are met. However, growth will only be truly inclusive if there are locally identified bespoke interventions which deal with the specific challenges of individual communities and ensure all residents have access to emerging opportunities. We believe this is best achieved through a 3UA model rather than via larger unitaries which are likely to replicate the role of the MSA.

Each council will have the power and insight to tailor skills and employment programmes to local needs, ensuring that prosperity and the growth of opportunities are more widely shared. In Greater Oxford, where inequality remains high, partnerships with universities, hospitals and major employers will create new opportunities in the city's growing innovation economy. In Northern Oxfordshire, where technical skills are a major strength, collaboration between colleges, businesses and local government will expand apprenticeships and training in sectors such as low carbon manufacturing

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and logistics. In Ridgeway, partnerships with the science and energy institutions at Harwell and Milton Park will ensure that local people can access the jobs created in these fast-growing sectors.

Improving access to training, transport and housing will make growth more inclusive. Each authority will integrate employment and infrastructure planning so that people can live closer to where they work, reducing commuting pressures and supporting a greener, healthier economy. This balanced approach will create stronger, more connected communities and ensure that Oxfordshire's prosperity benefits all who live and work here.

4.2 Homes

Building the homes Oxfordshire needs

The three unitary authorities model offers the biggest opportunity in a generation to unlock housing for Oxfordshire. It could deliver 1,220 more homes per year than other proposals (16,000 over 15 years)[5]. It addresses the long-standing housing shortage across Oxfordshire, providing the homes needed for the future, while protecting wider rural locations from inappropriate development that may be otherwise required to deal with Oxford's overspill.

By releasing just 2.6% of the current Green Belt around Oxford, only enabled by rebounding the city to create Greater Oxford, up to 40,000 homes in total could be built by 2040 – with at least 40% of these being affordable homes. This would be coupled with major housebuilding projects already proposed or underway including at Didcot, Dalton Barracks, Salt Cross and Heyford Park that will deliver large numbers of homes across Oxfordshire.

Engagement with the public in Oxfordshire has consistently shown that there is strong support for building more genuinely affordable homes in the right places. In Oxford City Council's 2025 Resident Satisfaction Survey[6], only 14% of Oxford residents said they were satisfied with the number of homes being delivered to meeting housing need. Citizens want these homes to be close to jobs, connected by good infrastructure. Unlocking housebuilding at this scale is also the only way to ensure Oxfordshire can deliver on Oxfordshire's economic growth potential and increase prosperity.

Building at density, particularly around Oxford, will enable more sustainable and viable public transport routes as well as active travel – reducing congestion. The scale of delivery possible in Greater Oxford will also mean that Ridgeway and Northern Oxfordshire will no longer need to meet Oxford's unmet housing demand. Because of this they can focus on delivering homes which fit the specific characteristics and needs of their unique settlements.

Oxfordshire's housing crisis

Oxfordshire does not build enough homes. There are several contributing factors, included the under-bounded nature of Oxford city alongside its restrictive Green Belt, and the historic townscape in and around Oxford and many other parts of the county and around the city.

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[5] This is calculated as with authorities delivering their Standard Method numbers of homes and excludes the delivery of the New Town at Hayford Park as New Towns are not part of the Standard Method targets.

[6] Satisfaction with Oxford and Oxford City Council rise but concerns about housing, transport and crime remain, Oxford City Council 2025

On current boundaries, due to a lack of available land, the city can accommodate less than half the housing target set by the Government's new Standard Method. This would therefore require the export of around 600 dwellings per year to is neighbours. With Oxford's Green Belt in place, this then forces growth around towns and villages unconnected to the city.

While a national issue, this lack of supply is perhaps felt most keenly in Oxford, which is the least affordable city in the UK – with the average house price 13.6 times the average wage.[7] and average wages are 68% of average rent levels in the city. With one third of the city's housing stock privately rented (either as HMO or private tenancy), the issue of affordability of housing is further exacerbated.

These issues have in turn spread this demand and price inflation across Oxfordshire. There is an overwhelming need for all tenures of affordable housing, and particularly socially-rented properties in Oxfordshire.[8]

This is a cost of living, a public health and a quality-of-life issue for many of Oxfordshire's residents. Furthermore, where growth has happened it has typically leaped the green belt, creating congestion issues, additional carbon emissions, and made it harder to deliver sustainable public transport connections. Economic growth in Oxfordshire is also being held back by these issues, making us a less attractive place to set up or expand a business. Other competitor locations globally can offer a higher quality of life with lower housing costs.

Unlocking home building and meeting Oxford's housing need

The boundary change to create Greater Oxford, proposed as part of the 3UA option, is the most appropriate and most sustainable way for Oxford to meet its own housing need. It is the only option that will deliver homes at scale close to jobs, amenities and public and active transport networks, via a careful but strategic green belt release.

As noted in the Prosperity section above, both the 1UA and 2UA option would instead see Oxford housing need spread across a wider area, where the abundance of available land outside the green belt would need to be prioritised. Setting aside any political imperative within the 1UA and 2UA not to grow the city, national planning guidance limits the ability to allocate green belt land, especially where other developable land is available in local plan areas. As such both options would serve to increase the pressure on villages and smaller towns across a wider area and add further stress to an already creaking transport network. In the case of the 1UA this housing would be spread county-wide, and in the case of the 2UA, this additional housing would need to be met in what is currently Cherwell and West Oxfordshire.

Under 3UA, Greater Oxford's ability to deliver its own housing need will allow the Northern Oxfordshire and Ridgeway Councils' plan-making process to focus on their own growth requirements, with new homes that fit these locations and communities, alongside the need to conserve the current natural environment and characteristics of rural settlements.

The 3UA approach will also improve the quality, function, and accessibility of Oxford's green belt. New development will be expected to deliver on-site green spaces as well as contributing to

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[7] Centre for Cities, Cities Outlook 2025.

[8] Volterra report, 2025

expanding and maintaining public access areas while protecting and enhancing other areas for biodiversity net gain and nature recovery. This could support the potential expansion of Shotover Country Park, or the realisation of Berks Bucks & Oxon Wildlife Trust's (BBOWT's) ambition of linking the unique habitats of Otmoor and Bernwood. This will be supported by ensuring appropriate developer contributions and land value capture from the release of green belt land. It will also be possible to deliver appropriate levels of community infrastructure, working with the local communities to ensure their voice guides its design and delivery.

Oxfordshire bus operators are also clear that increasing the density of housing around the city would directly improve the viability of bus services to villages in the Greater Oxford area.

The best option for homes

The 3UA option therefore provides the best opportunity to address housing delivery given the imperative Greater Oxford would have to unlock green belt land, and the political and technical challenges faced by the 1UA and 2UA options in doing the same.

It provides the land and opportunities to deliver housing in line with the new Standard Method in each of the 3UA. Moreover, it creates the platform to go beyond this target in Greater Oxford by 16,000 homes up to 2040. This could result in over 1,200 homes per year above the new Standard Method being delivered. The table below demonstrates this, setting out housing targets based on the old Standard Method (SM) and the new one for the existing district councils across Oxfordshire, alongside the proposed new ones under the 3UA option.

Table 4.2: Model of housing supply annually under existing and 3UA models

	Old SM	New SM	3UA with new SM	3UA potential (supply-led)
Oxford City	762	1,087	1,449 (Greater Oxford)	2,666 (Greater Oxford)
West	549	905	1,837 (Northern Oxfordshire)	
Cherwell	706	1,118		
South	579	1,179	1,952 (Ridgeway without W Berks)	
Vale	633	949		
Total	**3,229**	**5,238**	**5,238**	**6,455**

Greater Oxford's drive towards a more ambitious housing targets could be further supported by the creation of one or more Mayoral Development Corporations in collaboration with the new Mayoral Strategic Authority (MSA). This would build upon Oxford City Council's strong reputation as a proactive partner in delivering growth and act a catalyst for targeted growth. It is also welcome news that a New Town is proposed in Northern Oxfordshire, at Heyford Park. However, Government is clear that this housing growth will be in addition to the new Standard Method requirements , so removing Oxford's unmet need from the equation will be helpful in achieving this.

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4.3 Quality of Life

The 3UA proposal will develop place-based organisations that possess deep local knowledge and insight, adopting a whole systems approach to enable access to high quality services across Oxfordshire and West Berkshire to provide better quality of life. Placed based collaboration will ensure outcomes that matter most to residents are reflected in local strategies through bringing together functions and partners across the system, at a local level to deliver joint outcomes. Place-based partnerships will focus on tackling the root causes that currently lead to health, social and economic inequalities across the footprint.

The ambition is to develop affordable homes in the right places, place-based investment to boost transport and connectivity so individuals can better access spaces and jobs that fit their personal aspirations, safeguard green spaces and uphold climate resilience, provide proactive health and care services that consider all the wider determinants of health within their design to help residents maintain their wellbeing and age well, enhance education settings to meet the needs of all children supporting them to preserve their sense of belonging and ensure community safety.

All these strategic objectives are best delivered through the 3UA proposal as place-based organisations support quality and sustainability of local services.[7] District councils' deep community connections and extensive local knowledge is well evidenced to effectively improve the health and quality of lives, as service delivery is embedded within communities, generating local-level insights that shape service design.[8] These strengths will be built on through detailed analysis of local contexts within each unitary, to determine functions that are best delivered across system, place and neighbourhood levels to better resident outcomes.

Supporting our communities

Our public survey on LGR received 1,580 responses from residents across Oxfordshire and West Berkshire, evidencing 80% agreement that urban and rural areas require different approaches to housing, transport, social care, education, skills, and other key council services. The 3UA proposal provides a platform to best deliver improved socio-economic outcomes through enhanced service integration, simplified governance and increased democratic accountability in a way that best addresses specific rural and urban needs. It will establish authorities that are closer to communities they serve.

Our extensive public engagement shows there is an aspiration for high quality services and outcomes that enable residents to live healthy and rewarding lives. However, this is not a reality for many across Oxfordshire as socio-economic and geographic differences mean unequal access to opportunities.

Research highlights that residents in rural areas are more likely to be impacted by the twin pressures of energy and transport poverty due to environmental and infrastructural characteristics, including older homes with poor insulation.[9] Urban pressures more typically include housing affordability, social and economic inequalities and deprivation. 3UA will allow for mobilisation of more locally responsive services in rural geographies, including better infrastructure across Northern Oxfordshire

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[9] Identifying double energy vulnerability: A systematic and narrative review of groups at-risk of energy and transport poverty in the global north

and Ridgeway and sustainable local development strategies to ensure rural communities are prioritised.

Deep pockets of deprivation persist across Oxfordshire, in the city, urban market towns and rural areas, which often require different responses. The one size fits all approach of a single unitary risks failing to meet specific needs of different communities. The extent of local differences is stark – a 14-year gap in life expectancy exists for men across the footprint and 26% of children in Oxford live below the poverty line.

The most recent figures from the Indices of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) indicated that Oxford's place-based, preventative approach is working, with improvements in areas within the Community Impact Zone[10] and adjacent to the service hub provided by Rose Hill Community Centre. Other areas in the city that have moved up from the lowest 20% IMD rankings have benefitted from the City Council locality working model, with Neighbourhood Plans driving the focus for support and resources in places that are now seeing better outcomes, like Barton and Blackbird Leys. Overall, the city has reduced the number of areas in the 20% most deprived from nine to four areas. This demonstrates the power of place-based, locally led interventions to tackle the root causes of issues that can have life-long impacts and create better outcomes for individuals and communities.

The IMD figures also show South Oxfordshire, West Berkshire and Vale of White Horse are closely grouped in the average rankings, indicative of their similarities and shared challenges. Oxford continues to be an outlier with the highest average ranking, with Cherwell more closely aligning to West Oxfordshire. The ability of these areas to take an appropriate, place based and preventative approach will be strengthened by the three unitary arrangement that brings together places with shared characteristics.

A focus on residents and communities

Delivering better outcomes for residents through public services is about focusing on individuals and families, rather than expecting them to bend around council siloes. From a service perspective it is about creating a single and integrated pathway, to avoid residents from having to tell their story multiple times. We understand that human experiences and needs are complex, requiring a holistic and systems-based approach underpinned by a strong insight, to identify and address the root cause of demand and promote holistic problem-solving.

Deeply community-connected services will form the backbone of neighbourhood working, strengthening partnerships with health, education, and voluntary sectors, and making full use of multi-agency Hubs. Oxford City Council's Rose Hill Community Centre already performs such a function – housing council, NHS, Police and voluntary sector services in one of the most deprived areas of the city. As a result it was the venue chosen for the joint Oxfordshire councils' launch of the countywide Marmot Place initiative. This integrated, place-based approach builds resilience and reduce reliance on acute support services over time. This way of working will seek to link into wider community assets, a strong wellbeing leisure offer and local green spaces.

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[10] The Community Impact Zone (CIZ) aims to tackle inequalities of health, education and opportunity in South East Oxford www.oxfordhub.org/ciz

This approach will support a person-centred, community-based, preventative approach within adult social care. This will enable residents to receive support in a personalised way through effective short-term interventions, technology-enabled care, and specialist housing as powerful alternatives to traditional, high-cost models of provision.

Caring, stable, and nurturing family environments, supporting by the wider community offer will underpin Children's Services. Expanding existing specialist provision will allow more children to learn closer to home, supported by improved transport infrastructure and inclusive schools that foster belonging and opportunity.

Building on existing practice

This is not new territory for district councils, which are already embedded within the delivery of support for vulnerable residents and have a strong on-the-ground presence. This is instrumental to promoting and enabling the independence and wellbeing of local populations.[11] Far from all the relevant knowledge sitting in the existing upper tier authority, Oxfordshire's District Councils are well versed in being the first point of contact for individuals requiring support through their housing, benefits and neighbourhood teams.

Oxford City Council's Home Improvement Agency exemplifies this, as it has enabled residents to remain at home through accessing grants for adaptations – this includes creating safer home environments for individuals with dementia and those experiencing frailty, preventing hospital admissions or transfer to care homes.

District Councils are also deeply embedded within communities and core to prevention delivery, including providing support for individuals who fall below statutory and social care thresholds. Oxford City Council worked in close partnership with Oxfordshire County Council to deliver Blackbird Leys Youth Hub which provides support services and activities for young people, driving positive outcomes including improved mental and physical wellbeing, and skills for life and work.

Districts also lead delivery of projects with system partners that tackle housing and homelessness, possessing local knowledge and invaluable data on issues that people and organisations face day-to-day to design the most effective and evidence-based solutions. Oxford City Council is a leader in this area, partnering with third sector organisations including Crisis to deliver innovations like Built for Zero to enable communities to end homelessness for specific homeless populations.

3UA will result in councils that are effective stewards and convenors for their areas and are able to effectively deliver locally focused services, connecting residents to support that ensures they are healthier, resilient and able to live quality lives independent of support from the local authority and wider public sector. In contrast to the 1UA and 2UA proposals, 3UA creates smaller more responsive organisations can tailor their services to better meet the need of their residents based on local demography and demand requirements.

Research literature shows that that District councils' smaller geographic scale, deep community connections and extensive local data lead to the development of bespoke services that improve

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[11] The power of prevention and place in new unitary councils

health and quality of life.[12] It is precisely these strengths that will be built upon to ensure residents can stay independently at home for as long as possible, benefit from stable employment opportunities and access assets and green spaces that help to build strong community networks and boost overall wellbeing.

Early Intervention and Prevention

The three unitary model will improve residents' quality of life through adopting a place-based approach to reform. The early intervention and prevention offer will be delivered via local hubs that reflect varying needs of local communities across the three unitary authorities. This will ensure that all residents receive support even when they do not meet the thresholds of statutory services. National research highlights place-based approaches as being core to reducing demand and enabling effective service delivery – evidencing that scale is not the key determinant of positive resident outcomes, with no performance improvement across critical services including adult social care for a population size over 500,000.[13] This principle is also seen across Children's Social Care as 58% of existing outstanding Children's Social Care authorities have a population of under 500,000, increasing to 78% if London boroughs are included.

At the heart of reform will be a deep understanding of local identity and the voice of residents, each of whom will have a different definition of what quality of life means for them. For some this will mean reduced travel time to access the right education and learning opportunities to develop their skills. For others it is about receiving respite from caring by funding and providing the right types of services so they can maintain their wellbeing. Resident engagement will be a key design principle within service delivery across the three unitary authorities, ensuring everyone can benefit equally from council-led initiatives.

Oxfordshire's ambition for inclusive growth and planning will be aligned to the vision for place-based prevention, ensuring residents are empowered through seamlessly integrated services, delivered closer to home. This vision is aligned to UK Government's agenda on developing neighbourhood health services to reduce health inequalities as part of the wider 10-year Health Plan for England.

4.4 Identity

Oxfordshire is far from homogeneous, and this is reflected in the very different histories and distinct characteristics of its three proposed unitary authorities: Greater Oxford, Northern Oxfordshire, and Ridgeway. This demographic distinctiveness, coupled with a clearly stated public preference for smaller local authorities closer to the people they serve, underlines the rationale for three separate unitary councils.

While initially settled in Saxon times, Oxford expanded around the founding of its university – the first in the English-speaking world. Since then, it has enjoyed 1,000 years of local government and has held City status for nearly 500 years, serving briefly as England's Royalist capital during the Civil War.

Quite separate for 1,000 years prior to the 1974 local government reorganisation, much of what is currently southern Oxfordshire and all of the Vale of White Horse were part of Berkshire. The

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[12] Collaborate, The Bigger You Go the Less You Know for Test Valley
[13] Bigger is not better: the evidenced case for keeping 'local' government

Ridgeway path that connects this area is Britain's oldest road, more than 5,000 years old and runs east-west – not to Oxford - threading its way between the market towns of Wallingford, Wantage, Newbury and Hungerford.

Banbury also long predates Oxford, having been settled since the Iron Age in an area that was latterly shaped by the Fosse Way and the Salt Way. It has always formed the natural centre of northern Oxfordshire, just as Witney and its specialised traditional industries like tweed and blanket making and the Cotswolds Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty characterise western Oxfordshire.

On the ground public engagement on LGR by Oxford City Council officers and members, as well as our 1,580-response survey revealed just how different identities are across the Oxfordshire and West Berkshire geography. For most people across the county, Oxford does not define Oxfordshire and - other than residents of the city and its hinterland - they describe their identities in other ways.

Three unitary councils covering respectively northern and western Oxfordshire, the city of Oxford and central Oxfordshire, and the linked areas that were historically connected with Berkshire, will much better reflect the true identities of these areas than lumping them together.

Distinct priorities and needs

Over recent years, several detailed studies and plans have been undertaken by city and district councils in recent years to better understand residents' vision, priorities and needs for the different places in which they live. These studies include: Oxford2050 Vision, West Oxfordshire Market Towns study, Banbury Vision 2050, Bicester Healthy New Town study, South & Vale Draft Local Plan 2041 and West Berkshire Local Plan 2041.[14] Taken together, these show that pride of place and the aspirations of local residents reveal themselves in very different ways in across the wider geography.

Greater Oxford

Oxford stands out from the rest of the county. Its population is younger, much more diverse, and more densely housed. Nearly a quarter of its residents are students, including many postgraduates, and consequently it has fewer families with children, and most people rent their accommodation.

This young, diverse, highly qualified and very mobile population identifies directly with the opportunities brought through growth. The Oxford2050 Vision – produced with the input of the city's residents and businesses - set an aspiration that "Oxford's population will continue to grow over the next thirty years as people are drawn to live, work and study in our attractive, vibrant and thriving city." A recurring theme of the vision is the desire for more affordable housing, homes near jobs, and protection for renters.

Over the decades Oxford, Botley, Kidlington and Kennington and Sandford-on-Thames have become a near contiguous conurbation, despite spanning four separate district council areas. The hamlet of Shotover, which sits in South Oxfordshire can only be accessed by road through Oxford itself.

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[14] Oxford 2050 Vision, West Oxfordshire Market Towns study, Banbury Vision 2050, Bicester Healthy New Town study, South and Vale Draft Local Plan 2041, West Berkshire Local Plan 2041

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This proximity brings people together and unsurprisingly, while some residents attending drop-in engagement sessions on LGR in Botley, Kidlington and Kennington highlighted the distinctive nature of these parishes, many acknowledged the areas they lived already felt like part of Oxford and welcomed an opportunity to have a say in how the city is run.

While Wheatley and Berinsfield are separated from the city, most of their residents have regular work, family or leisure connections with the city and regularly use its services including retail, art and health facilities. All struggle with the chronic congestion in and around Oxford.

Greater Oxford would be a completely new authority, belonging as much to places like Wheatley, Berinsfield and Kidlington as to Oxford. The services will be provided across the whole area and for the first time in 50 years local residents would have more control over Oxford's transport. The proposals would provide additional bus services to villages around the city by extending existing routes. They will also see a redoubled focus on tackling the stark inequalities that are seen in some Oxford suburbs like Blackbird Leys and Rose Hill, as well as Berinsfield – all of which face long-standing challenges including low income, long-term unemployment, and poor health.

Places within the city itself still retain their distinct identities and even continue with a village identity as in Iffley Village and Old Marston. There is real local identity that differs between places like Barton and Jericho, or Blackbird Leys and Wheatley and our proposal aims to support community engagement and empowerment at the neighbourhood level across all areas of Greater Oxford, including the creation of Neighbourhood Area Committees.

==Graphics will follow to capture the following stats:==

As with many prosperous areas, Greater Oxford experiences stark inequalities. While overall health outcomes are better than the England average, there is a 10-year gap in male life expectancy between different areas.[15] Wealthy wards within Oxford, like Jericho, Marston, and Summertown are among the least deprived in the country, but they exist alongside areas such as Blackbird Leys and Rose Hill, which . In other more deprived parts of Greater Oxford such as Berinsfield, 21% of children live in absolute poverty, more than double the county average (10%)[16] and 26% of households claim Universal Credit, compared to 16% in Oxfordshire as a whole.[17]

The average age in Oxford is 31 years.[18], the youngest of any settlement across the three areas, compared to averages in the 40s elsewhere. Oxford is the fifth most densely populated district in the South East of England, and Greater Oxford is the most densely populated of the three unitary authorities, with an estimated 585 residents per square kilometre[19],.

Young adults aged 15–24 years, make up 19% of Greater Oxford's population, which is above the national average of 12%[20],. This is largely due to the student and postgraduate population in Oxford, where nearly a quarter (23%) of residents fall in this age group. These factors, combined with the

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[15] Office for National Statistics. Life Expectancy tables

[16] Children aged 0-19 years old living in absolute low income families, DWP 2024

[17] Total households on universal credit, DWP, May 2025

[18] Census 2021.

[19] Census 2021.

[20] ONS mid-year population estimates 2022

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area's thriving knowledge economy, contribute to Greater Oxford being one of the most highly educated areas in England: 47% of residents hold qualifications at Level 4 or above, compared to 42% across Oxfordshire and 34% nationally[21],.

As a result of its younger profile, Greater Oxford has the lowest proportion of older residents, with just 15% of the population aged 65 or over; lower than England (19%), Northern Oxfordshire (19%) and Ridgeway (20%)[22],. Conversely, it also has the smallest proportion of children under 15 (15%) of the three unitary authorities, which compares to 17% in Northern Oxfordshire and 19% in Ridgeway[23],.

Housing tenure reflects this demographic profile. Only 56% of residents in Greater Oxford own their home (with or without a mortgage), compared to 65% across Oxfordshire. Private renting is more common, with 27% of households renting privately or living rent-free, compared to 20% countywide. Greater Oxford also has higher rates of social renting (17% vs 15% countywide), rising to 21% in Oxford and 37% in Berinsfield, which lies in the south of the Greater Oxford area[24],.

Of the three unitary authorities, house prices are highest in Greater Oxford, averaging £550,800[25]. This is driven largely by Oxford's average of £573,300, making it the least affordable of the three unitary authorities.

Greater Oxford is the most ethnically diverse part of Oxfordshire. Only 76% of residents identify as White, compared to 87% countywide. The proportion of Asian, Asian British or Asian Welsh residents is 13%, more than double the county average (6%). Just 70% of Greater Oxford residents were born in the UK, compared to 83% across England, 86% in Northern Oxfordshire, and 88% in Ridgeway.[26]

Northern Oxfordshire

Northern Oxfordshire includes towns such as Banbury, Bicester, Chipping Norton, Witney, and Woodstock. These are proud, characterful, and community-driven places — rooted in heritage and independence – and all are growing rapidly. Amongst the market towns the area is a mix of rural villages across, and it is the least densely populated of the three unitary authority areas at 222 residents per square kilometre, about half the national average.

Northern Oxfordshire has often looked outwards rather than to the centre of the county, with West Oxfordshire District closely linked with Gloucestershire through its joint ownership interest in Publica and Ubico the two Teckal companies that provide many public services which it jointly owns. Cherwell District had a Section 113 formal joint working arrangement with South Northants up to the "forced divorce" in 2019 caused by Northamptonshire's own local government reorganisation.

Many longstanding residents identify with their locale - the Cotswolds or the Cherwell Valley. Yet, the area has many newer residents in more recent or still emerging settlements such as Carterton,

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[21] Census 2021

[22] ONS mid-year population estimates 2022

[23] ONS mid-year population estimates 2022

[24] All tenure figures are from Census 2021

[25] Land registry data; September 2024 to August 2025

[26] Census 2021

Graven Hill and Heyford Park. There is also a wide variation across the area in terms of diversity and affluence between rural communities to more urban centres like Banbury and Bicester.

As the West Oxfordshire Market Towns study shows, many residents feel disconnected from strategic decisions and want more local voice, investment, and care in shaping their future. Residents attending the LGR drop-in event in Banbury were fiercely proud of their hometown and were equally clear they didn't wish decisions on its future to be taken in Oxford.

These characteristics call for a place-based and locally responsive approach. While much of the area is relatively affluent, inequalities persist, particularly in the more urban centres such as Banbury. A joined-up system that brings together housing, education, health, and infrastructure will be essential. Tailored solutions for isolated rural communities, older residents, and disadvantaged towns must be informed by the voices of residents.

==Graphics will follow to capture the following stats:==

Residents in the Northern Oxfordshire area are generally older than Greater Oxford, with most towns having average ages in the 40s. Conversely, Northern Oxfordshire has the highest proportion of children under the age of five (6%), and 19% of the population are under 15, higher than Greater Oxford (15%) but similar to Ridgeway (19%)[27].

Home ownership is high, with 67% of residents owning their homes. This is above the Oxfordshire average (65%) and higher than Greater Oxford (56%). Northern Oxfordshire also has the highest proportion of people living in houses (88%) of the three unitary authorities. This compares to the England average of 77%[28].

Towns such as Banbury and Carterton face high levels of deprivation, lower qualification levels, and significant private renting. Banbury has three areas ranked among the 20% most deprived in England[29]. By contrast, places like Woodstock, Burford, and Standlake are among the least deprived.

Child poverty is higher in Northern Oxfordshire than Ridgeway, with 10.5% of children living in absolute poverty, compared to 8.5% in Ridgeway, although both have lower child poverty rates than Greater Oxford at 11%. Within the Northern Oxfordshire area, Banbury has child poverty rates as high as 17%, compared to just 6% in Woodstock[30].

Just over 36% of residents who are aged 16 and older, have level 4 and above qualifications. Whilst this is the lowest of the three unitary authorities, it is higher than the England average of 34%. Additionally, 15% of adults in Northern Oxfordshire have no qualifications, the highest proportion of the three areas but lower than the country average of 18%[31].

Ethnic diversity is lower than Greater Oxford, with 91% of residents identifying as White, compared to 75% in Greater Oxford and 87% countywide. The largest ethnic minority group is Asian (4%), though

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[27] ONS mid year population estimates 2022

[28] Census 2021

[29] Indices of Multiple Deprivation 2025.

[30] Children aged 0-19 years old living in absolute low income families, DWP 2024

[31] Census 2021.

this remains below the Oxfordshire average (6%)[32]. Greater diversity exists in towns such as Banbury and Bicester.

Ridgeway

The Ridgeway area stretches from the outskirts of Reading across the hills of the North Wessex Downs and includes a mix of towns, villages, and rural communities. Larger settlements include Abingdon, Didcot, Henley and Newbury; market towns such as Wantage and Wallingford; and smaller villages across West Berkshire, South Oxfordshire, and the Vale of White Horse.

While some towns such as Abingdon, Didcot, and Henley act as commuter and economic hubs with strong rail and road links that connect via Reading to London, much of Ridgeway is rural, with lower-density settlements and open countryside.

As already highlighted, these areas were connected as part of Berkshire for centuries. Amateur football teams in southern Oxfordshire still compete in the Berkshire League. Some older residents, along with the campaigning group CountyWatch still hold allegiances to Berkshire and describe their transfer into Oxfordshire as 'cultural vandalism'.[33]

Across South Oxfordshire, the Vale of White Horse and West Berkshire, local identity is defined by the meeting of heritage, landscape and community stewardship — and the shared ambition is to manage change so that new growth belongs to place rather than replacing it.

The area's large geographic spread and varied settlement types mean services must be tailored to a wide range of needs. Coordinating transport, health, housing, and education at a local level will be vital to ensuring equity. Engaging directly with communities, particularly in areas facing disadvantage, will help shape responsive and inclusive services across Ridgeway's social and geographic landscape.

The longstanding links across this geography is reflected in the strong local political support for the creation of a Ridgeway unitary authority. In putting forward their two unitary Ridgeway proposal councils in West Berkshire, South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse highlight the strong demographic and economic similarities and significant historic ties. The only significant difference with the three unitary Ridgeway proposal is the line of its northern boundary with Oxford, with Greater Oxford taking in around 40,000 residents close to the city.

<mark>*Graphics will follow to capture the following stats:*</mark>

Residents in Ridgeway are older on average than Greater Oxford, with most settlements having average ages in the 40s. It has the highest proportion of people aged 65 and over, of the three unitary areas (20%), compared to 19% in Northern Oxfordshire and 15% in Greater Oxford. However, Ridgeway also has the highest proportion of children under 15 (19%)[34], pointing to a mixed-age population with intergenerational needs.

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[32] Census 2021.

[33] Berkshire and Oxfordshire boundary debate still rages 50 years on, BBC News 2025

[34] ONS mid year population estimates 2022

Home ownership is highest in Ridgeway, with 69% of households owning their home outright or with a mortgage. This is above both Northern Oxfordshire (67%) and Greater Oxford (56%). Only 16% of households rent privately (compared to 27% in Greater Oxford), and social renting is also lower, at 14%, versus 17%[35] in Greater Oxford.

Ridgeway is the least deprived of the three areas, with a lower overall Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) score[36]. It has the highest proportion of residents who fall in social grade AB (35%)[37], and the lowest level of children in absolute poverty overall (8.5%)[38] of the three unitary authorities.

However, as is the case for both Greater Oxford and Northern Oxfordshire, Ridgeway is not an homogeneous area. While child poverty rates are low overall (around 5% in many areas within Ridgeway), there are places where poverty levels are much higher. In parts of Abingdon, Didcot, and Calcot for example, up to 16% of children live in absolute poverty[39].

Ridgeway is the least ethnically diverse of the three unitary areas. Around 92% of residents identify as White, compared to 87% countywide and 75% in Greater Oxford. The largest ethnic minority group is Asian, making up 3% of the population. However, more diverse populations exist in Didcot and Abingdon, where 80% of residents identify as White[40].

4.5 Voice

A New Democratic Vision for Oxfordshire

This proposal's overarching ambition is to establish the right powers, at the right scale, to deliver real change for our communities and places, leading to services and places designed with and for residents. In our LGR survey of 1,580 residents across Oxfordshire and West Berkshire, 69% agreed that: *councils are most effective when they are smaller and closer to the people they serve, enabling them to respond and adapt more easily to local needs.*

The proposed three unitary model achieves this by empowering Oxfordshire's towns and villages to speak strongly for their residents and businesses, at a scale and geography that more closely and accurately represents their interests. The model does the same for Oxford, where effective city-level governance is essential to managing the conurbation, and ensuring decision can be taken that prioritise its needs and maximises its growth potential. By creating an appropriately sized authority, communities can better hold politicians to account.

However, achieving real change is about more than getting the scale right. The success of the new authorities will also depend on their structure, size, and how effectively they engage and collaborate, formally and informally, with communities and partners. Our approach focuses on fostering strong strategic leadership, ensuring clear democratic accountability, and strengthening the community

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[35] Census 2021.

[36] Indices of Multiple Deprivation 2025.

[37] Census 2021.

[38] Children aged 0-19 years old living in absolute low income families, DWP 2024

[39] Children aged 0-19 years old living in absolute low income families, DWP 2024

[40] Census 2021.

leadership role of local government. Together, these principles will ensure that Oxfordshire's future governance is firmly rooted in the communities it serves.

Effective decision making

With unitary powers and responsibilities, each authority can make impactful decisions that shape its area in line with local, regional, and national priorities. This approach aligns with a coherent geographic structure that maintains clear rural–urban distinctions, ensuring that the interests of cities and the countryside are not set in opposition. Realising this potential, however, depends on a governance framework that enables effective and streamlined decision-making. We therefore propose a modern constitution and tailored support for each authority, establishing proportionate governance requirements so that decisions are not mired in red tape and councillors can focus on delivery.

Larger unitary structures at a county level, or a two unitary division, would see a continuation of the decades old dynamic that has seen the interests of city and rural areas represented together in a vehicle which is unable to effectively speak for either, frustrating the ability of all Oxfordshire's places to reach their full potential.

Clear accountability and responsibilities

The current two-tier system can be confusing, leaving many residents uncertain about who is responsible for their services. Our proposal replaces this complexity with clear, single-point accountability.

With unambiguous responsibility, councillors will become more visible, influential, and effective advocates for their communities. Each new authority will be designed for decisive leadership, balanced by robust, transparent scrutiny and enhanced support for elected members. Together, these changes will create a system that can act with clarity and confidence, while ensuring decisions are well-considered and responsive to the needs of local communities.

Unlike the 2UA and 1UA options, the place-based scale of the 3UAs will also ensure the councils are accountable to their populations at the ballot box. As an alternative to this, Oxford's population would represent 22% of the wider 1UA population, meaning those making the decisions for the city, will not be as accountable to those that live there.
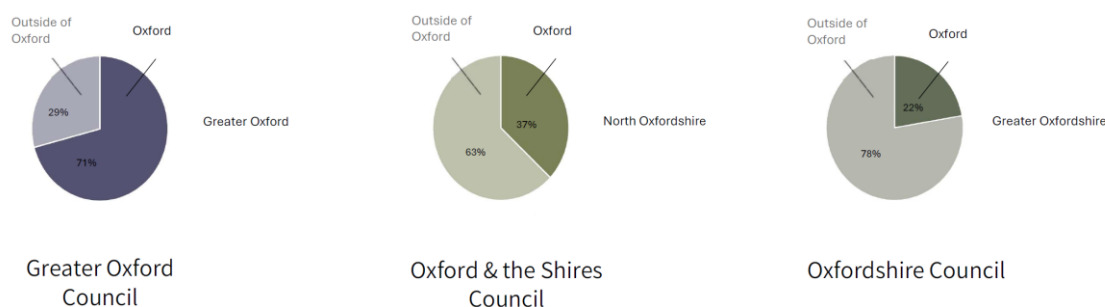

Fig 4.1: Proportion of Oxford population within proposed authority for each proposed option

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Empowering Communities Through Genuine Localism

True localism moves beyond the council chamber to bring residents into the very heart of decision-making. We will establish active, formal structures for neighbourhood engagement, centred on new Neighbourhood Area Committees (NACs), in line with central government guidance and reinforced by the *Centre for Governance and Scrutiny Report* commissioned by Oxfordshire County Council.

These will grant communities a direct voice in contributing to and shaping priorities, real influence over decisions, and stewardship of local budgets. They start from the principle that people are experts in their own lives, creating spaces where residents, community groups, and local institutions collaborate as equal partners to co-produce outcomes, ensuring that local insight remains a central pillar of democratic governance. We also understand this approach as a means of building community capacity in its own right: strengthening the networks, confidence, and skills that underpin resilient neighbourhoods, and forming a foundation for wider, preventative, community-based service provision.

This model builds on the strong networks and relationships that already exist across local government and the wider system, while giving ward councillors clearer ways to champion the communities they represent. We will ensure full the NACs are fully coterminous with the planned Health Neighbourhoods set out in the NHS 10-year Plan. This hyper-local focus and voice, alongside the place-based scale of the 3UAs will create a local governance system that works best with the new MSA.

This aligns with the direction set out in the *English Devolution and Community Empowerment Bill*, embedding neighbourhood empowerment and accountability at the core of the new unitary authorities.

Devolution

Following the publication of the English Devolution White Paper in December 2024, devolution discussions are progressing positively, with full support for Oxfordshire and Berkshire as the core of a new Mayoral Strategic Authority. The area has not been placed on the Devolution Priority Programme (DPP) for 2026, but discussions continue to work towards a proposal for the Mayoral Strategic Authority (MSA). The specific boundaries, timelines and priorities for the proposed MSA have not yet been confirmed, but it is anticipated the MSA will vest in 2028 at the same time as the new unitaries.

There are clear advantages to the three unitary authorities model as part of the developing MSA and to ensure that it appropriately works towards its strategic priorities for the wider region while representing the distinct communities of Oxfordshire.

The three unitary authorities approach to LGR will provide multiple constituent authorities built on strong engagement and local democracy models to support the Mayoral Strategic Authority in delivering across the region. The three unitary authorities will provide a balance of three voices for Oxfordshire, representing distinct places within the county. It ensures that the population of Oxford and its specific urban strengths and challenges can be suitably represented at this level alongside the individual representation of the other main economic centres – Reading, Bracknell, Slough and Swindon (dependant on final Government decisions on the make up of the MSA) – but without overpowering the different priorities of the rural populations of the wider Oxfordshire.

Strategic planning with local delivery

A Mayoral Strategic Authority across the wider region will operate across multi-unitary authorities, taking on functions which require a wider strategic regional perspective. This includes management of the growth plan and associated place funding, managing the integrated settlement and investment fund. It will also take on the strategic elements of spatial planning which require work at this level, such as housing, skills, public safety, protecting the environment and tackling climate change, inward investment, economic development and regeneration, and health, wellbeing and public service reform. It will also be responsible for strategic transport planning and delivery.

As such, the role of the Mayoral Combined Authority will allow unitary authorities to focus on local service delivery. They will draw on their deep understanding of local communities' strengths and the support they need to thrive – particularly when those unitary authorities are structured around their distinct communities. By collaborating on joint initiatives and neighbourhood-led schemes, unitary authorities can build on their connections to place and drive health and wellbeing benefits which increase the quality of life for the residents they serve.

The strategic nature of MSAs and their implementation across the country has a clear context for LGR and the role of unitary authorities in the national hierarchy. Larger unitary authority proposals, such as 1UA, aim to provide the advantages of working at a strategic level across a sizable area, which risks not being suitably distinct from the MSA's approach and missing the opportunity to create authorities which can focus on their specific place. Working with smaller authorities, such as the three unitary authorities for Oxfordshire, would provide the strengths of place-based unitary authorities alongside the strategic advantages of MSAs. The three unitary authorities approach is therefore the best fit for the new national hierarchy of local government.

The ambitious housing targets of Greater Oxford could be supported by working with the MSA to create one or more Mayoral Development Corporations – or other, similar, vehicles – to assemble land. This will ensure that development benefits and land value are captured and reinvested into needed infrastructure and services for existing and future communities.

Strong decision making in the strategic authority

A three unitary model in Oxfordshire and West Berkshire, balanced with multi-unitary model across the wider MSA area, combines the benefits of strategic regional leadership, local democratic responsiveness and operational resilience.

While the precise boundaries of the new MSA have yet to be confirmed, whichever options for LGR are pursued would significantly streamline the number of councils across the region. This would entail a significant reduction and, as part of that, there will need to be a constructive balance between scale and efficiency and democratic deficit, which will support strong decision-making.

Devolution enables the MSA to take responsibility for strategic infrastructure planning and delivery, ensuring that these are developed around economic functionalities and not county administrative boundaries. Whilst individual authorities will be able to focus on their own activities, the MSA will be able to take strategic oversight and drive the more major infrastructure projects which would support the specific work of each authority.

Coming together as a Thames Valley area under one MSA will foster a shared identity and purpose, supporting civic pride and a stronger leadership to advocate for the region at a national level. Ensuring that this leadership truly represents the constituent communities requires creating the right unitary authorities to make this up. Creating three unitary authorities with strong models for engagement and participatory democracy will mean that the specific communities and priorities within this area are appropriately represented to the MSA, eliminating policy bias towards only urban or rural priorities.

4.6 Future-Fit

3UA will create three councils are financially robust and sustainable from vesting onwards. Our proposal is self-financing and does not require Exceptional Financial Support (EFS) or any central government subsidy to fund the transition. 3UA fully pays back in 4 years, through efficiencies and transformation savings delivered by streamlining seven councils into three. **By year 5 annual net savings of £48.6 million will be delivered**. The financial sustainability of the three unitaries is underpinned by local resources — including reserves and the Flexible Use of Capital Receipts allowances.

The analysis and modelling that underpins our 'future-fit' financial assessment of the three unitary councils has been reviewed by Pixel Financial, experts in local government finance and funding provide support to over 160 local authorities.

What sets this proposal apart: A blueprint for modern local government

This proposal lays the foundation for a fit-for-purpose, modern model of governance, one that brings together strategic scale, empowered neighbourhoods and robust shared oversight, enabling all partners to drive growth, while ensuring community perspectives are fully woven into decision-making.

First, it gives Oxford the scale and powers to deliver the homes, jobs, and infrastructure the nation needs. With a governance structure designed to support effective decision-making, the city will have the tools, as well as the space, to appropriately to grow its world-leading knowledge economy whilst protecting access to the county's cherished countryside. Unlike other models that prioritise consolidation over effectiveness, this approach balances ambition for growth with a firm commitment to place.

Second, it builds authentic localism into the system. Oxford speaks clearly for the city, while towns and villages across Northern Oxfordshire and Ridgeway are empowered to speak for themselves.

The public survey undertaken across the entire Oxfordshire and West Berkshire geography within which more than 60% of the 1,580 responses came from areas outside of Oxford, found most people agreeing that councils were most effective when smaller and closer to the people they serve. An overwhelming majority of people (80%) expressed a view that urban and rural areas often require different approaches to housing, transport, education and skills, and other key council services.

A right-sized approach to unitarisation means that power resides at a distance which is accessible to each community, rather than getting lost in a bigger authority. Through formalised engagement structures, NACs and parish and town councils, communities will be empowered to contribute to and

shape local priorities. Where other models risk blurring or diluting identity, this one reinforces it, ensuring both urban and rural voices remain strong.

Third, it embeds prevention into the fabric of governance. Stable housing, secure incomes, and resilient neighbourhoods provide the strongest foundations for better outcomes in health, wellbeing, and opportunity. By harnessing local insight and strengthening connections with partners through a clear and consistent approach, the system and its governance are designed to co-create solutions with communities rather than impose them from the top down, delivering more effective and efficient results.

Taken together, these principles create a model that is both ambitious and grounded: strategic in scale, local in voice, and preventative in approach. This is not about redrawing boundaries for their own sake but about implementing the right governance at the right geography, from council chamber to community hall.

Clear, efficient, and future proof, our proposal offers Oxfordshire a credible and resilient framework to meet the challenges of the next generation.

Building a future-proof foundation for Oxfordshire

This proposal provides the building blocks for organisations that are truly fit for the future. A system of local government designed around people, place, and prevention. It is rooted in a commitment to sustainable growth that increases prosperity and income for the new councils. It delivers transformed, prevention-focused services that enable residents to live high-quality, independent lives with reduced need for long-term intervention from the council.

This dual focus on economic resilience and improved quality of life ensures that the new councils can deliver services that work today while remaining flexible and financially sustainable for the future. Through strong local leadership and empowered communities, this model will embed pride in place and strengthen local accountability across Oxfordshire.

Financial sustainability through growth and prevention

Detailed analysis of the finances of the seven existing councils, and modelling of transitional and transformational costs and efficiencies has been reviewed by Pixel Financial. It shows our 3UA proposal is self-financing and does **not** require or seek Exceptional Financial Support (EFS) or any central government subsidy to fund the transition. Instead, it is underpinned by local resources — including reserves and the Flexible Use of Capital Receipts allowances. Our proposal fully pays back in 4 years, through efficiencies and transformation savings delivered by streamlining six councils into three. By year 5 annual net savings of £47 million will be delivered.

This is a self-financing proposal that reimagines traditional local government structures to deliver three modern organisations with **prevention at their core and growth as a key outcome**. By leveraging extended boundaries, the new authorities will broaden their council tax and business rate bases, driving stronger revenue generation. At the same time, a focus on prevention will help to curb demand-led costs through more proactive, targeted interventions. By doing this the right way, we will be on a better financial footing for the longer term.

We have reviewed thoroughly the current performance of adult and children's care services across Oxfordshire and West Berkshire with independent advisors, Inner Circle Consultancy. This work has been woven into this report and highlights the potential for significant preventive opportunities that will help to ensure the delivery of better outcomes for individuals in receipt of care and support, as well as more responsive and efficient services.

Our proposals provide a once-in-a-generation opportunity to establish services that are transformed from vesting day, designed to be future fit from the very start. We know costs are increasing both at a unitary level across social care services due to complexity of need, and market pressures.
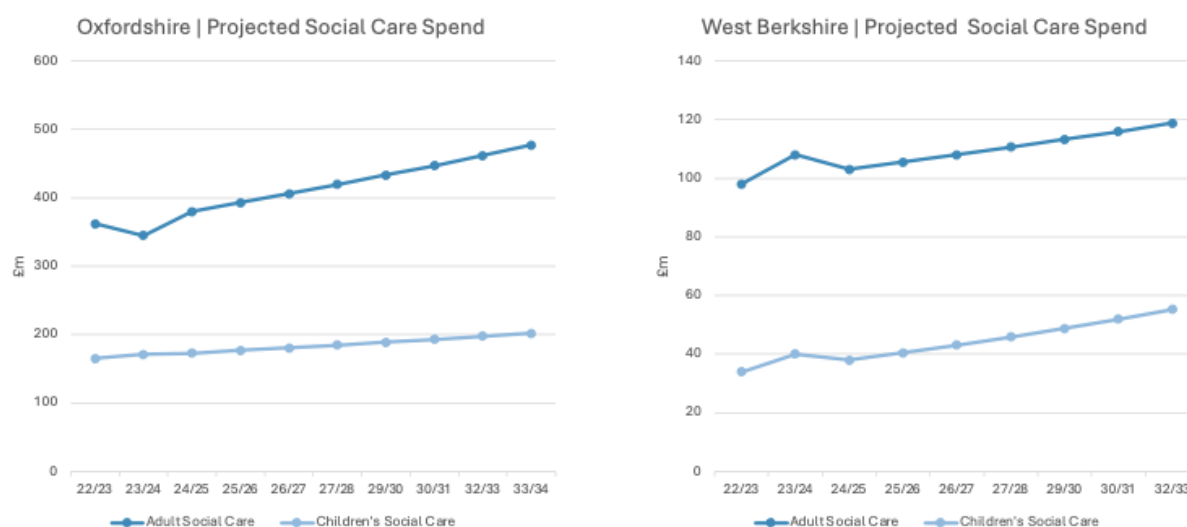
Fig 4.2: Projected Social Care Spend across Oxfordshire and West Berkshire

However, demand pressures are not unique to social care services. Oxford City Council has been recognised nationally as a beacon authority in development programmes which mitigate the rise of temporary accommodation demand and costs, delivering £8.5m in cost avoidance. Nonetheless, the annual pressure of temporary accommodation costs are expected to rise to £5.7m in two years, without further mitigation.

A proactive redesign approach is the key to unlocking both improved outcomes for residents and the financial sustainability required for long-term stability. It provides the foundation for councils that can deliver quality, prevention-led services, while driving growth and reinvesting savings back into their communities.

Building 21st century councils

New operating models for each of the three unitary authorities will deliver services that are fit for a 21st century council, that are efficient, modern, and responsive to local needs. They will prioritise the early resolution of resident queries, fully utilising technology and digital solutions to provide fast, seamless support, while maintaining a strong face-to-face offer for those who need it most. The ability to work at a local level means each authority can be responsive to the priorities of the specific communities they serve.

This future-ready approach will also ensure that the councils can adapt as services evolve and new opportunities arise. Innovative prevention and care services will be designed not only to meet current statutory duties for safe and legal practice, but also to anticipate future reforms and policy shifts.

Services connected to the community

Our transformation will consolidate prevention activity currently dispersed across multiple layers of delivery, enabling councils to streamline processes and embed data-led decision making. This will create a more holistic and efficient approach to prevention, one that avoids future costs by addressing root causes early.

Through community-rooted teams and proactive outreach, the new councils will work with children and families to prevent escalation of needs, reducing reliance on statutory intervention and legal proceedings. The focus of future Children's Services will be on building parental capacity and family resilience, enabling stable, loving family environments that promote permanence.

To address the national SEND challenge, our model will prioritise releasing sites to build specialist provision and strengthen inclusion within mainstream schools. Transformation in this area, underpinned by improved transport infrastructure, will reduce dependence on out-of-county placements and high-cost transport. By developing inclusive mainstream settings and multi-disciplinary teams around the school, we will ensure children and young people with additional needs can thrive, improving outcomes and reducing exclusions. Early intervention will help prevent many children from ever requiring an EHCP.

These community-connected services will all be underpinned by a deep understanding of place. The three unitaries will be smaller, more responsive organisations that reflect and respond to the unique needs of their communities, from the different priorities of families living urban over rural contexts, to the variations in provider markets across more rural footprints and those that are delivered via physical assets. Delivering services in this nuanced way is essential to achieving long-term, sustainable outcomes.

A financially secure, better future

Oxfordshire's future is one of rapid transformation shaped by population growth, economic expansion, and the opportunities created by the Greater Oxford area, but also across all of the 3UAs. The proposed three-unitary model is purpose built for this changing landscape. It combines the resilience and capacity required for growth with the agility to reflect the distinct character and needs of local communities. It fits the new model of national governance by giving local, place-based working which will feed local priorities into the strategic work MSA in a way which will balance the voices of Oxfordshire.

By aligning structure, scale, and local identity, this model will create councils that are future fit, financially secure, and community powered, able to deliver lasting benefits for residents and reinvest in the places they serve. Crucially, the three proposed unitary boundaries are designed to be future-fit and enduring, a structure that will stand the test of time, eliminating the need for further disruptive reorganisations in the years ahead.

4.7 Boundary proposal

The proposed lay-down of boundaries enables three viable unitaries, close to the people they serve, and each with a distinctive identity and profile for future generations. The inclusion of West Berkshire to extend the boundaries of the overall geography fits the legislative framework as a Type C proposal: a single tier that includes adjoining areas.

The redrawing of local government boundaries presents a nationally important opportunity for Oxford as a globally important city that is desperate to grow. The city already spills over its tight boundaries into three neighbouring districts. It attracts international investors keen to seize the opportunities in its knowledge economy. Yet long-standing divisions between the city and rural populations over the appetite for growth have held back the city's potential.

An unmodified three unitaries proposal on existing administrative boundaries would continue the artificial division for the city's communities. The two unitary proposal perpetuates the boundary problems and gives no scope to provide new housing and businesses in some of the most densely populated areas.

The proposal to extend to the Green Belt recognises that this is intrinsically connected to the city, a well understood and accepted geography created directly in relation to the city. Its villages and settlements predominantly look towards Oxford for work, leisure and services, and feel strongly linked to the city's fortunes and influence. Research spin outs provide business opportunities, science parks provide employment, and the population of students and academics shapes the foundational and cultural economy. Beyond the Green Belt, the influence of the university is felt much less, with the rural economy, manufacturing and tourism dominating employment, investment and skills.

The expansion of boundaries to create Greater Oxford absorbs city-adjacent areas of South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse. However, in all other respects our proposal for a Ridgeway unitary spanning across southern Oxfordshire and West Berkshire is the same as that presented in the 2UA proposal. It joins areas of common identity shaped by the historic links of these areas and their similar rural character.

The economic viability of the Northern unitary has been fully considered. This is an area with a good financial foundation, strong opportunities for future growth, and there is good alignment both politically and in the priorities of residents. There are growing economies in Bicester and Banbury , a strong and growing visitor economy, and significant plans for new housing including at Heyford Park, assuring financial resilience for the proposed unitary.

Oxfordshire's population today is in excess of 750,000 and growing - a single authority for the county would be well above the government's 500,000 guide figure. The creation of a Mayoral Strategic Authority removes the rationale for strategic scale unitaries that comprise it. Indeed, the creation of two strategic-scale organisations, at regional and at local government level, would leave a significant gap between residents and meaningful local government accountability.

Other options for the division of the area to preserve city governance have been considered, including a Greater Oxford within a 'doughnut' of an Oxfordshire authority and an authority based along the north-south knowledge spine. However, the proactive work between West Berkshire, Vale

of White Horse and South Oxfordshire to open discussions to coalesce as a unitary created an opportunity for alternative approaches.

The government requirement for better services alongside financial resilience and cost savings formed a key part of our overall approach. Our proposal creates the right size footprint for unitary councils to take a place-based approach to delivering integrated services, delivering transformation and putting a prevention approach at the core of delivery. Where the benefits of scale outweigh local adaptability we propose a shared service approach, such as the NHS joint commissioning fund for Children's Services.

Co-terminosity has been considered: the Oxfordshire Fire & Rescue Service (OFRS) performs well at an Oxfordshire-wide level, but Oxfordshire's police force and ICB both extend beyond our potential geography. The alignment of proposed timing for LGR and the creation of a Thames Valley MSA will enable a single transition for the OFRS, which is already expected to merge with Royal Berkshire Fire & Rescue Service.

Our proposal for boundary change is based on detailed work to ensure that it delivers on the criteria set by government, including making an exceptional case for boundary change. As well as expert analysis of the economic, geographic and demographic case for change, we have engaged widely with residents and stakeholders across the geography. We have shaped our proposal based on the needs of residents, businesses and future generations, to create places with a strong sense of identity, opportunity and accountability.

4.8 Public Engagement

Local government reorganisation in Oxfordshire needs governance that meets today's challenges and tomorrow's ambitions. The three unitary authorities (3UA) proposal delivers modern, efficient, and community-focused governance.

Thousands of residents, businesses, and stakeholders across Oxfordshire, and West Berkshire and regionally shaped this proposal through extensive engagement.

The engagement gave a clear mandate: people want governance that is closer to communities, more responsive, and more accountable. Business and economic partnerships backed the proposal for its ability to simplify planning, strengthen representation, and accelerate decisions.

Introduction and Strategic Context

Oxford City Council has engaged in wide-ranging and inclusive engagement to understand what people across Oxfordshire want from this once in a generation opportunity to reshape how local government is structured, to ensure that our proposal is responding to their priorities.

Engagement has indicated support for the proposal to create three new unitary authorities. There is strong support for a locally responsive option which would deliver more locally tailored services and strengthen local representation. Protection of local identity was noted, especially balancing growth with heritage and environmental priorities and where development could be directed to less sensitive areas.

Stakeholder and public engagement demonstrate support for this strategically sound option that reflects, a clear appetite for more localised governance, improved service responsiveness, and smarter, place-based decision making. The 3UA model achieves this most definitively.

In response to the feedback from engagement, the proposal will protect Oxfordshire's historic and cultural identity and align governance with community boundaries and their local identities. It empowers residents with greater influence over local planning and ensures services are tailored to the distinct needs of urban centres and rural communities.

This section outlines the extensive engagement and activities undertaken by the City Council to support the case for change, ensuring that the voices of residents, stakeholders, and communities were central to the development of the 3UA proposal.

Engagement is guiding how the City Council continues to collaborate as the proposal has evolved and the new unitary authorities are shaped in greater detail. Early and inclusive engagement has built trust and improved the quality of the proposal, reflecting a strong appetite for localised governance that meets community needs.

Stakeholders have consistently emphasised the importance of transparency and co-design in shaping future governance, alongside clear communication about service delivery, cost savings, and democratic accountability. These priorities have helped to embed a more responsive and informed approach.

Detailed information on the engagement activity and results from specific groups is outlined at Appendix D: Engagement Detail.

Oxford City Council has undertaken an extensive, inclusive, and impactful engagement programme across Oxfordshire and West Berkshire. This engagement was facilitated through a variety of channels, such as meetings, online surveys, social media, roundtable discussions, community-based events across Oxfordshire and West Berkshire, and short-form video content. This breadth of engagement ensured a representative and inclusive understanding of public and stakeholder views.

The engagement programme reached thousands of people through multiple channels, including:

- An Oxford Resident Panel survey on the 'Future of local Government for Oxford', with **266 responses**
- A public survey inviting Oxfordshire and West Berkshire residents, businesses and community groups to have their **say on proposals to reorganise local government, with over 1,580 responses , of which 61%** of respondents were from outside of the city.
- **340 residents engaged through 11 drop-in events** across Oxfordshire and one in West Berkshire
- Enhanced community engagement and inclusivity through targeted digital outreach, achieved **more than 2.6million impressions and strong interaction across six platforms**, with **TikTok boosting youth engagement**
- Engagement with more than **75 stakeholder organisations and statutory bodies**, including health, fire, police and neighbouring local authorities
- Engagement with **11 MPs** across Oxfordshire and Berkshire

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- A second Oxford residents panel survey, which included questions on Local Government Reorganisation to the standard annual survey of residents' satisfaction with City Council services
- **35 responses** were received to the City Council survey with local businesses and employers, to gather their views on shaping Local Government Reorganisation in a way that best supports future housing and economic growth in and around Oxfordshire.

Public engagement

Key findings from the main public engagement survey show:

- **69% agree** "councils are most effective when they are smaller and closer to the people they serve, enabling them to respond and adapt more easily to local needs"
- **80% agree** "urban and rural areas often require different approaches to housing, transport, education and skills, and other key council services"
- **88% agree** "councils have an important part to play in supporting the local economy, including through housing, infrastructure and transport policies"

Some survey respondents commented:

Boundaries and Governance Models

"The existing boundaries of Oxford have long been too constrained to allow effective development of a globally important city, whilst protection of genuinely ecologically important sites. The so-called 'Green Belt', and the resulting 'County Towns' development policy, does not do this and has resulted in the major traffic flows into Oxford. The unitaries in the proposed 'single County' and 'two Councils' models seek to perpetuate the problem and are too large and diverse to be effective and democratic. They appear to have been proposed for political reasons."

Advocacy and Strategic Oversight

"I think that the Greater Oxford model is optimal, enabling the City to be run more effectively as a cohesive whole. This should specifically include increased control over roads and traffic. However, ultimately the introduction of a Strategic Mayoral Authority is more important, as only at large scale can the main issues for the region be addressed successfully."

"I strongly support the three-unitary model, particularly as it will mean that local, urban voices are not overridden by rural voices. I fear that in a county council unitary, rural funding pressures would come at the expense of investing in Oxford's urban and suburban needs. Oxford City Council's current boundaries mean it is tightly hemmed in with little opportunity to expand. This puts a lot of pressure on transport links, over which the current city council has no control."

"I prefer the Greater Oxford council model since that will be focused on the housing and transport needs of the city and the nearby communities."

"I very much welcome this proposal which recognises that Oxford's needs are quite different from much of rural Oxfordshire. Including some of the nearby urban areas outside the city's current boundary within a new Greater Oxford council would recognise their similar needs for affordable housing, good transport infrastructure and a system of education and training to provide staffing for a thriving local economy."

A three unitary model to address diverse and local needs

"Three unitaries will offer local government most tailored to the particular needs of the different areas served. A single unitary is too large and too distant from the public. The track record for service delivery by Oxfordshire County Council - and many large local authorities such as Birmingham - is not great. A one-size fits all approach doesn't work with such diverse populations."

"As a former County Cllr, I like the 3 unitary model. The needs of Oxford and surrounding areas are very different to the rest of the County and there is a cultural difference too. So it's good to split Greater Oxford from the rest of the County."

"Three unitary model sounds like it will best support the people who need it."

"Of the three proposed models, it's the one I prefer. I think Transport in Oxford, in particular, should be the responsibility of a smaller urban council and not the current county council, whose rural members make decisions about urban areas that don't affect them."

"I feel a three unitary model is the most appropriate given the huge gulf in needs between Oxford city and rural Oxfordshire."

"I like this proposal. Our local needs in the Ridgeway area (Faringdon and Wantage) are often ignored by County Council and have resulted in some heinous examples of local authority mismanagement and neglect of the transport infrastructure."

"I think the 3 unitary model is the best proposed. The others are too big and mix urban and rural areas with different priorities."

"This option seems to me to be the most effective at balancing the need to reduce the complexity of local government and providing a council that can accurately and effectively respond to the needs of the people it serves."

This feedback aligns directly with the foundation principles of the Council's three unitary proposal.

Two additional questions were asked in the Councils annual Residents Survey 2025 in relation to Local Government Reorganisation:

- The majority of residents **(62%) agree** that councils are most effective when they are smaller and closer to the people they serve, enabling them to respond and adapt more easily to local needs
- **An even bigger majority (72%) agree** that urban and rural areas often require different approaches to housing, transport, education and skills, and other key council services

- **A substantial majority of 90% agree** that the council should prioritise good quality services and responding to local need
- Whilst **levels of agreement (43%) and disagreement (40%) were fairly equal** on the council prioritising cost savings.[41]

Business engagement

The City Council engaged with local businesses and employers to gather their views on shaping Local Government Reorganisation in a way that best supports future housing and economic growth in and around Oxfordshire.

Insights from the survey will inform ongoing work to ensure Oxfordshire can meet its housing needs while fostering business growth and sustainable development. The feedback received has helped shape the three-unitary proposal and will continue to guide future planning policies and partnership initiatives across the city and surrounding areas.

35 responses were received to the City Council survey, across the Health, Technology, Engineering, Arts, Entertainment and Recreation, Education, University, Property, Retail and Voluntary sectors.

- **Over 80%** of **respondents** said being located in or near Oxford is very or extremely important to their business success.
- **Around 68% strongly agree** that Oxford should go beyond government's housing delivery targets.
- **Almost 85% agree** that affordable housing near Oxford is important for business growth.
- **46% favour** building additional homes close to the city, including suitable locations within the Green Belt. (23% would prefer development beyond the Green Belt)
- **Over half (54%) believe** future development should balance new homes with employment space.

The following is some of the feedback examples respondents told the Council:

A commercial stakeholder commented: *"Clever and denser developments close to the city of Oxford that provide opportunities for a diverse range of commercial enterprises, and not just the well funded STEM variety are important in providing and balanced and sustainable community."*

A stakeholder in the entertainment sector said: *"increased commercial development only works if there is the housing development to support it.*

An educational stakeholder said: *"There is a healthy balance to be struck between supporting economic growth and increasing the availability of housing. A thriving economy supports the sustainability of the broader community."*

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[41] [Satisfaction with Oxford and Oxford City Council rise but concerns about housing, transport and crime remain, Oxford City Council 2025](#)

A voluntary sector stakeholder stated: *"The Oxford economy seems to be vibrant to me with a major issue being recruitment, retention and pay of staff for the businesses. More, affordable housing might alleviate this somewhat, so providing homes and helping business."*

A developer said: *"Alongside new homes ambitious targets for employment growth will allow Oxford to better meet its full potential which for so long has been constrained by the tight administrative boundary."*

A major business said: *"As a major centre for national and international research and development, which is unlikely to change in the long term, it would be shortsighted not to ensure the City can continue to adapt to changes in technology and the need to accommodate high growth companies. A mixed approach also reduces the need to commute and drives services which can be shared with adjoining neighbourhoods."*

A university stakeholder commented: *"A single consistent focus on City Governance is essential in the 21st Century. We need to move away from governance structures which are a product of history or geography and therefore operate either within a limited, arbitrary boundary (such as the existing City boundary), or alternatively, are so big they encompass towns and rural areas which have different issues or priorities to the running of a modern City."*

Digital engagement

Through digital engagement, the City Council achieved significant reach and high engagement across six social platforms, connecting with thousands of residents and stakeholders.

- Delivered **32 content pieces** and **11 Facebook events**, driving both online and in-person engagement;
- Targeted communications reached audiences in Oxfordshire and West Berkshire, averaging **2.8 views per person**, with **TikTok generating standout engagement** among 18- to 34-year-olds;
- **2.6m+ impressions** and **38.8k link clicks**;
- **1,650 hours** of video viewed; and
- **8.3k reactions**, **2.7k comments**, **1.5k shares** and **1.1k saves**.

This digital engagement – considered by the City Council to be significantly broader than the engagement undertaken by the one unitary authority (1UA) or two unitary authority (2UA) proposers – combined extensive visibility with meaningful interaction, leveraging video and shareable content to deliver a precisely targeted strategy that resonated strongly with communities, residents, and stakeholders across Oxfordshire and beyond.

Participation from businesses, the voluntary sector, MPs, parish councils, universities, residents, and community groups responded positively to the increased local representation and engagement this model would offer, while businesses welcomed the potential for economic growth and streamlined services.

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Strategic partnerships

Oxford City Council has an established strong network of local and strategic partnerships that underpin its approach to shaping inclusive, world-class services and provision.

Through sustained engagement with local, regional, and sector-wide stakeholders, the Council has for many years actively listened, collaborated, and co-designed solutions that reflect a broad spectrum of perspectives.

These relationships, spanning the city, Oxfordshire, the wider region and networks of similar local authorities have enabled Oxford City Council to draw on external expertise and voices beyond its own boundaries, ensuring informed and shared priorities and collective ambition. The other District Councils and County Council – which together with Oxford City Council will form the new unitaries – have similarly worked collaboratively across many of these shared partnerships.

Key partnerships include the:

- **Oxfordshire Leaders Joint Committee**: the statutory partnership of the six Oxfordshire councils working together to deliver the county's Strategic Vision for sustainable development, coordinating efforts on housing, infrastructure, economy, and climate to secure inclusive growth and net zero by 2050
- NHS Buckinghamshire, Oxfordshire and West Integrated Care Board - **Place Based Partnership**: bringing together health, social care, local authorities, and community partners at a local level to integrate services, reduce health inequalities, and improve outcomes for residents
- **Oxfordshire Health and Wellbeing Board**: the statutory partnership of local government, the NHS, and community representatives that provides strategic leadership to improve health, reduce inequalities, and oversee joint plans and priorities for the county's health and care system supporting integrated health and social care strategies
- **Oxfordshire Health Improvement Board**: a partnership under the Health and Wellbeing Board that works to prevent ill health, reduce health inequalities, and promote wellbeing through coordinated action on priorities like physical activity, healthy eating, mental health, and wider determinants of health
- **Oxfordshire Children's Trust**: assembles public, private, and voluntary sector partners to improve outcomes for children and young people by coordinating strategic planning, promoting integrated services, and ensuring their voices shape decisions
- **Oxfordshire Inclusive Economy Partnership**: which originated from City Council-led initiatives and now operates countywide to tackle inequality and promote opportunity. Uniting businesses, public bodies, education, and community groups to tackle inequality and create a fairer, more inclusive economy across the county.
- **Oxfordshire Zero Carbon Partnership**: which also originated from City Council-led initiatives and now operates bringing together other local authorities, businesses, and institutions to accelerate climate action and achieve a net zero and climate-resilient Oxfordshire by 2050
- **Oxford Strategic Partnership**: integrates public, business, community, and voluntary sector leaders to shape Oxford's future, tackle key challenges, and promote a thriving, inclusive, and sustainable city

- **Fast Growth Cities Group**: aligns Oxford, Cambridge, Milton Keynes, Norwich, Peterborough, and Swindon to champion investment, infrastructure, and devolved powers that unlock their economic potential, drive innovation, and support sustainable growth for the UK economy
- **Oxford Safer Communities Partnership**: a multi-agency collaboration that works to prevent and reduce crime, anti-social behaviour, and community safety risks in Oxford by coordinating local authorities, police, health, and voluntary sector partners
- **Oxford Children and Young People Partnership**: unites public bodies, health, education, police, voluntary sector partners, and young people themselves, to improve wellbeing and life chances for children and young people, ensuring their voices shape services and strategic priorities.

These established partnerships create a platform for integrated action across Oxfordshire and the wider region, with a collaborative infrastructure strengthening the three new unitary councils' ability to respond to complex challenges and deliver outcomes that are inclusive, innovative, and aligned with the long-term vision for Oxfordshire, the region and nationally.

By leveraging these strategic alliances, the new unitaries will continue the existing countywide commitments to partnership led governance and joint capacity to mobilise a wider system for transformative change.

Detailed information on key Oxfordshire local government partnerships is outlined at Appendix D: Engagement Detail.

The Council worked through established partnerships and networks across Oxford, Oxfordshire, and the wider region to ensure the LGR Proposal reflected a shared, informed approach:

 Locally, it engaged with the Oxford Strategic Partnership – uniting public, private, and voluntary sector leaders to shape city priorities - and collaborated with the Oxford Economic Growth Partnership, and other county-wide forums to align with growth and investment strategies.

Regionally, the Council drew on its membership of the Fast Growth Cities Group (consisting of Oxford, Cambridge, Milton Keynes, Norwich, Peterborough, and Swindon) and the *Case for Cities* group (consisting of Oxford, Cambridge, Exeter, Gloucester, Ipswich, Reading, Lincoln, Peterborough, Swindon and Norwich).

Feedback from these partnerships refined the proposal by highlighting shared ambitions, identifying challenges, and shaping actions that address local needs while aligning with regional and national priorities.

Transparency in Action – engagement feedback, questions and concerns

We have carefully considered the wide-ranging feedback received through extensive and inclusive engagement across Oxfordshire and West Berkshire. The Council is grateful to everyone who shared their views and have reflected on the key themes, concerns and aspirations raised coming out of engagement.

This proposal has been shaped by meaningful stakeholder input, placing Oxfordshire and West Berkshire voices at the centre of decision making. The Council acknowledge the concerns expressed and, in the section below, outlines how the proposal addresses common questions and concerns.

Topic	Area of concern	How this is addressed in the 3UA Proposal
Population and Sustainability	• The proposed 3 unitary authorities are too small to fit the minimum population model • None of the authorities will have a big enough population size to make it financially sustainable	Government has stated that authorities will be able to make the case for Unitaries of less than 500,000 population - this is guidance not a hard floor The three unitaries will be median in size for English unitary councils at outset and top third in size by 2040. Balance sheet analysis shows that all three councils fully meet government criteria on financial sustainability, with strong balance sheets and significant future growth benefits which underline financial sustainability and resilience of the three unitary councils.
Service Delivery and Capacity	• Oxford City Council has no experience delivering key services like adult social care, SEND, and education. • What are the set-up and ongoing costs for services in three unitary authorities? • Concerns about service continuity during transition	The three new unitary councils will incorporate two existing social care and SEND services. Service leadership will be recruited to oversee the safe, legal and innovative delivery of those services and the vast majority of people delivering the services in the new councils will be the same people already doing so today. Quality assurance will be a core part of the service delivery, and the quality of the service will be externally validated by Ofsted and CQC. The set-up and ongoing costs for services are set out in detail in 5.6 Transition Costs. The Implementation plan across section 7 covers how services will be delivered across the transition period
Financial Concerns	• Future council tax levels • a three unitaries authority model will not make the savings required	All three LGR proposals will involve council tax harmonisation. Future arrangements for Council Tax is described in the Council Tax section of Finance (5.9). It should be noted that there are no decisions or recommendations here and at this stage the proposal sets out the options.

	• Will savings from LGR be absorbed in existing debt	There are no current concerns over debt levels or assets which are not performing as expected. Therefore, savings would not be absorbed in existing debt. This is noted in Stranded Debt section of Finance (5.5) The proposal delivers significant Transformation Savings Finance section (5.7)
Governance and Representation	• Parish Councils may be bypassed or lose status • Ward boundary changes and community connections will be disrupted • The balance between efficiency and effective representation, and the preservation of local identity	Parish Councils will retain their importance and have a crucial role to play in connecting the new structure with the community, set out in 6.3 Council Size and Structure. The proposal talks consistently (particularly in 3.4 Voice) about building on existing structures, including parish councils. Where possible, existing administrative boundaries have been retained. Where the unitary authorities have required new boundaries, the building blocks of these proposed changes are based on parish councils to preserve local community identity. The creation of three unitaries responds to a desire for local decision-making. This means that the Northern Oxfordshire and Ridgeway unitaries can both respond to their own needs in the best ways for them, and likewise Greater Oxford.
Identity and Community Cohesion	• Local areas within the proposed new boundaries have distinct identities not aligned with Oxford City • Loss of community identity and character	Extended boundaries will work in a place-based way and the Greater Oxford council will ensure that these are considered as their own places in their context around the outside of Oxford, strengthening the transport links to enable people to get the advantages of proximity to Oxford while keeping their identity as smaller, suburban/rural settlements. By creating a single Greater Oxford unitary rather than combining with Oxford and the Shires these communities can have their voices heard better as a more distinct part of the population.

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Green Belt and Environmental Protection	• Development in the Green Belt • Urban sprawl threatens the countryside, wildlife, and biodiversity	Only 2.6% of the green belt is proposed for release, as set out in 4.2 Homes. Through targeted land value capture, this limited release enables investment in the wider green belt, enhancing its ecological and community value. This approach could support initiatives such as expanding Shotover Country Park or advancing the Berks, Bucks and Oxon Wildlife Trust's vision to connect the habitats of Otmoor and Bernwood (outlined in 4.2 Homes). By improving access and biodiversity, the remaining green belt becomes more meaningful and beneficial for residents' health and wellbeing. Focusing development at density in small areas near Oxford reduces pressure on more rural locations, reduces overall land take for new housing, reduces commuter journeys and helps protect the broader countryside.
Housing and Development	• Overdevelopment and misuse of land • the need for more affordable and social housing • a focus on office, laboratory and commercial development over housing	Oxford's housing targets include a substantial proportion of affordable homes, as detailed in 4.2 Homes. The proposal demonstrates a clear ability to meet these targets in line with local needs. By strategically releasing small areas of green belt land, place-based planning can ensure land is used optimally - supporting housing delivery as well as providing much needed commercial space to unlock economic growth.
Transport and Infrastructure	• Traffic congestion and inadequate transport infrastructure • Current infrastructure capacity may be insufficient to support the scale of proposed growth • Transport and connectivity, especially in rural and outlying areas	The proposal concentrates development around existing urban areas, enabling stronger connections to active travel routes and public transport. Concentrating new development beyond the Green Belt would lead to more commuting. Housing and transport planning within single authorities ensures a coordinated, place-based approach that reflects local needs (Homes 4.2). This proposal supports local area energy planning and aligns with the wider ambitions of the MSA. Ridgeway is an energy powerhouse

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		and the strong networks there can be used to ensure robust planning to meet needs. Agglomeration directly supports the viability of public transport services. By engaging communities directly, the proposal allows for tailored transport solutions and locally supported initiatives, ensuring infrastructure is designed with residents in mind (TOM for Place).
Strategic Planning and Structure	• Fragmentation and disaggregation of services	As outlined in Table 7.1, the Council will map critical services and implement continuity plans to ensure a smooth transition. Prior to vesting day, accurate and complete data will be securely transferred to the appropriate unitary authority to support the safe and lawful continuation of services and minimise disruption. While shared services may be considered where appropriate, most services will be duplicated across the three authorities to reflect local priorities. The cost of duplication is expected to be offset by long-term savings achieved through reduced demand and more effective, place-based delivery. Disaggregation plans are informed by best practice from previous local government reforms and the establishment of new authorities.

Prosperity

Businesses and developers welcomed the growth potential, streamlined services, and opportunities for economic development. SMEs expressed interest in equitable service provision and local accountability. Residents called for better transport links, including bus and rail services, particularly in rural areas.

Oxford City Council's longstanding leadership that has led to a decision to reopen the Cowley Branch Line demonstrates how local engagement drives real solutions - connecting deprived communities, easing congestion, and unlocking growth.

Although not the transport authority, the City Council's leadership on this issue that was so important for our place in terms of the economy and housing meant that in the absence of actions from the transport authority, the City Council stepped in and delivered a scheme with investment from the private sector and national government support.

By working directly with residents and partners (including with Oxfordshire County Council, ARC Oxford, The Oxford Science Park, and the Ellison Institute of Technology), the City Council is already addressing key issues like traffic and access. This targeted, place-based approach supports inclusive prosperity and demonstrates the value of retaining strong local governance.

Homes

There was strong support for building more genuinely affordable housing in the right places, with affordability and access to jobs being key priorities. People were concerned that the current infrastructure can't support the growth outside of Oxford's immediate hinterland, so the proposal focuses housing growth in areas adjacent to Oxford city. These locations are better positioned to support new development through existing and planned transport links, services, and facilities. This approach enables Northern Oxfordshire and Ridgeway to concentrate on meeting their own housing needs under the new Standard Method, while safeguarding rural character and limiting development on open countryside.

Quality of Life

The proposal is designed to enhance quality of life for residents by prioritising the delivery of high-quality public services. Engagement findings indicate that 90% of residents prioritise service quality over cost savings, underscoring the importance of maintaining standards that directly impact wellbeing. In addition, feedback from the voluntary and community sector highlights the value of accessible, person-centred services and the preservation of green spaces - both of which are recognised as essential contributors to physical and mental health.

To address increasing service pressures, particularly the rising number of children and young people with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), the proposal sets out a framework for integrated care across health, education, and social services. It embeds preventative approaches and promotes cross-sector collaboration to enable earlier identification of needs and more coordinated, effective interventions.

By aligning services and reducing duplication, the proposal aims to improve outcomes for individuals and communities, while also strengthening long-term resilience. This future oriented proposal supports the sustainability and fairness of service provision, ensuring that public services continue to meet the evolving needs of residents and contribute positively to their quality of life.

Voice

Residents, community groups and the voluntary sector supported the proposal's potential to enhance local voice and participatory governance. Parish councils expressed interest in clearer roles and funding, with many welcoming greater localism.

This proposal responds to that and strengthens local voice by embedding participatory governance at every level. The proposal gives Oxford, Oxfordshire's towns, and villages distinct democratic platforms - each empowered to represent their communities, drive place-based priorities, and contribute to strategic leadership.

Our proposal to establish active, formal structures for neighbourhood engagement, centred on new Neighbourhood Area Committees will grant communities a direct voice in contributing to and shaping priorities, real influence over decisions, and stewardship of local budgets. It also aims to put local voices at the heart of decision making to make sure that decisions are made alongside the people who live and work in Oxford and Oxfordshire.

Identity

There was a clear desire to preserve local identity and concerns about villages becoming urban extensions of Oxford. Cultural organisations emphasised the need to embed Oxfordshire's cultural heritage and amenities in future planning.

People were concerned that rural communities would lose their identity. The proposal responds to that and acknowledges the distinct identities and governance needs of Oxfordshire's rural communities. By establishing a three unitary authority, it enables areas to articulate and pursue their local priorities without being subsumed by the strategic focus of the city. For areas that would be incorporated into Greater Oxford, the proposal ensures that their community interests are safeguarded through appropriate representation and tailored service delivery within the new structure.

This proposal will help people stay locally rooted, with better access to public transport. By avoiding scattered development, it safeguards the distinct character of Oxford, Oxfordshire, and historic and local landscapes, ensuring that community identity and rural heritage are preserved for future generations.

Future-Fit

Stakeholders strongly endorsed differentiated strategies for urban and rural communities (72% agreement), recognising that a one-size-fits-all model is no longer viable. There was a call for transformative reforms across welfare systems, sustainable transport, and integrated health and social care - key pillars of a future-fit public service ecosystem.

The engagement process highlighted the critical role of smaller, place-based councils in cultivating meaningful local relationships. These councils act as agile connectors between residents, community groups, and local authorities, enabling more responsive and resilient service delivery.

There was consistent and widespread support for a place-based, community-led approach. Participants advocated for services that are locally tailored, inclusive, and reflective of the distinct needs and aspirations of each area. This feedback presents a clear mandate to design governance structures that are adaptive, participatory, and capable of delivering equitable outcomes.

The Council has embedded these principles into its proposal.

Engagement Strategy and Timeline

Oxford City Council adopted a phased and inclusive engagement strategy to inform and shape the proposal. Key milestones included:

Feb 2025	Mar - Nov 2025

Jul - Aug 2025	Sep - Oct 2025

Initial Residents Panel survey launched

Stakeholder meetings and early engagement

Main public survey and drop-in events

VCSE Engagement and stakeholder survey

Fig 4.4: Timeline of Engagement

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5 The Financial Case

All seven councils included in this proposal – the Oxfordshire authorities plus West Berkshire – shared data to support the financial modelling undertaken in the development of the three proposals. As the granularity of information provided varied across the councils some assumptions were required. A common high level approach to modelling, including use of 2025-26 Revenue Account returns, non-inclusion of projections for Fair Funding impacts on business rates, and data on assets, staffing, etc. was agreed by the Section 151 Officers of all councils with the objective of enabling a like-for-like comparison of the financial benefits identified for each proposal.

Pixel Financial, experts in local government finance and funding, worked with Oxford City Council officers in a number of areas to undertake the financial modelling and assessments, with further support from consultants at **LGFin** and **Inner Circle Consulting**.

Pixel Financial undertook specific work including grants and business rates disaggregation and other metrics used to disaggregate revenue expenditure; detailed modelling on Council Tax harmonisation; and a review of the overall modelling of transitional and transformational costs and benefits. LGFin undertook specific work on balance sheet disaggregation. Inner Circle Consulting provided overall support across the financial section and a review of the financial modelling.

The analysis below show that the three unitary authorities (3UA) proposal fully meets Government criteria on financial sustainability:

- Strong balance sheets and significant future growth benefits underline the financial sustainability and resilience of the 3 unitary councils.
- A manageable revenue position on formation of the unitaries based on disaggregation of their 2025-26 budgets.
- Payback of transitional costs of £36.2 million and the transformation of services could be achieved within a 4-year period with no need for any Government support.
- By year 5 annual net savings of £48.6 million per annum will be achieved through transitional and transformational efficiencies which is broken down as follows:

Table 5.1: Transformation and Transition Costs and Benefits

Year 5 Transformation and Transition Costs and Benefits	Greater Oxford	North Oxfordshire	Ridgeway	Total
	£000's	£000's	£000's	£000's
Transformation Benefits	-9,210	-8,407	-10,648	-28,265
Transformation Costs	4,419	4,530	4,732	13,681
Transition Savings	-7,070	-8,910	-18,072	-34,052
Net Benefits	-11,861	-12,787	-23,988	-48,636

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The additional commercial and housing growth enabled by the creation of Greater Oxford is not included in the above table of transitional and transformational benefits, but is very significant (set out in Section 5.11 below):

- By year 5 (2032/33) Greater Oxford's growth will yield an additional £8.4m per annum in business rates and an additional £11.8m in council tax receipts.
- By 2040/41Greater Oxford's growth in commercial floor space and housing will yield an additional £41.9m per annum in business rates and an additional £72.8m per annum in council tax receipts

5.1 Financial Position

The baseline position has been analysed using the 2025/26 budgeted position of each of the Councils in Oxfordshire plus West Berkshire. A summary of the current position is shown in the following table:

Table 5.2: Financial Position of Existing Local Authorities

	Net revenue Expenditure Budget	Forecast Total Funding	Forecast Net position (Surplus(-) / Deficit)	General Fund Allocated Reserves	General Fund Unallocated Reserves	Total Long Term General Fund Borrowing (Capital Financing Requirement)	General Fund External Debt	Total General Fund Property and Equipment Assets
	£ million	£ million	£ million	£ million	£ million	£ million	£ million	£ million
Cherwell	32.8	-34.7	-1.9	1.9	39.3	235.5	139.0	173.4
West Oxfordshire	12.1	-13.6	-1.5	3.6	27.8	29.4	0.0	129.6
Oxford City	27.8	-30.5	-2.7	11.6	48.8	45.3	0.0	343.2
South Oxfordshire	18.3	-18.4	-0.1	2.2	63.8	-0.1	0.0	58.0
Vale of the White Horse	20.1	-19.2	0.9	10.0	27.2	0.3	0.0	86.8
West Berkshire	336.4	-340.6	-4.2	7.8	13.9	319.7	202.7	422.4
Oxfordshire	1,129.1	-1,138.9	-9.8	58.6	238.1	505.5	259.9	724.3
Total	1,576.6	-1,595.9	-19.3	95.7	458.9	1,135.6	601.6	1,937.7

This section will show several key aspects of the 3 unitary proposal:

- All of the forecast opening revenue surpluses and deficits are relatively small and would be manageable through the normal budgetary process.
- Depending on how the new authorities decide to manage it, could be achieved between one and two years
- The Housing Revenue Account (HRA) currently operated by Oxford City Council adds the benefit of supporting the growth agenda and providing increased affordable dwellings
- The housing company, OX Place, provides an opportunity both to develop new housing and for the HRA to manage on behalf of the citizens of the new unitary
- Oxford Direct Services Limited and its sister company Oxford Direct Services Trading Ltd will continue to thrive and deliver dividends back to its shareholders. The increased boundaries of Greater Oxford and the potential to work in partnership will give the potential for the companies to continue to grow

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- The balance sheet analysis shows that all three proposed unitary authorities will have strong financial resilience
- All of the new authorities would start with above average levels of usable revenue reserves along with the strong balance sheets.
- The proposed unitary authorities will have the resources to finance the necessary transition and could also release capital resources to take advantage of the proposed flexible use of capital receipts.
- The analysis of the costs and benefits of transition to unitary status and the transformation of service provision shows payback over a four-year period (three years for Ridgeway) with an ongoing financially sustainable position thereafter for all of the three unitaries in this proposal
- None of the unitary authorities in this proposal will be looking for exceptional financial support
- This proposal will deliver growth which will benefit the citizens of the area and also the wider national economy.

5.2 Existing council budgets and pressures

The district councils in Oxfordshire are experiencing many of the same pressures faced by local authorities nationally with the main pressure coming from demand for temporary accommodation and other demand-led services. As the main urban centre in Oxfordshire, Oxford City Council is experiencing the greater increase in demand for temporary accommodation. The temporary accommodation (TA) placement rate has risen from an average of 4.26 households placed per week in 2022/23 to 10.20 in the current financial year. The Council currently has a Temporary Accommodation stock of 188 dwellings and will grow this to over 300 by 2026, with a mixture of purchases, long term leasing and conversion of existing units. Whilst this stock will grow, the council will continue to incur a significant expenditure on short term hotel and B&B accommodation in the short term. Demand is also forecast to continue to grow and alternative measures are being introduced to further mitigate costs, including the purchase of additional housing, taking our TA housing stock to around 560 by 2029-30, introducing a face to face offer to improve homelessness assessments and decrease the placement rate, as well as introducing a new IT system for Housing Needs which will increase staff productivity.

To deal with the financial pressures, most councils have responded with prudent financial management, delivering in-year underspends, replenishing reserves, and in some cases forecasting surpluses. West Berkshire Council asked for and received a £16 million loan from the government to cope with "tremendous financial demands". Of this, £13 million was to provide reserves for future sustainability while the remaining £3 million was to fund a gap in the 2025/26 budget. As can be seen from the later analysis, the combination of West Berkshire Council into the Ridgeway Unitary will support the future financial position and, along with transition and transformation savings that are available to all of the unitary authorities in the proposal, this will allow the new unitary overall to be financially sustainable in the future.

In accordance with the Local Government Act 2003 all council chief financial officers are required to assess the robustness of their budget estimates and the adequacy of reserves. In the case of West Berkshire Council, the budgets and reserve levels were signed off assuming the receipt of the government exceptional financial support (which was received) and noted that this was a one-off

measure and that there is a clear path to securing a balanced financial position in the immediate future. In these assessments all the chief finance officers signed off their budgets but some with reservations over the longer term. The opportunities afforded by the transition to unitary status will, as shown later in this chapter, deal with the concerns over the future financial position.

Our three unitary model delivers the optimal balance between scale, resilience, and local accountability. It creates councils that are financially sustainable, operationally efficient, and close enough to their communities to design services around local priorities. The model spreads transformation effort and cost, reducing implementation risk and ensuring that efficiencies are achieved without over-centralising decision-making. Savings would primarily derive from:

- **Consolidation of management tiers and corporate services** within each unitary;
- **Reduction in duplication** of governance and back-office functions across districts and county;
- **Rationalisation of estate and ICT systems** through harmonised transformation programmes;
- **Stronger procurement leverage and shared commissioning frameworks** at a sub-regional level; and
- **Transformation of major services** such as Adult Social Care, Children's Service, Early Intervention Programme.

Three unitary authorities also create a more balanced distribution of financial risk. Concentrating all fiscal exposure in a single authority would heighten vulnerability to demographic and economic shocks, such as rising demand in adult social care or business rate volatility. A tri-structure allows for differentiated fiscal strategies, greater flexibility in financial management, and collaboration where shared arrangements deliver best value. This approach builds long-term resilience and aligns with the Government's commitment to fiscal devolution and empowered local leadership — ensuring decisions about tax, spending, and reform are made at the level where they can deliver the greatest impact.

Proposed Unitary Model

Our proposed three unitary authority model for the future of local government in Oxfordshire will result in significant financial benefits by reducing duplication, achieving economies of scale, without being so big that diseconomies of scale creep in, and capitalising on opportunities for service transformation and improvement. This would be achieved whilst retaining good local democratic representation and being responsive to the needs of local communities in a way that a larger more remote Council would not.

Oxfordshire currently has six councils; five district councils and one county council. The proposal is also bringing in West Berkshire Council which is currently a unitary council. This proposal replaces these with three new unitary councils comprising:

- Greater Oxford - Oxford City Council plus parts of its Green Belt (surrounding parishes from Cherwell, South Oxfordshire, and Vale of the White Horse Councils)
- North Oxfordshire - West Oxfordshire Council and the balance of Cherwell District Council
- Ridgeway - West Berkshire Council and the balance of South Oxfordshire, and Vale of the White Horse Councils

5.3 Financial Disaggregation and Aggregation Process of Baseline position

Revenue Baseline

The baseline position for the new unitary organisations has been estimated using Revenue Account (RA) returns for 2025/26. These are returns that every Council must submit to the Government reporting a breakdown of budgets. The figures for each of the Councils has been disaggregated using various appropriate metrics such as Population, Dwelling numbers, and various relative needs formulae. The figures have then been aggregated into the totals for each proposed unitary Council. The totals of the original RA returns and the revised totals on aggregation have been checked to ensure that the same figures are resulting.

The revised totals have then been compared to a calculation of the total Council tax which will be raised by each Council using the detailed Council Tax setting data.

Based on the assumptions above, the initial results show that each of the three new Unitary authorities is financially viable based on the assumptions used, with the largest variance being Greater Oxford at a £2.0 million deficit and Ridgeway at a £1.1 million surplus based on the 2025/26 budgets. While the shortfall in Greater Oxford would require attention, it is relatively small in the context of local government and given the size of the revenue expenditure for each new Council of between £396.3 million and £748.9 million; these variances would be manageable through routine financial management measures and the normal budgetary process.

Table 5.3: Baseline Financial Position For Unitary Councils

	Greater Oxford	North Oxfordshire	Ridgeway	Total
	£ million	£ million	£ million	£ million
Revenue Expenditure	396.3	431.4	748.9	1,576.60
Grant Funding	-169.7	-180	-347.9	-697.6
Transfer to Reserves	6	6.5	6.8	19.3
Collection Fund Surpluses	-3.1	-3.7	-2.9	-9.7
Retained Business Rates	-62.7	-51.3	-58.4	-172.4
Net Council Tax Requirement	166.8	202.9	346.5	716.2
Estimated Council Tax Chargeable	164.8	203.8	347.6	716.2
Variance	2	-0.9	-1.1	0
	Deficit	*Surplus*	*Surplus*	

Building on the starting position for each unitary above, work has been progressing to identify the one off and recurring cost of setting up and transitioning to the new unitary authorities as well as the costs and benefits that may arise from service transformation. This is shown in following sections.

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5.4 Balance Sheet Disaggregation

Methodology

We have taken the balance sheets from the published draft 2024/25 statements of accounts of all Oxfordshire authorities and the West Berkshire unitary and then apportioned these into the proposed unitary authorities. The apportionment has been undertaken using populations of the current and proposed areas applied to apportion Oxfordshire County Council's balance sheet between the proposed unitary authorities and also Cherwell, South and Vale between Greater Oxford, North Oxfordshire and Ridgeway. Having established balance sheets for the proposed unitary authorities using this apportion methodology, the results have been compared to national benchmarks over a number of financial health measures.

Overall Results

The table below shows a summary of the financial health measures for the three proposed unitary authorities.

Table 5.4: Financial Health Measures for Unitary Councils

Area	Measure	Greater Oxford	North Oxfordshire	Ridgeway	England Average	Unitary Average	HRA Unitary Average	Non-HRA Unitary Average
		HRA	non-HRA	non-HRA			HRA	non-HRA
Net Assets	Net Assets (excl. pensions)/CSP	684%	279%	280%	426%	354%	419%	233%
	Usable Reserves/CSP	138%	104%	92%	74%	61%	67%	51%
Usable Reserves	URR/CSP	71%	65%	48%	41%	35%	37%	30%
	DSG Balance/CSP	-10%	-11%	-10%	-6%	-7%	-6%	-9%
	URR and DSG Balance/CSP	61%	54%	38%	35%	27%	31%	21%
	HRA Reserves/ Dwelling Rents	34%					47%	
	Current Resources/CSP	128%	94%	83%	68%	54%	61%	43%
Capital Health	CFR/CSP	241%	158%	118%	229%	222%	238%	192%
	Debt Gearing	32%	46%	38%	39%	42%	40%	50%

The measures are colour coded showing green where the measure is better than the benchmark average and yellow where it is worse than the benchmark average. Where the measure is marked as yellow, the reasons for this are explained in the narrative below. There is no colour coding for asset and debt measures because these are heavily affected by whether an authority has an open Housing Revenue Account (HRA) as HRA and non-HRA authorities have different benchmark averages. This will also be considered in the narrative below.

Net Assets

Net asset levels are heavily influenced by whether an authority holds an HRA or not. For this reason, the graph below shows Net Assets excluding pensions compared to Core Spending Power (CSP) and distinguishes between HRA and non HRA authorities.
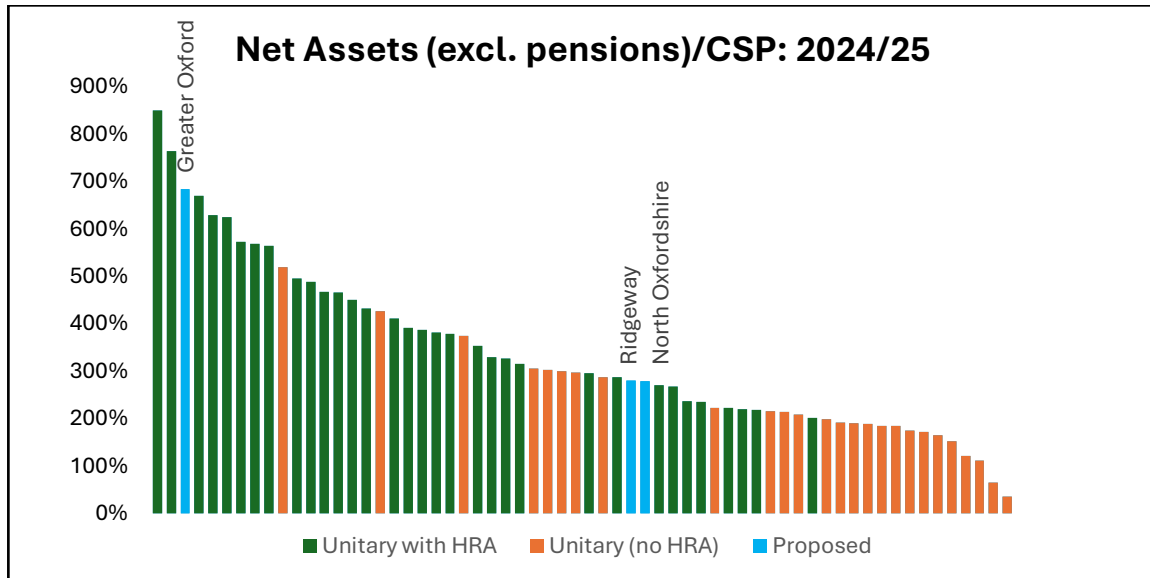
Fig 5.1: Net Assets / Core Spending Power

Both Ridgeway and North Oxfordshire have lower average net assets compared to the average whereas Greater Oxford is in the top quartile. This is to be expected since neither Ridgeway nor North Oxfordshire will have an HRA. The graph therefore is designed to show HRA and non-HRA authorities separately with HRA authorities as green bars and non-HRA authorities as orange bars.

Both Ridgeway (280%) and North Oxfordshire (279%) compare favourably on net assets to the upper tier non HRA benchmark of 233%. The conclusion is that all proposed authorities are therefore resilient in respect of balance sheet net assets.

Usable Revenue Reserves

The graph below shows the Usable Revenue Reserves (URR) of each unitary compared to CSP.
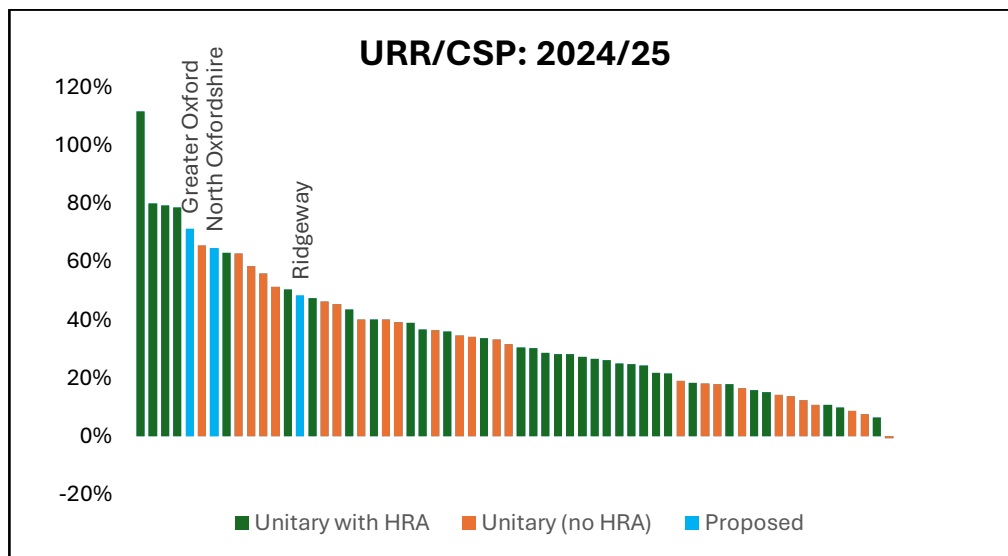
Fig 5.2: Usable Revenue Reserves / Core Spending Power

All proposed authorities have above average usable revenue reserves. Ridgeway's levels will be lower than the other two unitary authorities due to West Berkshire having relatively low levels of URR in 2024/25.

Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG)

All proposed authorities will have higher than average DSG deficits. This is because both Oxfordshire and West Berkshire have higher than average DSG deficits in 2024/25.
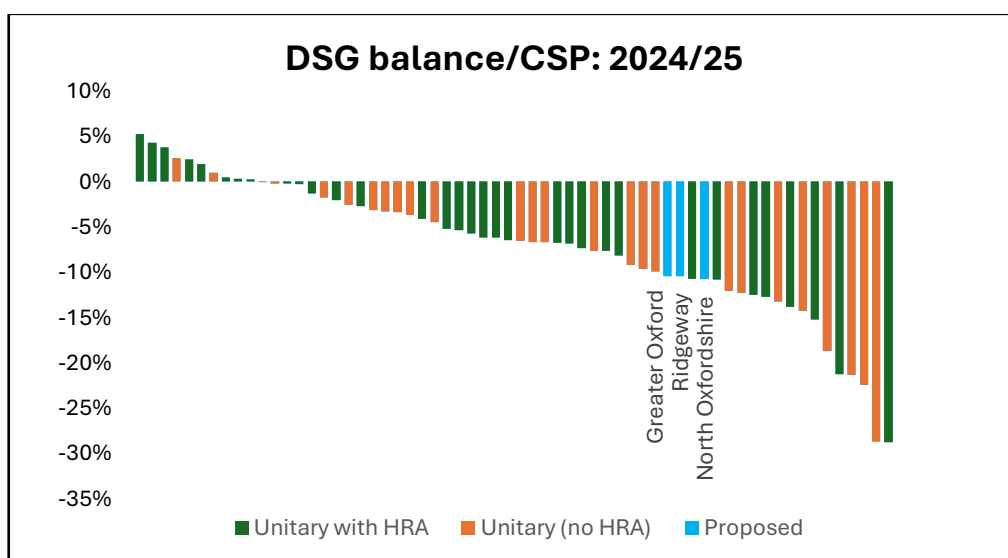
Fig 5.3: Dedicated Schools Grant / Core Spending Power

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There is a national issue with Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG). The statutory reporting requirements for the accounts require the closing deficit balance on the Dedicated Schools Grant to be held within the Dedicated Schools Grant Adjustment Account, which is an unusable reserve. There is an existing statutory override in place that supports this accounting treatment which was due to end on 31 March 2026 but the Government has now extended this until 31st March 2028.

The Oxfordshire DSG deficit balance has increased from £45.8 million as at 31st March 2024 to £80.3 million as at 31st March 2025, an increase of £34.5 million in the year. This is clearly an issue for the Oxfordshire area, however the Government has recognised that there is a structural problem in the system with associated large financial implications and the Government has stated that they are going to implement measures to rectify the position. A consultation is expected in the Autumn. Additionally when looking at the overall position of the Dedicated Schools Grant Adjustment Account plus Usable Revenue Reserves, this shows that Oxfordshire is more resilient overall than many others.
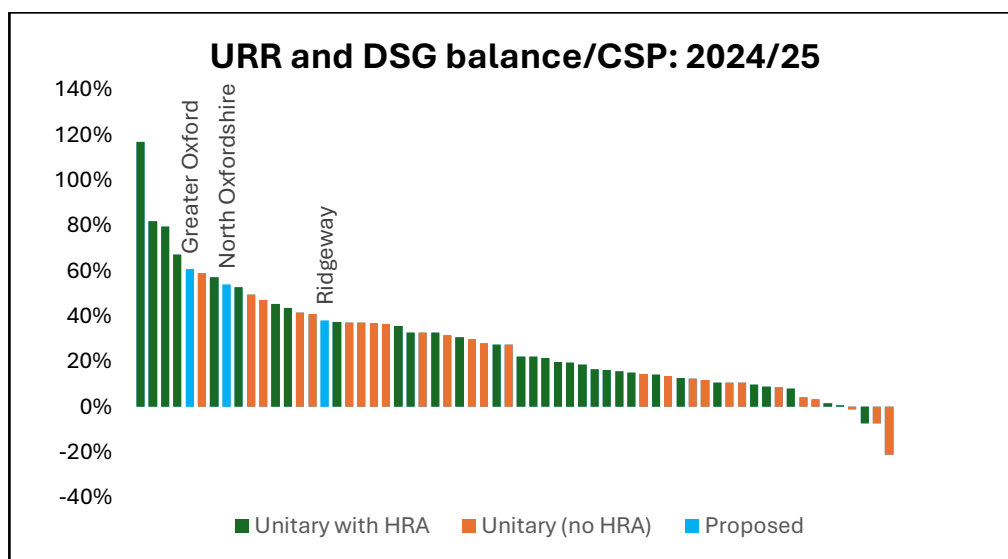
Fig 5.4: Usable Revenue Reserves & Dedicated Schools Grant / Core Spending Power - All
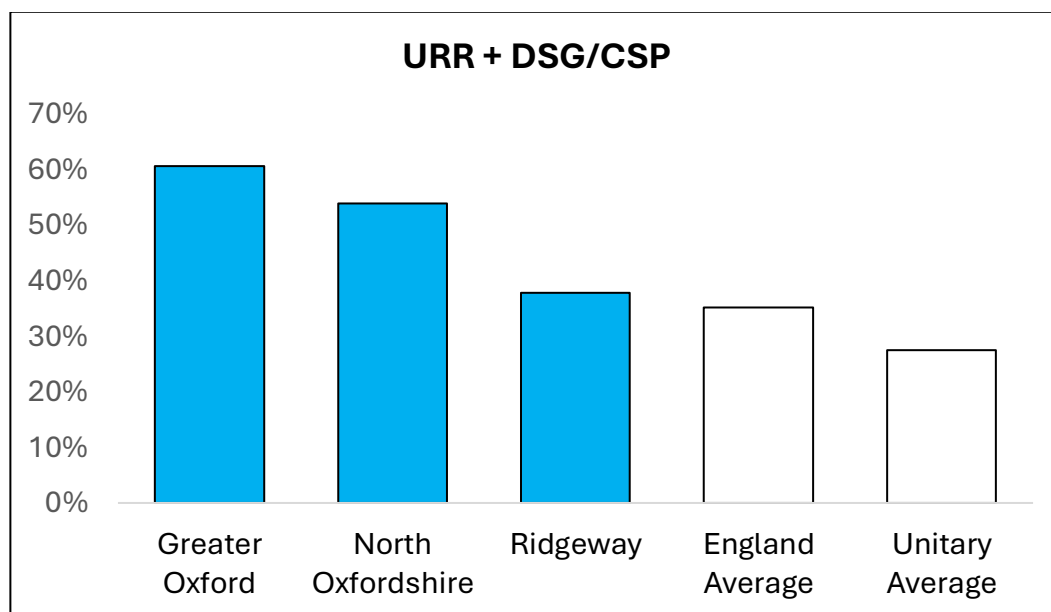
Fig 5.5: Usable Revenue Reserves & Dedicated Schools Grant / Core Spending Power – Average Comparison

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Despite higher than average DSG deficits, all three proposed unitary authorities have better than average resilience when adding those deficits to existing levels of usable revenue reserves.

Capital Financing Requirement (CFR)

Greater Oxford will have a higher need to borrow than the overall average benchmark averages. This is to be expected since Greater Oxford will have an HRA. Consequently, the graph below to shows HRA and non-HRA authorities separately with HRA authorities as green bars and non-HRA authorities as orange bars.
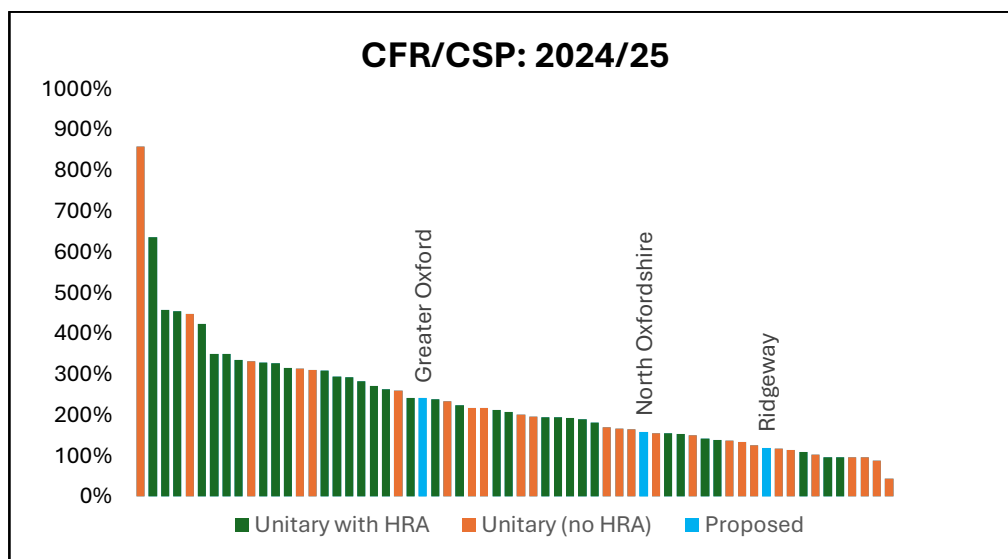
Fig 5.6: Capital Financing Requirement / Core Spending Power – Average Comparison

The Greater Oxford CFR to CSP is 241% which is in line with the unitary with HRA authority average of 238%.

Debt Gearing

Debt gearing is an important measure to ensure that authorities are not overborrowed compared to the underlying value of their long term assets. The comparison between the proposed Oxfordshire unitary authorities and the rest of the country can be shown graphically as follows:

Fig 5.7: Debt Gearing

North Oxfordshire is projected to have higher debt gearing than both the unitary and the all England averages, however it is lower than the non-HRA Unitary average.

Revenue and Balance Sheet Conclusion

CIPFA (Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy) provides a Financial Resilience Index for UK local authorities, which uses a range of indicators to assess financial health. Whereas some of these indicators are useful, they do not properly take account of the differences between HRA and 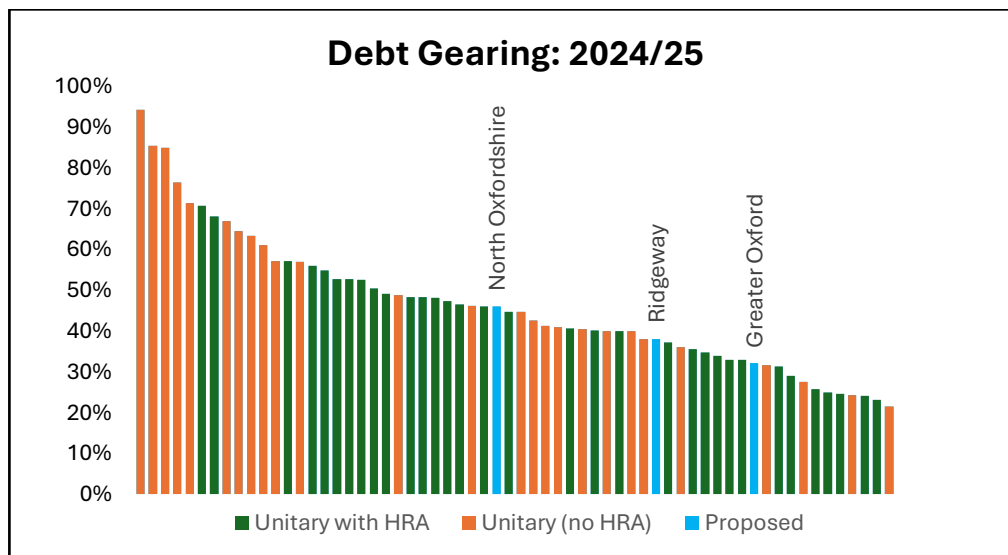non-HRA authorities. Some of the indicators measure aggregate authority totals (i.e. debt) with general fund only metrics which make authorities with an HRA appear to be high risk for some of the indicators. This is misleading and so we have provided metrics above which allow comparison between similar authorities. The balance sheets of the current authorities were disaggregated in to balance sheets for the 3 unitaries by a Finance Specialist at LGFin. This showed that, from a balance sheet perspective, the new authorities would have a sufficient level of assets and resources to be financially sustainable. Various measures of financial health show that the new authorities will start on a strong financial basis when compared with like authorities.

None of the unitary authorities in this proposal will be looking for exceptional financial support; the base disaggregation of the existing revenue and balance sheet positions would not indicate that the new unitary councils would need to seek exceptional financial support after the savings from transition to unitary status and the transformation of services.

The balance sheet analysis shows that all three proposed unitary authorities have strong financial resilience when compared with relevant benchmark averages and there are no wide and unexpected variances in financial resilience measures between the proposed unitary authorities. Greater Oxford has a higher level of net assets and debt which is entirely consistent with being an HRA authority.

With the exception of DSG deficits, which the Government has pledged to resolve, the key balance sheet measures are around or better than the average national position.

All authorities would start with above average levels of usable revenue reserves and strong balance sheets. On this basis it is anticipated that all three of the proposed unitary authorities will have the resources to finance the necessary transition and could also release capital resources to take advantage of the proposed flexible use of capital receipts.

5.5 Current Debt Position (and stranded debt)

Background

In the context of UK local government reorganisation, stranded debt refers to the liabilities of a dissolving council that cannot be covered by its assets or future revenue. This issue arises when a local authority with significant debt is broken up or merged with others, leaving a financial deficit that needs to be settled and this debt cannot be taken on by the successor authorities without putting them in a financially unsustainable position. In general terms debt becomes "stranded" if the revenue-generating assets that were originally intended to service that debt are not transferred or do not perform as expected. It can also arise if an authority has overborrowed such that it now cannot service its debt from its normal revenue stream.

Debt position

The level of local authority debt across the Oxfordshire and West Berkshire areas is variable between authorities. The current levels of debt can be seen in the table below:

Table 5.5: Long Term External Debt

	Long Term External Debt £ million
Cherwell	139.0
West Oxfordshire	0.0
Oxford City	288.5
South Oxfordshire	0.0
Vale of the White Horse	0.0
West Berkshire	202.7
Oxfordshire	259.9
Total	890.1

Compared to the other districts, Oxford City Council appears to have a high level of debt, however this is due to the council being the only council in this proposal to have a Housing Revenue Account (HRA) (see more detail in the section below). For this reason, the Oxford City Council debt needs to be split between the HRA and the remainder of the General Fund.

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There are not currently any concerns over debt levels or assets that are not performing as expected within the areas under consideration. In addition, Oxford City Council currently has capital plans that will require borrowing in the future, most of which on the Housing Revenue Account. This borrowing requirement would transfer to the new Greater Oxford unitary and is shown in the table below.

Table 5.6: Oxford City Council Planned Borrowing

	HRA Borrowing Capacity	Oxford City General Fund Future Planned Borrowing
	£ million	£ million
Current Capacity	57.3	0.0
2025/26	121.6	0.0
2026/27	72.0	10.1
2027/28	64.0	32.0
2028/29	57.5	62.2
2029/30	175.3	17.7
Total	547.7	122.0

There will therefore be enough capacity within the Greater Oxford unitary HRA to absorb any existing external debt that cannot be supported by the other unitary authorities.

5.6 Transition Costs, Efficiencies and Longer-Term Transformation Savings

Introduction

For Greater Oxford, the transition to unitary status is not seen as simply a change to the structure of local government. This is a once in a generation opportunity to reshape how services are delivered for the urban centre of Oxfordshire. Greater Oxford will be an organisation that is financially resilient, efficient, and innovative through creating a council that is leaner, more agile, and better able to meet residents' needs in a rapidly changing social and financial environment. Longer term, the organisation will invest in digital capability and capacity and provide innovative service models which focus on preventative measures rather than reactive management. Initially, it is important to demonstrate that the new unitary, along with the other two unitary authorities, is financially viable on transition.

In calculating the projected financial effects of this proposal we have been careful not to overstate the benefits or to be too optimistic about the timing of changes and Pixel Financial Management has reviewed the cost and savings calculations used. To ensure that we have not underestimated additional expenditure we have built in a contingency of 10% on costs, however the calculations

show that the unitaries would still pay back within a 5 year period with a 30% contingency. This can therefore be seen to be both a prudent and a realistic proposal.

In the Interim Proposal we said: *Pixel Financial has estimated realistic transition costs of between £5-10 million per district and existing unitary (West Berkshire) moving into three new unitary authorities.* Our estimated transition costs, including redundancies and project management, are estimated at £36 million for all 3 unitaries. This is within the expected range of £30 million to £60 million.

We are mindful that during any transition or transformation process it is imperative to maintain full continuity of service. Also, the larger and more the complex the service the more time it will take to get the process right without an adverse effect on citizens. This will inevitably mean that the benefits will phase in over time. We have taken this into account when considering the costs and benefits of our proposal. In our opinion any proposals that suggest they will break even or start paying back in the first year are being extremely overly optimistic.

The county council's RO expenditure, medium term financial strategy and council tax baselines currently include costs and funding for Oxfordshire Fire and Rescue Service. In the longer-term these will sit with the mayoral strategic authority. It is assumed that the costs and income related to Fire and Rescue Service will be transferred and will have a net nil effect on the overall financial position of the proposed unitaries.

Given the relative sizes of organisations (aggregate net expenditure of districts can be around only 10% of the county net expenditure), in all the unitary proposals the majority of any savings must come from current county services. If any one unitary authority (1UA) proposals suggest an early payback period one must question why the savings are not being made now without the conversion to unitary. A key basis for the Greater Oxford proposal is that, in addition to keeping services closer to and more responsive to citizens and their needs, we believe that taking the approach to service provision that is currently employed at Oxford City Council, we can make overall savings in the costs of local authority services currently not provided by the City Council.

Overall Results for the Oxfordshire and West Berkshire Unitary Authorities

In line with guidance, the financial modelling has been completed at today's prices, not considering the impact of inflation and not discounting future cash flows.

Each of the individual savings, additional costs and transition costs have been phased in line the expectation of when it is anticipated these will be realised or incurred. Some transition costs will be incurred ahead of vesting day and these are shown against the relevant year in the overall costs. The financial case has been modelled up to year five after vesting day.

Based on our detailed analysis of costs and savings, the overall result of converting the councils to unitary status can be summarised as follows:

Table 5.7: Financial Impact of All Unitary Authorities in Oxfordshire

Aggregate of All 3 Unitaries			One off Costs	Recurring Costs and Savings	Net Impact	Cumulative Net Impact
		Year	£000's	£000's	£000's	£000's
Pre vesting	0	2026-27	-900	-90	-990	-990
	0	2027-28	-29,926	-2,992	-32,918	-33,908
Vesting	1	2028-29	-12,284	1,537	-10,747	-44,655
	2	2029-30	-8,615	4,524	-4,091	-48,746
	3	2030-31	-5,313	37,152	31,839	-16,907
	4	2031-32	0	45,136	45,136	28,229
	5	2032-33	0	48,636	48,636	76,865

This is broken down between the three unitary authorities as follows:

Table 5.8: Financial Impact of Greater Oxford Unitary

Greater Oxford			One off Costs	Recurring Costs and Savings	Net Impact	Cumulative Net Impact
		Year	£000's	£000's	£000's	£000's
Pre vesting	0	2026-27	-300	-30	-330	-330
	0	2027-28	-7,835	-783	-8,618	-8,948
Vesting	1	2028-29	-3,821	-2,250	-6,071	-15,019
	2	2029-30	-2,071	-1,757	-3,828	-18,847
	3	2030-31	-1,771	9,653	7,882	-10,965
	4	2031-32	0	10,991	10,991	26
	5	2032-33	0	11,861	11,861	11,887

Table 5.9: Financial Impact of North Oxfordshire Unitary

North Oxfordshire			One off Costs	Recurring Costs and Savings	Net Impact	Cumulative Net Impact
		Year	£000's	£000's	£000's	£000's
Pre vesting	0	2026-27	-300	-30	-330	-330
	0	2027-28	-9,235	-923	-10,158	-10,488
Vesting	1	2028-29	-4,479	41	-4,438	-14,926
	2	2029-30	-3,472	994	-2,478	-17,404
	3	2030-31	-1,771	6,943	5,172	-12,232
	4	2031-32	0	11,249	11,249	-983
	5	2032-33	0	12,787	12,787	11,804

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Table 5.10: Financial Impact of Ridgeway Unitary

Ridgeway			One off Costs	Recurring Costs and Savings	Net Impact	Cumulative Net Impact
		Year	£000's	£000's	£000's	£000's
Pre vesting	0	2026-27	-300	-30	-330	-330
	0	2027-28	-12,856	-1,286	-14,142	-14,472
Vesting	1	2028-29	-3,984	3,746	-238	-14,710
	2	2029-30	-3,072	5,287	2,215	-12,495
	3	2030-31	-1,771	20,556	18,785	6,290
	4	2031-32	0	22,896	22,896	29,186
	5	2032-33	0	23,988	23,988	53,174

This shows that payback for each of the three unitary authorities is around year 4 after vesting day on 1st April 2028 for Greater Oxford and Northern Oxfordshire and year 3 for Ridgeway and that the authorities between them incur around £31 million of one-off costs in the pre-vesting period. This is in line with analysis of previous unitary authorities provided by Pixel Financial Management Ltd which therefore supports our figures from this detailed localised work. As with other proposed unitary authorities it is assumed that these one off costs will be funded locally through reserves and realisable assets. The analysis of the balance sheet strength of the authorities shows that these costs can be covered without government support.

Fair funding is currently out to consultation and the provisional finance settlement is not expected to be announced until December, the Chancellors Budget having been pushed back to 26th November. There is considerable uncertainty around this funding and therefore no projections have been made on this.

The Proposal

The disaggregation of existing councils and consolidation into the new unitary councils will involve taking the services provided by the five district councils and allocating these to the new unitary authorities plus splitting up the services currently provided at the Oxfordshire county level so that they can be delivered by the three new councils. West Berkshire services will transition into the Ridgeway Council and become part of that unitary. This process will affect both frontline services and back-office functions.

The transition process will include:

- Redundancy and early retirement programmes.
- Establishment of programme delivery teams.
- Creation of shadow authorities.
- Closing down existing councils and transferring staff, assets, and services.
- Designing harmonisation plans for council tax.

Local Government Reorganisation will change the boundaries of local authorities but more importantly it involves two distinct but interconnected changes. Firstly, it will involve the consolidation of seven existing organisations into three and then secondly, the transformation of those three new councils into agile, efficient, and responsive authorities.

This process will involve bringing together both frontline resident services and back-office functions and transforming them into agile and services responsive to the needs of the communities within the area. It will be necessary for upper-tier functions, such as highways, social care and education, to be disaggregated amongst new unitary authorities, providing opportunities for better outcomes through service alignment.

Costs

The main costs of disaggregation arise from:

- Recreating senior posts (such as Directors of Children's Services) for each unitary (incorporated into the senior management calculations below)
- New IT systems (incorporated into the IT transitional savings calculations below)
- Project Management
- Public Engagement
- Contingency

Project Management

Managing the transition from a two tier system to a unitary system of local government will require significant project management over a prolonged period. It is estimated that the cost will be circa £5 million per unitary for providing resources such as a programme director, project officers and external report over the life of the project. This cost is consistent with other Local Government Reorganisation business cases already submitted.

Public Engagement

There will be a need to 'get the message out there' both pre vesting day and post vesting day in terms of public engagement and media publications. It is anticipated that costs of circa £300k per annum, based on other business cases put forward, will be required to provide for the costs of this public engagement.

Contingency

With a multi-million programme of re-organisation planned one can never predict costs with complete accuracy. A contingency of 10%, based on the gross annual cost, has therefore been assumed over the 7 year life of the programme (including the 2 years in the lead up to vesting day).

Savings

Key initial savings arise from:

- Senior Management
- Councillor numbers and governance; Members' allowances
- Elections
- External audit costs
- IT Transition
- Additional adult social care precept (covered in the section on Council Tax)
- Transformation (see separate section)

Senior Management

We have specifically modelled new senior management structures (top three tiers). This work has incorporated reductions in staff in some areas and increasing staffing in others (such as Directors of Children's Services). Data on the number of senior staff for each authority in Oxfordshire and West Berkshire has been obtained and broken down into the different levels of senior management as follows

- Tier 1 – Chief Executive (Head of the Paid Service)
- Tier 2 – Executive Directors
- Tier 3 – Assistant Directors

The number of senior managers for all authorities has then been compared to the benchmarked structures of senior managers based on unitary population sizes based on guidance from the Local Government Association and the Local Government Boundary Commission for England and adjustments made from the combining authorities either by reducing or increasing the number of posts.

Where posts are reduced an appropriate level of redundancy is calculated.

Democratic Service and Elections

Members allowances

The current cost of members in the form of allowances has been obtained from the most recent Statement of accounts and the current number of councillors and ward members obtained from publicly available data. Our data shows that there are currently 331 members across Oxfordshire and West Berkshire at a total cost of circa £3.8 million. The revised number of members for the 3 new unitary authorities is estimated at 214.

Elections

The current cost of elections for Oxfordshire and West Berkshire is estimated at £5 million. Unitary authorities generally have 1 election per four years and savings have been calculated on this basis – other than the two-yearly cycle proposed for Greater Oxford.

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External Audit

Local government reorganisation will deliver a benefit from the external audit fees compared to the predecessor authorities. External audit fees have been obtained from the latest statement of accounts and our assumption is that external audit fees will vary according to the population size of authorities. The audit fee for Oxfordshire County Council will be a saving to the audit fees going forward and hence it is allocated as a saving based on population across the new three unitary authorities.

IT Transitional Savings

There is some consistency in the use of ICT systems across the current 7 authorities with 6 of the authorities using the same financial management system, 2 use the same HR and Payroll system, all use the same elections system and there are only 2 different systems for revenues and benefits. Whilst the Greater Oxfordshire and Northern Oxfordshire authorities would require a system to deal with adult social care and children's services, the costs for which have been factored in to the transitional analysis, there will be savings to be generated from the combining of contracts in the other systems once they expire. A modest 5% saving has been assumed albeit from 2030-31 onwards.

5.7 Transformation Savings

The areas where savings from transformation could be achieved include:

- Asset rationalisation and proactive management of assets
- Service Transformation
    - Adult social care, children services and Early intervention programme
    - Environmental and Regulatory
- Enabling Services
- Growth; not included in the overall costs and savings summary table (see section below); growth is in addition to the other benefits

5.7.1 Asset Management

Overall Position

Information taken from the latest Statement of Accounts indicates a net book value of approximately £2 billion across Oxfordshire and West Berkshire. A rationalisation of assets including disposal of property either in terms of the freehold or a long-term lease has been assumed to release around 10% of the property in each new unitary. This is consistent with other business plans and in the case of Greater Oxford is corroborated via an exercise undertaken by the councils Property team. Based on net book values of assets as at 1st April 2025, rationalisation of assets translating into a revenue saving of around £3 million per annum has been calculated for Greater Oxford (see below). Clearly since this is based on net book values the saving is likely to be higher than this, so this is considered prudent and potentially able to realised across the whole portfolio of property.

Greater Oxford Analysis

Oxford City Council has a strong track record of actively managing its asset portfolio and it is assumed that Greater Oxford will continue with this approach. A common assumption adopted across all of the unitary business cases is that assets will transfer to successor authorities based on their physical location. The asset lists from each of the existing authorities has been reviewed and categorised by establishment type to understand the opportunities which may be available in the Greater Oxford authority. As a result of the detailed work undertaken to assess asset rationalisation opportunities across the Greater Oxford geography, the identified 10% savings figure has also been used to model similar opportunities for Northern Oxfordshire and Ridgeway.

It is assumed that the property transfer will be undertaken at book value since the asset transfer will follow the disaggregation and reaggregation of the balance sheets of the respective authorities.

Based on this, the assets to be transferred will predominantly consist of operational assets; the investment portfolios are small and mostly land and most of this sits outside the Greater Oxford boundary. The review of the asset portfolios has however highlighted a number of opportunities to consolidate operational services and reclassify assets as part of the investment portfolio. It is anticipated that once the full detail of the portfolio is better understood there is likely be further opportunities, however these have not been included in the costings.

The information available is not comprehensive enough to fully establish whether there are any opportunities for growth, although potential opportunities that need further investigation have been identified. As the key information available is book value has been provided, it has been assumed in the modelling that where the asset is not needed, the Greater Oxford Council would dispose of the asset either by way of freehold transfer or, more likely, by way of long lease.

Further Assumptions

The following **Establishment Types** have been assumed to be required to be retained in their entirety:

- Schools and Nurseries
- Fire Stations
- Children's Homes
- Libraries
- Gypsy and Traveller sites
- Elderly persons homes

For **Staffing and Office Space**, it is assumed that staff working within the Greater Oxford Authority would predominately work from home, using the Town Hall as a city centre base and making better use of Community Centres and libraries for locality working.

In East Oxford there would be the **Consolidation of Services** for Community and Health facilities which is likely to lead to a disposal of one centre. Similarly, in Berinsfield there is the assumption one of the buildings would be redeveloped following consolidation of services.

If all other assumptions remain true, a **Cost of Delivery** allowance of 25% of the additional income/savings should be made to deliver the consolidation works required. This would also cover staff time. When the Council reviews options for each of the identified properties, the cost and mechanism of delivery would be considered as part of the business case. This would be expected to be contained within the 25%.

Values

Savings, Income and Capital Receipts have been calculated using the book value not market value, since this is the information available on a comprehensive basis. The exception to this is in relation to infill sites which have been valued at £200k per acre based on recent transactions undertaken by the City Council. Although flagged for disposal and costed into these calculations, the infill sites would present an opportunity for the wholly owned housing company which would improving the profitability of the company and hence the dividend return to the shareholder. In the event the property is developed by the housing company, the company would have to pay the going rate for the property and so any development by the company would be over and above the benefits included here.

Opportunities for growth

The data provided does not allow a full review of opportunities for growth within the portfolio and while, for the purpose of this exercise a capital receipt has been assumed, it is likely there would be opportunities for growth. A fuller options appraisal would need to be undertaken to better understand the opportunity.

Results

The number of assets transferred from Oxfordshire County Council, South Oxfordshire Council, Vale of the White Horse District Council and Cherwell Council together with their estimated disposal value or revenue streams is summarised below

Table 5.11: Net Book Value Of Assets Transferred

Council	Assets Transferred	Total Book Value
	Nos	£
County	227	187,615,797
South Oxfordshire	19	1,264,353
Vale of the White Horse	11	1,067,079
Cherwell	20	6,566,826
Total	277	196,514,055

The review indicates there is around £17.6 million of capital receipts available, predominantly from the County portfolio, plus additional Revenue Income and some revenue savings. It is expected that there will be additional opportunities for savings or additional income once each of the opportunities is reviewed in more detail, however the amounts below are a comfortable estimate.

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To assess the annual impact of this, the capital receipts have been converted to revenue by assuming a 4% saving on borrowing interest costs and a 2% saving on the principal element representing a reduced minimum revenue provision charge. The property team estimate that there would be a 25% cost relating to additional staffing and other costs associated with selling or converting the assets. An additional 10% cost contingency has also been included to account for ay cost overruns. It is also assumed that the full benefit would not be achieved until 2030/31 representing the lead-in time to realise the benefits. This would result in the following:

Table 5.12: Revenue Impact Of Asset Rationalisation For Greater Oxford Unitary

Capital Receipt, Revenue Income or Revenue Saving	Value	Revenue Benefits
	£	£
Capital Receipt	17,598,352	1,055,901
Revenue Income	160,000	160,000
Revenue Saving	3,840,000	3,840,000
Total benefit	21,598,352	5,055,901
Assumed Related Cost Implications		1,263,975
Cost Contingency		505,590
Net Benefit		3,286,336

For the Greater Oxford unitary a 10% benefit would achieve a benefit of £3.3 million. This granular work therefore supports the use of 10% saving for the unitary projections.

5.7.2 Service Transformation

Taking the opportunity to redesign services not only provides improved quality of life and services to residents but also the ability to unlock financial benefits and enable the new unitary organisations to be financially sustainable.

Our benefit modelling includes each unitary being provided the tools to embark on a programme of ambitious redesign and innovation – rather than simply amalgamating new services and continuing with the status quo.

Not all services will benefit from transformation programmes in the medium term although over the longer-term new managers will bring in new ideas and savings going forward may be established from changing the long running practices that have prevailed over the years. No assumption has been made around these longer-term savings although there are some areas in County Council and other services where in the medium-term, we believe savings can be generated as follows.

Early Intervention & Prevention, Social Care & SEND Transformation

The approach we have taken to creating our recommended Target Operating Models for the new unitary authorities began with understanding the current baseline activity for services across both district and unitary services. Combining detailed analysis of local data sources and benchmarking with national returns, we were able to identify where additional interventions could release financial benefits and improved outcomes for residents.

We have ensured that our service design will align to coming and expected reforms, including the Families First Partnership Programme within Children's Social Care, the Fit for the Future plan within the NHS and anticipated further reforms in SEND and Adult Social Care.

Through consolidating cross-cutting prevention activity currently dispersed across layers of delivery, we will be able to build on existing best practice prevention innovations and take these further – streamlining processes and embedding data-led ways of working. This consolidation will also enable us to make efficiency savings and right sizing the organisation to ensure that we wrap around the right skills and expertise to residents at the right time.

Our preventative approach to service delivery will avoid additional cost on temporary accommodation, through reducing the number of residents who are made homeless through proactive data-led identification of households at risk and intervention to prevent them falling into crisis[42].

A more holistic approach to prevention will also avoid the need for long-term spend on Adult Social Care. Through deploying digital tools to resolve client queries early, and through community-based signposting, more people would have their needs met without a need for long-term care. Where residents may need additional support, short-term TEC-enabled reablement will be used across the footprint building upon existing offers for older adults and expanding this to be available to all residents who may require short-term support[43].

A deep knowledge of local places and community-based providers will also enable a focus on working closely with young people and their families to undertake a programme that sees children and young people supported in placements that are close to their communities, and are family-based wherever possible, reducing overall spend. This includes exploring reunification where safe and appropriate, preventing the need for long-term spend on care.

This local knowledge will also be deployed in deploying Teams Around the School[44], which will work in a develop deep relationships with SENCOs, teachers, young people and their families to identify and support additional needs without an escalation in need either to exclusion or additional support, reducing the need for additional spend.

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[42] Luton's data-led approach identified 78 at risk households, of which 22 were supported the authority to manage finances and avoid crisis – Policy in Practice

[43] Herefordshire Enablement Team saved approx.. £800k in its first year of operation, reablement functions across the country (including in Leicestershire, Rochdale and Southwark) have led to fewer people requiring long-term support following an intervention (LGA)

[44] Blackpool's Team Around the School pilot saw a positive impact on children & families, and reducing escalation to crisis (DfE)

In the longer-term, transformation also expects each unitary to develop a vibrant and local provider market – leveraging local spend into improved outcomes for residents and reduced spend[45]. We also anticipate opportunities to be unlocked via housing development in both specialist housing for adults with support needs, and young people, reducing high-cost spend in both residential and supported living sectors as people are able to move into these schemes or stepped down out of more acute support.

We believe that this programme of transformation will deliver savings as set out below. This is £15.9 million of annual cashable savings and cost avoidance from year 5 onwards:

Table 5.13: Revenue Impact Of Social Care Innovation

Area of innovation	Total Ongoing Saving as at year 5		
	Greater Oxford £ million	North Oxfordshire £ million	Ridgeway £ million
Early Intervention & Prevention	3.9	2.6	4.1
Adult Social Care	0	0.3	0.5
Children's Social Care	1.3	1.4	1.8

Other Service Areas Considered

Education

While the three unitary approach will enable a more focused approach to meeting the distinct support needs of schools serving urban and rural and rural areas, there is limited scope for changes that would deliver transformational cost savings.

Highways and Transport

There is an existing £840 million 8 + 6 year Milestone highways contract which will remain in place and will be managed collaboratively. The costs of this will be apportioned over the three unitary authorities but with West Berkshire's own highways continuing to be separately until the services can be combined.

Service delivery for Greater Oxford is safeguarded through as now through the wholly owned company, Oxford Direct Services (ODS) who collaborate and partner with an extensive supply chain to minimise risk and ensure lower fixed costs by deploying sub-contractors where needed to deal with fluctuations in demand. ODS also provides services commercially, delivering some £4m worth of schemes in 2024/25 with margins that result in returns to the shareholder, currently Oxford City Council. No savings on highways are currently being assumed; any savings in costs are assumed will be used to improve the road network.

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[45] Self-Directed Futures is a social enterprise that works with local authorities to make their commissioning approaches more localised and focused on the individual, including working with Somerset to make smaller providers available to those on direct payments.

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Public Health

There are currently two Public Health teams serving the Oxfordshire and West Berkshire geography, which would continue to be the case with one team serving Ridgeway and the other a shared service between Greater Oxford and Northern Oxfordshire. No transformational savings have been identified. However, longer-term it is expected that the alignment of MSA and Integrated Care Board geographies may create opportunities for a more strategic approach to public health commissioning across the Thames Valley area.

The current Oxfordshire public health budget is £47.75 million, equating to £63.67 per head. Proposed budgets for unitary authorities are weighted by population and deprivation, e.g., Greater Oxford's weighted budget is £16.73 million. A 5% efficiency gain is targeted through service integration, co-working, and better use of voluntary sector resources.

Housing

The Housing Revenue Account (HRA) currently operated only in the Oxford City Council area, will continue to operate as a separate function. The formation of the Greater Oxfordshire unitary will provide more opportunity for OX Place the housing development company operated by Oxford Council to broaden its operation boundary, providing it access to much needed land for future development (see the section on growth below).

In respect of homelessness challenges, Oxford Council is already responding to the financial challenge by the purchase of new dwellings and moving homeless families out of expensive hotel accommodation. The Greater Oxford Unitary should allow it greater access to accommodation together with the scale of operation and the associated services within social care, giving the authority the ability to deal with these financial pressures.

Cultural Leisure Services

No transformation savings proposed.

Planning and Development

The combination of district and county services would amalgamate the district and county level planning functions. Savings from Development Management would be expected to be realised in senior management savings which have been captured in the transition calculations. There may be some small savings at an officer level but broadly as the geographical area changes, the officer cover is just reapportioned so no net savings have been built into the business case in respect of this. With respect to the Committee system it is anticipated that any additional work required at Planning Committee level would be alleviated by redesigning the scheme of delegation such that more decisions would be delegated to officers.

Policy wise, a Mayoral Strategic Authority would take on the strategic planning role with the unitary authorities producing shorter time-horizon local plans. This would be expected to shift costs around rather than change the overall cost aggregate. The costs of the work of the current district planning service is already included in the district level costs and the additional responsibility for public realm

etc would be covered, capacity-wise, with the disaggregation of County costs to the unitary authorities and the consequent transfer of staffing.

AI and digitisation are likely to yield efficiencies and savings, although these will need to follow after systems and function integration and would therefore be more in the medium term. It is not possible to cost the savings impact of this at this stage and so therefore no savings have been built in to this business case.

Enabling Services

Support services include finance, ICT, Human Resources and payroll, legal and democratic, internal audit, revenues and benefit, procurement, counter fraud and customer services. Baseline data has been taken from information provided by each of the individual authorities which indicates a mixture of in-house provision of services and outsourced management arrangements through private sector companies and a wholly owned Teckal company. Enabling services will be provided separately for each council, either directly or through outsourcing arrangements.

People services will be critical to enabling the CEOs of the new authorities to create the shared organisation identity and purpose that is crucial for success. A priority will be to embed high-performance cultures in the new authorities, based on putting residents first, effective collaboration, and providing rewarding roles with strong career development.

ICT services underpin the ability of councils to deliver service integration and transformation to better meet the needs of residents. Alongside the essential deliverables of providing a secure digital environment that enables collaboration and communication, ICT will enable future innovation through common data platforms, automation and digital service design. Customer self-service opportunities will continue to develop with the rapid advance of AI technology, which will also support improved back-office functions. Data-led decision making will ensure a focus on effectiveness and efficiency. This will be supported by the technology and expertise, skilled for and applied across all service areas.

Through the transformation process we will analyse the best delivery model which will drive savings but also retain resilience and quality. We will seek to redesign and innovate processes and procedures and drive savings we believe are achievable from 2028-29, with an emphasis on data-driven decision-making and greater use of digital and AI to streamline processes and improve appropriate automation. A reduction of 10% full time equivalents has been assumed, which is prudent compared to other business cases put forward which indicate ranges of 10-20%.

Some enabling services, such as finance, HR and ICT, will require resource to manage the merger of existing systems, staffing and resources, and to support the transition process. The cost of this is factored into the prudent level of savings assumed.

5.8 Environmental and Regulatory

All of Oxfordshire's local authorities are among the highest performing waste collection and disposal authorities in the country, with residents recycling 57.6% of their household waste against the national rate of 44.6%. However, recycling performance has flatlined over the last few years and the

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cost of disposing of residual waste is the highest in the country[46]. In addition, much of the county's waste infrastructure, consisting of 31 sites, most of which are end of life, requires considerable investment to meet the needs of residents and businesses in the future.

A business case has been prepared for four authorities, Oxford City Council, Cherwell Council, West Oxfordshire Council and Oxfordshire County Council to work in partnership to deliver waste and environmental services in a co-ordinated and integrated way across the county to deliver improvements in operational performance; in environmental sustainability and biodiversity and substantial efficiency savings.

The Waste and Environmental Services Transformation Programme (WESP) business case outlines a new operating model for waste collection, disposal, and environmental services. It identifies significant opportunities that can be achieved through integrating operations both vertically throughout the waste system as well as geographically. The scope of the WESP business case includes:

- Waste collection: household waste, food waste, garden waste.
- Recycling: recycling centres, recycling management.
- Waste disposal: waste processing, energy from waste.
- Business waste: trade waste, hazardous waste.
- Street cleaning: street sweeping, gully clearance.
- Grounds maintenance: verge management, open space management.

Decisions by the participating councils on implementation of WESP are expected to be made ahead of the Government's announcement of its preferred LGR option for Oxfordshire. Therefore, WESP cost savings have *not* been included in the transformational cost savings projected in any of the unitarisation proposals put forward for Oxfordshire.

If implemented, WESP would be expected to deliver net savings of c£6m in the 2027/28 financial year, rising to ongoing net savings of c£14m across the 3UA unitaries from 2030/31 onwards. £63.5m of net benefit will be delivered in the first five years (by 2032/33), with £59m of this achieved in Greater Oxford and Northern Oxfordshire. Transformation savings have been modelled for each of the three unitary proposals and can be found in Appendix F.

WESP would see the creation of a shared company hybrid model to provide an agile approach to transform and respond to the significant changes Government is introducing to reduce the environmental impacts of waste and support a circular economy. WESP would ensure full alignment of commercial and regulatory incentives to minimise waste arisings and maximise the recycling of waste that is collected. In addition to helping meet Government and Oxfordshire waste and climate change targets, it would deliver very significant cost savings, improve the commercial performance of paid-for services and deliver operational benefits to both residents and businesses.

South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse District Councils have chosen not to partner with WESP and have taken the decision to award an outsourced contract for waste collection and street cleansing that will start on 29 June 2026 and run for eight years, with a possible break after four years. Upon vesting in 2028, Ridgeway Council will need to operate separate arrangements for waste

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[46] WRAP UK Gate Fees Report 2024-25

collection and disposal across southern Oxfordshire in parallel with West Berkshire's existing contract with Veolia that runs to 2033. It is assumed that at this point Ridgeway would either choose to integrate the operations in its former South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse area with those covering West Berkshire, or to join WESP and integrate across the wider geography including Greater Oxford and Northern Oxfordshire. No modelling has been undertaken to assess the further efficiencies that either of these choices would likely deliver.

5.9 Council Tax

Council tax is integral to council finances for ensuring the financial sustainability of any new unitary council. Inevitably different Councils have different levels of council tax charge which is the result of annual incremental political decisions at the different councils over many years. Through the creation of unitary councils, bringing together areas which have historically different levels of council tax charge, result in the need to harmonise those council tax charges over time.

Harmonisation must take place by day 1 of year 9 from vesting day, although if you move too quickly some residents receive a high council tax increase whereas if you go too slow residents on the same council tax bands get charged different levels of council tax for a longer period. Ultimately the levels of council tax and speed of harmonisation will be a political decision for the Shadow Authorities. For the purposes of equity between Council taxpayers, it is preferable to have the shortest period of harmonisation possible. However, this must be taken in the context of affordability and the impact on Council Taxpayers of the annual increase. It therefore may be necessary to harmonise over a longer period than one year.

An additional nuance of the proposed Unitary models in Oxfordshire and West Berkshire is that there is a difference balance of service delivery between the district council and the parish council in different areas. For instance, the average parish Council band D charge in Oxford City is £21 but in the rest of Oxfordshire the average parish Council band D charge is £114. Differences in the provision of services between different areas must be adjusted using a mechanism of special expenses which is an adjustment between areas made in the council tax setting process.

Special Expenses

Special expenses are applied when a main precepting body i.e. a district or unitary Council, provides a service in a parish (or unparished area) which is provided in other parishes by a town or parish council. To avoid double taxation the cost of this service must be met by the council taxpayers of the town or parish where the service is being provided so a special expense is charged to the council taxpayers of that parish or area. It should be noted that special expenses are not additional spending over and above the budget set by the Council but a classification within the overall budget.

Legislation (Section 35 of the Local Government Finance Act 1992) specifies the items which are to be treated as special items for the purposes of calculating the Council Tax. These items include:

1. A precept relating to part only of the Council's area e.g. parish precepts;
2. The whole of the expenses (or only some) of those incurred by the Council in performing in a part of its area a function performed elsewhere in its area by a Parish Council; and
3. Any net expenses which arise out of the Council's possession of property held in trust for a part of its area.

It is item 2 in that list that needs to be considered in respect of the unitary proposals. The types of costs included in this item would normally include (not exclusively):

- Cemetery provision
- Community Centres
- Allotment provision
- Parks, Open Spaces and Recreation Grounds

5.9.1 Council Tax Harmonisation

Current Band D levels for each existing authority are:

Table 5.14: District/ Unitary Authority Band D Council Tax 2025-26

Billing Authority	2025/26 Overall Band D (excluding police) £
Oxford	2,252.70
South Oxfordshire	2,062.64
West Oxfordshire	2,040.78
Vale of the White Horse	2,073.09
Cherwell	2,069.90
West Berkshire	1,921.41
Highest Band D	2,252.70
Lowest Band D	1,921.41

As already identified, harmonisation of Council Tax in the shortest period possible within affordability and financial impact considerations is desirable to achieve equity across the new unitary authorities with all service users in a new council paying the same rate. In doing this, Councils will likely want to ensure that they maximise income to deal with financial pressures facing councils in both year one and every subsequent year. The new unitary authorities will also likely want to comply with the referendum limits. The choice of methods and timeframe for harmonisation will be a decision for the new unitary authorities; these options are provided therefore for indicative purposes, and the results have not been included in the overall costs and savings figures. The harmonisation analysis has been undertaken using 2025/26 council tax figures since these are a known factor; any projection to estimated 2027/28 council tax levels for analysis purposes would have the same overall results since consistent percentages would be applied to get to the estimated figures. 2025/26 council tax figures also have the benefit of being recognisable and published figures and are consistent with the use of 2025/26 budget information for baseline calculations.

There are four options for Council Tax Harmonisation that have been assessed:

1. Harmonising to the Highest Band D with a 4.99% increase
2. Harmonising to the Highest Band D without a 4.99% increase
3. Harmonising to the Lowest Band D with a 4.99% increase
4. Harmonising to the Weighted Average Band D

More detail on these options can be found in Appendix E.

Harmonising to the Highest band D with a 4.99% increase

Council tax referendum limits apply to the overall weighted average band D of an authority. Harmonising to the highest band D in each unitary area after applying the annual referendum limit would inevitably breach the referendum limit.

This option has issues for the following reasons:

- A Council cannot breach the referendum limit without undertaking a referendum, the results of which would be uncertain
- The councils will not be fully established when the Council Tax needs to be set, and a referendum would likely be an unpopular move and a poor start to the relations between the new council and their stakeholders.

Harmonising to the Highest band D without a 4.99% increase

Council tax referendum limits apply to the overall average band D of an authority. Harmonising to the highest band D in each unitary area but without a 4.99% increase would allow for harmonisation over a shorter period or with less adverse impact on those lower council tax areas.

Applying this option would result in a loss to all the Councils compared to applying rises based on a weighted average. This may be considered an acceptable cost to the new unitary authorities to ease the cost burden on individuals and / or to speed up harmonisation. Any council tax setting which does not take the maximum increase to the Band D charge will have ongoing year on year effects and the reduced council tax yield would roll forward from year to year and would be exacerbated by the loss of future percentage increases on the "lost" Band D charge.

Harmonising to the Lowest Band D with a 4.99% increase

Harmonising to the lowest band D in each unitary area would result in a lower council tax yield than the maximum increase that each council could levy without breaching the referendum limit.

If this option were to be chosen, the following would need to be considered:

- Councils generally are under increasing financial pressure and increasing demand for services and council tax is a key income stream for councils to deal with the costs of demands on their services
- Any reduction in the Band D charge will have ongoing year on year effects and the reduced council tax yield would roll forward from year to year and would be exacerbated by the loss of future percentage increases on the "lost" Band D charge.

Harmonising to the Weighted Average Band D

Council tax referendum limits apply to the overall average band D of an authority. Harmonising to the weighted average band D would move all Council taxpayers to the weighted average with some moving up and some moving down.

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Although it is preferable from an equity perspective to harmonise over one year, it may be preferable to smooth the impact through an extended harmonisation period. This would reduce the year-on-year effect to individual council taxpayers. Potential phased harmonisation for Greater Oxford City Council could be as follows:

Table 5.15: Greater Oxford Council Tax Harmonisation

Greater Oxford	Over / (Under) the average £	Harmonisation effect over 3 years (per year) £
Oxford City	68	-23
South Oxfordshire Parishes	-122	41
Vale of White Horse Parishes	-112	37
Cherwell Parishes	-115	38
Maximum Variance	-122	41
Minimum Variance	68	-23

(N.B. a positive variance means the council tax would come down; a negative variance means that it needs to go up)

The difference between the highest and lowest Band D in the new North Oxfordshire and Ridgeway unitary authorities is not as large as that for Greater Oxford therefore the harmonisation could be undertaken over a shorter period:

Table 5.16: North Oxfordshire and Ridgeway Council Tax Harmonisation

	Years to Harmonise	Maximum Average Harmonisation upwards £	Maximum Average Harmonisation downwards £
North Oxfordshire	1	-15.00	14.00
Ridgeway	2	-44.00	32.00

Unitary status and need for additional special expenses calculations

Council tax charging in Oxford City is different to that in the non-City areas being brought into the greater Oxford area. This is because the non-Oxford City areas rely more heavily on services being provided by the parishes. Due to this there is a relatively large difference between the district council tax of the City area and the new areas brought into Greater Oxford.

Based on the 2025/26 council tax levels, the average council tax for the new Greater Oxford area would be £2,184.88 excluding the parish charge and existing Oxford City Special Expenses.

However given the amount of the difference between the district charge from the City and that of the parished areas brought into the new unitary, along with the differences in the parish related band D, this is likely to be due to a disparity between the services provided by parishes in the Oxford City Area and those provided by parishes in the parished areas being brought into Greater Oxford. When there

is a difference between areas for charging purposes there must be an adjustment called "special expenses" to remove double taxation. This would be in additional to the special expenses currently forming part of the council tax calculations for the current City Council. A rough estimate of the effect of this would produce the Greater Oxford harmonisation position as the following:

Table 5.17: Greater Oxford Council Tax Harmonisation Including Special Expenses Adjustment

Current Council	2025/26 Overall Band D (excluding police) £	Increase / (Decrease) to Weighted Average £	Increase / (Decrease) %	4.99% Increase on Weighted Average £	Total Increase £	Revised Council Tax £	Total Increase %
Oxford *	2,180.65	(41.27)	(1.89)	106.75	65.48	2,246.13	3.00
South Oxfordshire	2,062.64	76.74	3.72	106.75	183.49	2,246.13	8.90
Vale of the White Horse	2,073.09	66.29	3.20	106.75	173.04	2,246.13	8.35
Cherwell	2,069.90	69.48	3.36	106.75	176.23	2,246.13	8.51

Weighted Average = Total Council Tax Requirement divided by Tax base	Gap from largest to smallest
2,139.38	118.01

* Excluding All Special Expenses

This would also influence the phasing of harmonisation that could be applied. This can be shown as follows:

Table 5.18: Greater Oxford Council Tax Harmonisation Modelling Including Special Expenses Adjustment

Greater Oxford	Over / (Under) the average £	Harmonisation effect over 3 years (per year) £	Harmonisation effect over 2 years (per year) £
Oxford City	41	-14	-21
South Oxfordshire Parishes	-77	26	39
Vale of White Horse Parishes	-66	22	33
Cherwell Parishes	-69	23	35
Maximum Variance	-77	26	39
Minimum Variance	41	-14	-21

Adult Social Care Premium

Districts and Borough Councils can only increase council tax up to their referendum limit of 2.99% without undertaking a costly and uncertain referendum. On creation of the unitary authorities, the district element of the precept would become part of the new unitary council precept to which the unitary cap of 4.99% would be applied. With increasing social care costs, it is assumed that the social care precept of the additional 2% will continue. This therefore would result in additional Council Tax income that is not included in existing financial projections.

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The benefit would occur every year and compound on the previous benefit. A summary of this benefit by unitary of a single year effect is as follows:

Table 5.19: Estimated Financial Impact of Adult Social Care Premium

	Greater Oxford	North Oxfordshire	Ridgeway
Taxbase relating to District Area	75,437	99,143	104,446
Weighted Average Band D Council Tax (£)	2,184.88	2,055.58	N/a
County Council Element (£)	1,911.40	1,911.40	N/a
Weighted Average Band D District Element Council Tax (£)	273.48	144.18	156.21
District Element Council Tax (£)	20,630,237	14,294,778	16,315,463
Additional 2% increase (£)	412,605	285,896	326,309

5.10 The Oxford Model

The Oxford Model is an innovative approach adopted by Oxford City Council to enhance its financial independence, maintain high-quality services and support local employment. It involves "insourcing" services rather than outsourcing them to private companies. This model allows the Council to retain control over service quality, keeps more of its spend and employment local, and ensures that profits are reinvested back into the community rather than going to external shareholders.

As part of this approach, Oxford City Council owns two wholly owned companies:

- Oxford Direct Services (ODS): Responsible for waste collection, street cleaning, property maintenance HRA and GF, highways, and other direct services including fully commercial services.
- OX Place: Focuses on designing and building new homes for Oxford, contributing to affordable housing development in the city.

The model generates around £10 million annually, which supports frontline services and other Council activities. The profits made by these companies go directly back to the Council, helping to fund essential public services, reducing dependency on government funding, and enhancing financial stability. By keeping services in-house and more of its spend local, the Council creates high-quality local employment opportunities and maintains control over the quality and delivery of its services. This approach aligns services closely with local needs and expectations. The Council's companies are also empowered to bid for external contracts, providing additional revenue streams and reinforcing the financial sustainability of the model.

The Oxford model will also contribute towards delivery of the growth agenda that is proposed to be adopted by the Greater Oxford unitary council. OX Place is well placed to contribute to the delivery of housing across new sites released through a Green Belt review. These are by their nature likely to be less challenging or costly to develop than many of the small, constrained sites within the city that it has brought forward. ODS could relatively easily expand direct service operations it currently delivers within the to the wider Greater Oxford geography.

No assumptions are made about the nature of service delivery by the Northern Oxfordshire or Ridgeway unitary councils. Across the Northern Oxfordshire geography the existing West Oxfordshire and Cherwell District Councils have a track record of primarily Teckal company and in-house service delivery, while across the Ridgeway geography the existing West Berkshire Council and South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse District Councils have a track record of primarily outsourced service delivery.

5.11 Growth

Council Tax

Oxford City Council has a demonstrable track record of delivering strong growth even though the boundary of the authority limits land availability and provides additional difficulties due to the urban nature of the area. The new Greater Oxford unitary would look to continue the drive for growth both in dwellings to meet housing need and in commercial capacity.

The Council has identified areas of green belt to provide sufficient supply to build 40,000 new dwellings, 16,000 more than the Standard Method. For the purposes of providing an indication of the additional income arising from the growth, completions have been assumed to start from 2030/31. The council tax band D used for these indicative figures is the weighted average for the Greater Oxford unitary using 2025/26 council tax levels; this ensures comparability with the rest of the financial analysis within this proposal.

This growth would result in an increase in Council Tax income from the current baseline as follows:

Table 5.20: Financial Impact of Greater Oxford Dwelling Growth 2030-31 to 2040-41

	2030/31	2031/32	2032/33	2033/34	2040/41
Additional Number of Properties (Cumulative)	1,081	3,243	6,486	10,810	40,000
Band D Equivalent	900.3	2,700.8	5,401.5	9,002.6	33,312.0
Additional Council Tax (Cumulative) (£'s)	1,966,951	5,900,853	11,801,707	19,669,511	72,782,650

Business Rates

The Greater Oxford proposals would see the creation of up to 12.8m sq. ft of employment space. We have modelled potential Business Rate income based on an assumed 5.9 million – 9.6 million square feet of research and development and laboratory space and 2.1 million – 3.2 million square feet of other commercial space which is split between retail, hospitality and leisure accommodation and office space.

The calculation of Rateable Values varies depending on use, location and size. Since all of this additional growth would be outside the current City boundary, the rates have been taken to be out of town and then apportioned between the different size categories of properties based on the existing business rates profiles with the existing City boundary. Properties have been assumed to only start being completed from 2030/31 and then to follow a bell curve profile. The tables below show exemplifications of additional business rates income based on the lower end of the development area and the higher end of the development so that the range of potential additional income can be seen. The figures do not include any inflationary increases and so are at 2025/26 rates multiplier

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levels and do not make any assumptions about future business rates resets. The expected total development area is in the following range:

Table 5.21: Estimated Development Area Growth in Greater Oxford

	Development Area (Million square feet) Lower End	Development Area (Million square feet) Upper End
Research & Development	0.27	0.44
Laboratory Space	5.63	9.16
	5.90	9.60
Retail, Hospitality and Leisure	1.45	2.21
Office Accommodation	0.65	0.99
	2.10	3.20
Total Assumed Commercial Development	8.00	12.80

This results in the following business rates growth, shown below on a cumulative basis:

Table 5.22: Estimated Business Rates Income Growth in Greater Oxford

	2030/31 £	2031/32 £	2032/33 £	2033/34 £	2040/41 £
Additional Business Rates (Cumulative)					
Lower End	1,300,951	2,601,902	5,203,804	7,805,706	26,019,020
Upper End	2,096,828	4,193,656	8,387,309	12,580,962	41,936,539

The level of additional revenue from business rates, even at the lower level, is significant and, when combined with the additional council tax income, demonstrates that the Greater Oxford growth strategy would aid in the future sustainability of the new council in addition to benefits to the residents and the economy.

Other benefits of growth

There are direct benefits of this growth to housing need and the economy. If the new council follows Oxford City Council's current planning policies, 40% of the new homes (estimated total of 40,000) would be required to be social housing. These could then be brought into the Council's existing Housing Revenue Account, increasing the number of new council homes by over 16.000 and thus contributing significantly to dealing with the demand for low cost good quality housing.

For the affordable housing production that followed the model established within Oxford City of the City Council's wholly owned housing company developing affordable and social housing for the City, surpluses from the development of these homes would be retained in the public sector to improve

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local services and to improve the financial position of the new Greater Oxford unitary council. The additional financial return from dividends paid by the company has not been included in the finances within this proposal since profit would be dependent on the specific schemes; the additional returns from the company would further improve the financial position and sustainability of Greater Oxford.

5.12 Housing Revenue Account (HRA)

Background

The Housing Revenue Account (HRA) was established under the Local Government and Housing Act 1989 as a ring-fenced account within the General Fund which must be kept separate from the rest of the General Fund. It records all income and expenditure relating to the ownership and management of a council's social housing stock. Typical income streams include rents from tenants and service charges. Expenditure covers housing management costs, repairs and maintenance, capital investment in the stock, and the servicing of housing-related borrowing. In many local authorities, the housing stock has been transferred to another registered provider but where the houses have bene retained by the council, the HRA plays a central role in delivering local housing strategies: maintaining and improving existing homes, ensuring compliance with housing standards and decarbonisation targets, and in some cases funding the development of new council housing.

The Oxford City HRA

Oxford City Council has retained its housing stock and, unlike many authorities, continues to grow its housing stock each year. In 2024/25, the HRA dwelling stock increased by 193; 97 houses and 96 flats. For Greater Oxford the assumption is that Oxford City Council's HRA will be wholly subsumed into the new Greater Oxford unitary authority since the entirety of the current boundary of Oxford City Council will be within the Greater Oxford area. This means the HRA, and its financial trajectory, will directly underpin the new authority's housing strategy from vesting day.

Oxford City Council's HRA budget for 2025/26 includes £60.9 million income from rents and service charges and expenditure of £59.7 million. This expenditure includes £15.3 million net interest costs. The surplus on the HRA for the year needs to be taken in the context of the longer term; the HRA is managed using a 30 year business plan to ensure that the account is viable over the long term.

The current HRA position is summarised as follows:

Table 5.23: Oxford City Council HRA Financial Metrics 2025-26

	Revenue Expenditure Budget	Forecast Total Funding	Forecast Net position (Surplus(-) / Deficit)	HRA Allocated Reserves	HRA Unallocated Reserves	Total Long Term HRA Borrowing (Capital Financing Requirement)	HRA External Debt	Total HRA Dwelling Assets
	£ million	£ million	£ million	£ million	£ million	£ million	£ million	£ million
Oxford City HRA	59.7	-60.9	-1.2	4.3	10.9	345.8	288.5	865.2

There are pressures on the HRA, partly due to national policies:

- Rent Increase Restriction - Rent increases were capped at 7% in 2023/24, even though inflation (CPI) was 10.1%;
- Foregone Rental Income - The rent cap led to weekly rent foregone of an aggregate of £76,724 for the 7,134 properties below formula rent.
- For 2024/25, the total rental income foregone due to the caps amounted to £4.1 million.

These restrictions on rent restrict the resources available to the HRA to produce additional social housing.

The Oxford City Council HRA is managed using three key metrics to ensure long-term viability:

- Interest Cover Ratio (ICR) - Target Minimum of 1.25 (2024/25 actual was 1.27)
- Loan to Value (LTV) - Maximum LTV of 65% (2024/25 actual was 40%)
- Debt / Turnover - Guideline of 5.0 / 6.0 (2024/25 actual was 4.9)

Adherence to these metrics gives confidence that the HRA is viable and sustainable in the longer term. If these targets are not achievable then the Business Plan budgets can be adjusted until they are.

The HRA is asset and capital investment driven, backed by income from rents. A long-term view therefore must be taken of any investment in the HRA. The current HRA capital includes the following key investment areas:
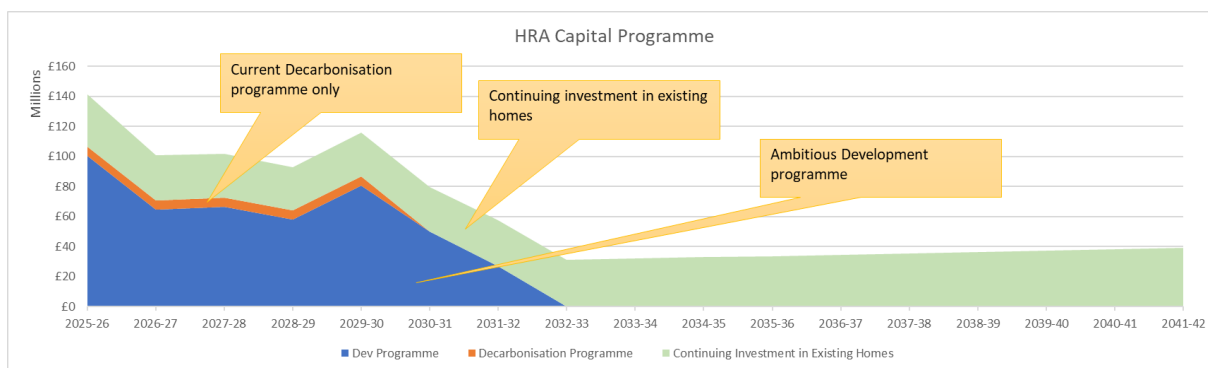

Fig 5.8: HRA Capital Programme

This shows that despite the financial pressures placed on the HRA through national policy, the Oxford City Council HRA has been well managed and is able to deliver new affordable housing. It is anticipated that a new Greater Oxford unitary council would continue to build on these achievements.

Delivery of new homes requires a high level of borrowing and to maintain the Interest Cover Ratio, the level of expenditure on new dwelling is necessarily limited. The current HRA business plan shows that the HRA will only just maintain the Interest Cover Ratio up to 2030/31 but will have additional capacity after that point:
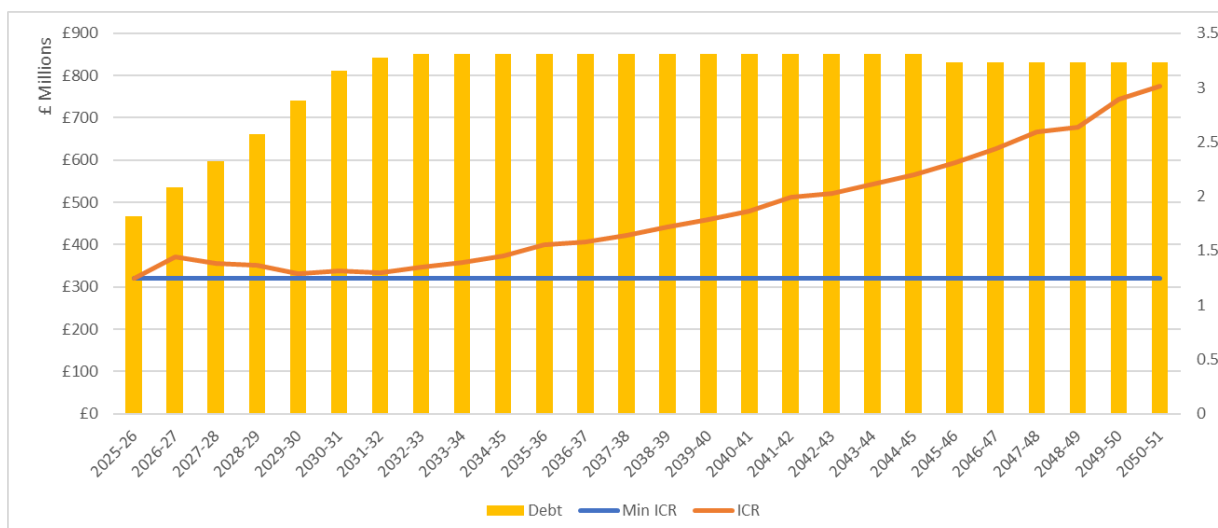
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Fig 5.9: HRA Interest Cover Ratio (ICR) 2025-26 Business Plan

This profile aligns with the timing of the growth projections that could be achieved by the Greater Oxford unitary, demonstrating that the new unitary would have the capacity in the HRA to take additional dwellings arising from the growth agenda.

HRA Summary

The Oxford HRA contains some risks that will need to be managed, as Oxford City Council has done over the years, to ensure continuing sustainability. It also represents a major opportunity for the new Greater Oxford unitary. It brings with it a substantial income base, a large housing stock, and strategic capacity for new build. The capacity for new build will support the proposed continued growth agenda and be supported by the wholly owned housing company to deliver new stock and by the wholly owned company, Oxford Direct Services Limited, that delivers the maintenance and repair work on behalf of the HRA. Continuing the financial discipline currently employed in the HRA, the HRA could underpin the wider growth and regeneration strategy of the new authority.

Northern Oxfordshire and Ridgeway

Other than Oxford City Council only Cherwell District Council owns council housing across the proposed three unitary authorities' geography, with all other councils having previously transferred their stock to housing associations. Cherwell's 146 units include specialist assisted housing and general needs properties. This is below the 200-dwelling threshold required for an HRA. Therefore, it is assumed neither the proposed Northern Oxfordshire nor Ridgeway Councils would create an HRA.

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5.13 Financial Conclusion

The opening position for the Greater Oxford unitary based on the disaggregated 2025/26 budgetary position is a deficit of £2.0 million and the other two unitaries have forecast small surpluses. While the shortfall in Greater Oxford would still require attention, all the forecast surpluses and deficits are relatively small in the context of local government and, given the size of the revenue expenditure for each new Council of between £396.3 million and £748.9 million, these variances would be manageable through routine financial management measures and the normal budgetary process.

Council tax harmonisation is one area that would have to be managed to balance between the financial impacts on the taxpayer and the equity between different council payers. Whereas the actual method chosen for harmonisation is a decision for the new unitaries, harmonisation could be achieved between one and two years. The challenge for the shadow authority will be to select an approach that secures long-term sustainability while distributing impacts fairly across communities.

The Housing Revenue Account (HRA) currently operated by Oxford City Council adds further weight to Greater Oxford's position, both from the perspective of showing how Oxford is different to its surrounding authorities, but also how a Greater Oxford unitary, in continuing the growth agenda currently adopted by Oxford City Council, could capitalise on the use of the HRA to take additional affordable housing stock. Oxford City Council's HRA currently manages over 8,000 homes and, along with the housing company, OX Place, provides an opportunity both to develop new housing and to manage that housing for the future on behalf of the citizens of the new unitary.

The balance sheet analysis shows that all three proposed unitary authorities have strong financial resilience when compared with relevant benchmark averages and there are no wide and unexpected variances in financial resilience measures between the proposed unitary authorities. Greater Oxford has a higher level of net assets and debt which is entirely consistent with being an HRA authority. Except for DSG deficits, which the Government has pledged to resolve, the key balance sheet measures are around or better than the average national position.

All authorities would start with above average levels of usable revenue reserves and strong balance sheets. On this basis it is anticipated that all three of the proposed unitary authorities will have the resources to finance the necessary transition and could also release capital resources to take advantage of the proposed flexible use of capital receipts.

The analysis of the costs and benefits of transition to unitary status and the transformation of service provision shows payback for the three unitary authorities is around year 4 after vesting day on 1st April 2028 for Greater Oxford and Northern Oxfordshire and year three for Ridgeway and that the with an ongoing financially sustainable position thereafter for all the three unitaries in this proposal. This position does not include the effect of the planned changes in waste collection and transfer, the additional council tax from the adult social care precept and the additional revenue from council tax and business rates growth. Combined with the strong balance sheet position this shows that none of the unitary authorities in this proposal will be looking for exceptional financial support. Additionally, this proposal will deliver growth which will benefit the citizens of the area and the wider national economy.

6 New Target Operating Model

This section sets out the proposed target operating model for the three unitary authorities (3UA). In this we will describe how services will be brought together to deliver better outcomes for residents across Oxfordshire. Grounded in the principles of early intervention and prevention, the model aims to anticipate need, reduce long-term demand, and support communities before challenges escalate.

The model uses place-based design to empower Oxfordshire and West Berkshire's towns and villages to support the priorities of their residents and businesses, while the city can provide for the city. Services will be co-designed and delivered through "right-sized" services, ensuring consistency where needed and flexibility where it matters.

6.1 Overview of New Unitary Authorities

One of the key opportunities of LGR is the ability to design authorities from first principles to address the distinctive challenge and opportunities of their specific place.

This is no mere administrative reorganisation – this is a once in a generation opportunity to create authorities that can efficiently and effectively meet needs and priorities of local communities. These councils will be focused on joined up delivery of services to provide integrated care and support to those who need it, ensuring that services are delivered in person-centric ways which respond to the specific priorities of each place. Through the prevention of crisis there will be savings to the cost of services through lower requirement for intensive interventions. But crucially more people will be supported before they require a statutory council service – including those most at risk of or already experiencing deprivation first hand.

The operating models for the new unitary authorities leverage fully the potential of unitarisation and devolution within their specific places. They provide a platform for deep transformation which improve outcomes while yielding optimal savings for services. The key to making savings for these new authorities will be through their preventative work.

Delivery of services will be tailored to meet the unique geographies and priorities of each place. This prevents services from being absorbed into larger authorities where the greater mix of needs will mean the complexities of each place would be lost in the scale of organisation. Working at this level means that Greater Oxford can deliver its full ambitions for growth of housing and businesses, enabling Northern Oxfordshire and Ridgeway to grow in the ways which work best for them in the context of their settlements and rural communities.

Bringing together social care, education, housing and public health functions sets the foundation strong public service reform. This will enable all three unitary authorities to achieve their ambitions to achieve healthier, longer, more prosperous lives for all.

6.2 Key Service Target Operating Models

6.2.1 Target Operating Model at a Glance

The three unitary approach sets out a bold ambition to unlock Oxfordshire's full future potential by delivering the best possible outcomes for our people, places, and economy. To deliver this, we have set out a target operating model that is both robust and deliverable, ensuring safe, legal, and effective services, while capitalising on this once-in-a-generation opportunity to design innovative, future-ready organisations that are built to meet the evolving needs of our communities.

At its core, the target operating model is driven by the six critical dimensions outlined in the Case for Three Unitary Authorities at section 4:
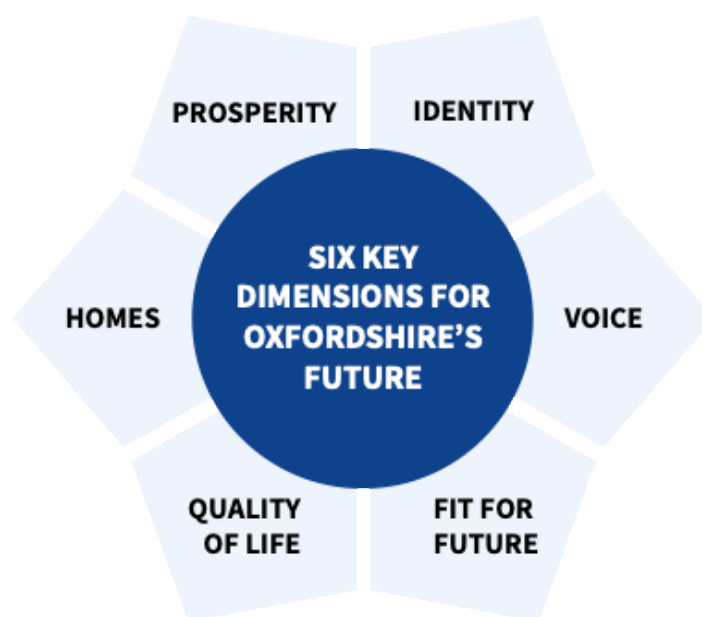

Fig 6.1: Six key dimensions for Oxfordshire's future

Each part of the operating model, from Place to Enabling Services, is intentionally designed to make the most of the opportunity LGR presents to build services from first principles that better meet the needs of the people they serve. Individually, each component builds on deep understanding of the local areas and communities, to innovate and reimagine how services are organised and delivered. Collectively, they form a coherent, future-ready system that gives each individual authority, and Oxfordshire as a whole, the strongest possible foundations for achieving its vision.

We will realise this vision by focusing on three transformative shifts:

- **Driving housebuilding and economic growth:** Enabling unitary authorities to plan and deliver the required number of homes where they are needed, promote growth and prosperity across the city region while protecting and enhancing access to Oxfordshire's countryside.
- **Putting residents at the centre:** Empowering Oxfordshire's towns and villages to speak for their residents and businesses, while the city speaks for the city. Delivering meaningful localism through an engaged community and a networked, prevention-led public sector that is responsive and supportive.

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- **Focus on prevention:** Unlocking the strength of communities to create successful places, rooted in stable work and good homes, to work together to build resilience and tackle local challenges, reducing the need for council intervention, and enabling services to be delivered in a cost-effective, efficient and considerate manner.

We have outlined how the same principles apply consistently across Greater Oxford, Northern Oxfordshire, and Ridgeway. Each area has distinct priorities and profiles, and therefore place-based models will adapt to reflect local circumstances. It is our intention to collaborate with partners in these areas to design in consistency and join-up where beneficial, while enabling locally led delivery wherever possible.

6.2.2 Early Intervention and Prevention

The new operating model across each of the three unitary authorities will have, at its core, a focus on prevention. We do not propose to respond to the national demand and resource challenges across Adults, Children's, SEND and homelessness by delivering services in the same way across a larger footprint, but by purposefully pivoting to prevention-first, community-centred approaches.

We know that most people within Greater Oxford, Ridgeway and the Northern Oxfordshire unitary areas rely on support from friends, family, and local community networks, which helps them to thrive and navigate challenges before they escalate. For those with weaker community connections or more complex needs, public services are essential in providing additional support and supporting local connection.

A similar approach is already being implemented in organisations from London Boroughs and city unitary authorities to county unitary authorities, based on an understanding that investment in tailored prevention approaches results in improved outcomes and reduced costs[47].

Case Study: Rose Hill Community Centre, Oxford
Enabling community connection
Opened in 2016, Rose Hill Community Centre brings together community facilities, and personal support networks under one roof. The centre is home to the Rose Hill & Donnington Advice Centre, which works with residents to provide advice on benefits, debt and housing issues. It is also home to the Early Pregnancy Assessment Unit and the Thames Valley Police.

A well-used and vibrant community space, it serves a wide and diverse community. Facilities include a gym, a dance studio, a library and other rooms for hire – which serve groups from the Syrian Sisters, a refugee support group, to a weekly food larder. At the heart of the centre is the cafe, bringing diverse groups together.

Whether used for a cup of tea and a chat, or to attend a range of community events, Rose Hill Community Centre is a place that enables community cohesion, trust and a sense of belonging. These feelings help prevent isolation, reduce a risk of crisis and enable people to seek help early – reducing demand into statutory services and spend on long-term acute support.

[47] ICC work in Cheshire East, Fife, Swindon and Liverpool

The operating model of the new authorities will focus on a collaborative approach with residents, partners and with the other new unitary authorities. It will empower local community-led prevention, fostered through an enabling approach towards communities and partners to support residents. This will be supported through social infrastructure, community governance that centres resident voices and adaptive commissioning and grant processes.

This depth of understanding will be enabled by having three smaller, more responsive organisations, underpinned by a strong insight and data-led approach, that deeply understand their resident needs and communities, as opposed to being lost within a much larger footprint – as is the case in some current service delivery. The recent report from Collaborate CIC highlights that place-based, relational approaches – working locally, focusing on relationships and prevention – can deliver better outcomes as well as delaying and prevent demand.[48]

There will be a single pathway into the prevention offer delivered by the three unitary authorities, which will be complementary to that offered within the community. It will focus on building resilience, through collaborating with partners, co-locating support and services and using shared insights to design better, and more connected, support pathways.

This pathway will bring together services currently delivered across different layers of government and within different teams – including housing adaptations, homelessness prevention and information and advice typically located within social care services. The ethos of early intervention and prevention will be felt within all the people-focused services across the three unitaries. This means that all statutory services will have a 'no wrong door' approach to residents starting their contact with the local authority and will enable a holistic approach to supporting resident need and resolving challenges.
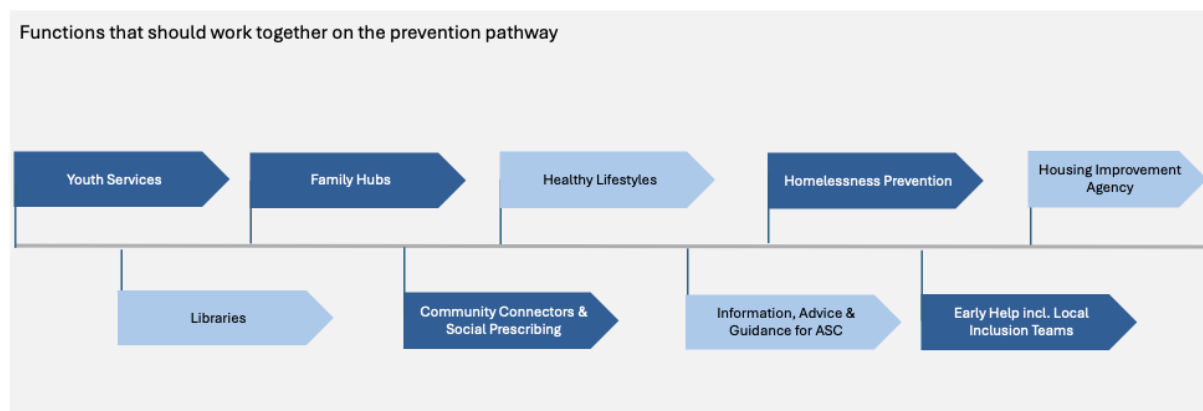

Fig 6.2: Recommended teams who would work together on the EI&P pathway

The early intervention and prevention approach will deliver effective early help through community-based support to enable everyday wellbeing, digital advice and guidance to give timely access to information and advice, and links to statutory services where a household's needs are more complex. A coordinated, integrated approach will ensure that people get the right help at the right time from people they trust.

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[48] The case for putting place-based, relational approaches at the heart of local government reorganisation, Collaborate CIC 2025
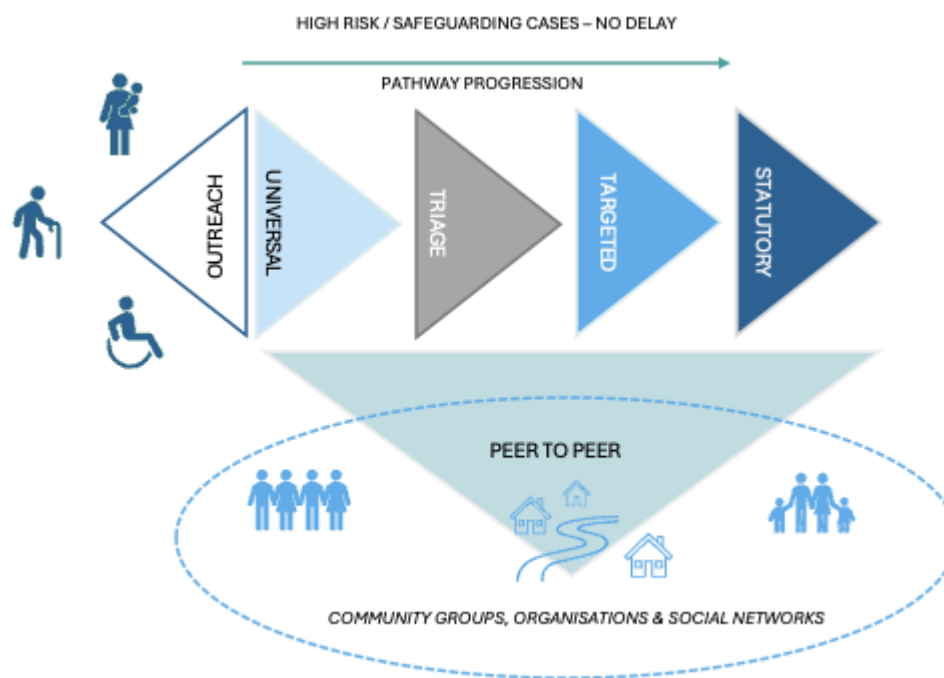
Fig 6.3: The Early Intervention & Prevention Pathway

Through co-design with residents and partners, each of the three unitary areas will have the opportunity to develop a response to their specific opportunities, rather than delivering a one-size fits all approach to service delivery.

This offer will be enabled by a newly developed Data and Insights function, which would bring together data from statutory services, nationally available data sets, and information on resident journeys, to be able to pinpoint both the root causes of demand and the moments where intervention is required to prevent someone from falling into crisis – either now or in the future, and enabling action.

This will provide the basis for proactive outreach to wrap around short-term support to residents and households to prevent a longer-term crisis – this may be a holistic approach to council tax arrears over a movement to punitive action, connecting a bereaved family who have used 'Tell Us Once' to update their status with community support or organising a Team Around a Child where school absenteeism has become a challenge.

Staff have the capacity to undertake this work through the new unitaries better utilising Artificial Intelligence and digital solutions for those who are digitally connected – using good practice such chatbots to connect residents instantly to further information or enabling the completion of self-assessments and referrals online.

Existing community assets, such as libraries, community centres, children's centres and leisure centres, will be used as hubs for the early intervention and prevention pathway – bringing together a wide range of council and partner services. This way of working will align with the Family Hub and Neighbourhood Health approaches – which requires hubs that either contain or can connect to services ranging from early years play activities and health visiting, to debt and housing advice.

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As an example, libraries could provide local face to face support for residents via drop ins and advice sessions; spaces for community-led activity such as parent/guardian-led homework clubs along with digital skills training and cultural programmes to combat isolation and free computers, digital support and Wi-Fi will be maintained in every branch. This enables the library and wider cultural offer to continue to play a part in developing thriving communities with a sense of belonging, whilst also playing an essential role in connecting residents to support.

Case Study: Westgate Library, Oxford
Improving service accessibility through a 'one stop shop' approach.
In January 2022, Oxford City Council relocated its face-to-face customer service offer into the Westgate Library, co-locating for the first time with Citizen's Advice Oxford. The space was developed further in September 2023, to provide greater privacy for people seeking advice and support.

Being in a central shopping area has increased accessibility and encouraged residents to engage with and receive advice in a non-threatening environment. The accessible nature of the space saw customer volumes increased by almost 8% compared to the previous year. Co-locating with Citizen's Advice has enabled more direct access to independent debt and housing advice, especially in the context of the rising cost of living. It has also enabled the service to be delivered in a more cost-effective way.

The library also hosts the Digital Cafe, a partnership with Oxfordshire County Council and the ICB, supporting residents to develop their digital skills, reducing isolation and exclusion.

The people who use the service rate their satisfaction at 97% - a testament to the impact of the wraparound support available.

Delivering services locally or through mobile options improves accessibility, especially for those on low incomes or with mobility challenges, while tailoring provision to local needs and strengthening community capacity and resilience.

We will embed close working with the Public Health function across the three unitaries, to ensure a focus on reducing health inequalities and improving overall wellbeing. Our proposal suggests a single Director of Public Health for Greater Oxford and Northern Oxfordshire, and one to cover Ridgeway – building on existing infrastructure in the two areas. Embedding public health approaches, and the close integration with health partners through strong governance will reinforce our commitment to truly partner-led ways of working.

A focus on health and wellbeing will be further enhanced by the embedding of the Active Wellbeing Offer approach across the three-unitary footprint, aligning with the direction of travel from Sports England and the LGA, as contract terms end and offer the opportunity for innovation and transformation. It is recommended that new services feature close partnerships and governance arrangements with community partners, including residents, the VCSE and health.

This not only enables the co-location of health, wellbeing, and prevention services presents a transformative opportunity but the embedding of the principles of the offer, unlocking long-term improved wellbeing for residents:

- **Preventative focus**: Leisure centres and services should help to prevent ill health, not just respond to it
- **Co-location & placed-based planning:** Bringing together leisure, health care and social services, in places people already use to address wellbeing holistically
- **Stronger health outcomes:** Leisure providers will be judged on health and wellbeing outcomes (such as improved mental health and social inclusion), as well as more traditional metrics like membership numbers
- **Sustainability & affordability:** With the market facing challenges following long-term impacts of Covid-19 and rising costs, there will be an emphasis on making leisure services both environmentally and financially sustainable
- **Equality, diversity & inclusion**: A drive to reduce inequalities in access to activity, especially for people and communities who have traditionally been less active or served by leisure facilities.

Our ability to deliver prevention-forward solutions to resident needs will also be supported by our wider commitment to housing growth from the three unitary model – with Greater Oxford delivering 40,000 new homes (of which 40% would be affordable), alongside the Heyford Park new town in Northern Oxfordshire and other settlements continuing to grow with home building appropriate to their local context and character. This will reduce demand for temporary accommodation, as well as providing the opportunity for other accessible housing that could provide lifelong independence for residents.

Greater Oxford

Greater Oxford is area of contrasts, with some of the most affluent areas in the country alongside neighbourhoods facing significant deprivation, health inequalities, and economic challenges. While the city benefits from world-class academic institutions and overall good health indicators in many wards, issues of deprivation continue to impact vulnerable populations. The pressure on services is intensified by complex needs that fall below statutory support thresholds and the high cost of living. Greater Oxford faces the most significant housing pressures, with high levels of both private and social rented housing, higher rents and significant amounts of supported accommodation.

An early intervention and prevention (EI&P) approach within the city region should consider how to build resilience within the population, with a particular focus on connecting residents to stable employment, support on debt management & benefit advice, rent and tenancy support & advice and mental wellbeing support.

At its core, the EI&P function will be focused on working alongside communities, bringing currently disparate functions together to provide a single seamless service. By concentrating on the strengths of households and therefore reducing the level of crisis that residents experience, it will also reduce the long-term support they would require from the council. The new unitary authorities will work alongside communities and partners taking a systems leadership role to support more resilient and better-connected communities.

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Case Study: Oxford Hub Slow Cooker Project

Place-based community-led action

Oxford Hub is a place-based charity that connects people and organisations to create positive social change across Oxford. They support community-led projects that address local challenges such as inequality, social isolation and environmental sustainability. Through volunteering, training, and collaboration, Oxford Hub empowers individuals and groups to act on issues like education, mental health and food insecurity.

The recent Slow Cooker Project is a grassroot community that has promoted sustainable access to healthy, affordable food by teaching families to cook nutritious, diverse meals with minimal resources. Families have learned to create healthy meals using affordable ingredients, minimising food waste and energy use. The grass root community now has 16 participants a week, feeding up to 90 people per week for under £2 per head.

Northern Oxfordshire

Northern Oxfordshire faces some of the opportunities and challenges that are typical of many rural areas with market towns, where communities are dispersed across a large geographical footprint. Areas of deprivation, with challenges around child poverty, can be found around the more urban area of Banbury – with affluent rural areas found elsewhere in the authority's boundaries. Increasing pressures around homelessness have been emerging in recent years, with a particular challenge around rough sleeping in the West of the unitary. This area had the highest self-reported level of middling health and wellbeing, alongside the largest population of adults with no qualifications, speaking to a need to meet a range of needs.

Across Northern Oxfordshire, a prevention approach should focus on enabling quality lives across the footprint. This should include targeted healthy lifestyle interventions to ensure lifelong wellbeing, support managing private tenancies, domestic abuse outreach and training and reskilling support for residents who wish to access employment.

Given the rurality of Northern Oxfordshire, delivery of this support will consider the use of social, digital and mobile approaches to provide services. This will mitigate against a postcode lottery of support and reduce the risk of rural isolation.

Ridgeway

Ridgeway will have the lowest levels of deprivation out of the three areas but have a comparative higher number of older adults living in the area. Whilst data indicates generally positive health outcomes in the area, a prevention approach should focus on ensuring people are able to age well and independently.

This approach will connect residents to community and peer support to establish and build upon social relationships, and ensure households have the information available to continue to manage finances into older age, including keeping homes safe and warm, especially given the prevalence of owner-occupiers in the area. Delivery of support will be sensitive to the rurality of the area, considering mobile delivery and mitigating risks of digital exclusion.

Further detail on local context and constraints across Oxfordshire that we have considered in the model development, as well as further blueprint detail on the recommended EI&P operating model can be found in Appendix G.1.

6.2.3 Adult Social Care

The three unitary authorities (3UA) model is the best way to achieve our vision for delivering Adult Social Care across the Oxfordshire and West Berkshire footprint. This is a vision that sees person-centred care, delivered locally and tailored to the demand and cost pressures that each of the three unitary authorities experience. Service delivery approaches will be rooted in in a detailed understanding of local community strengths, assets and challenges, and partnership working notably with community partners and the NHS.

The recent Impower/DCN report 'The power of prevention and place in new unitary councils' highlights the opportunity local government reorganisation provides to develop a localised, place-based ethos into adult social care. The 3UA responds to this opportunity.[49]

This vision also aligns with the government's 10 Year Health Plan, with its focus on community support, digital opportunities to enable wellbeing and a focus on prevention. Building upon the role that districts already play in supporting the reduction of health inequalities in their local areas[50] the shift to neighbourhood working can be much more effectively delivered through a smaller and more local model of service delivery. In a social care context, this could include working in collaboration to avoid hospital admissions through embedding multi-disciplinary approaches in line with the early intervention and prevention approaches.

Building upon the existing 'Oxfordshire Way' strategy held at county level with an emphasis on community resilience, and work underway within the different districts, the unitary model will enable service delivery that is more closely connected to their communities, and that places their co-production at the centre of service delivery, enabled through being delivered closer to communities, in geographies that make sense to them.

Our proposed way of working also seeks to ensure Adult Social Care works alongside other areas of the local authority. This includes collaborative working on the prevention pathway, to ensure fewer residents require long-term support and engagement with housing pathways that ensure homes are safe and support independence. It also centres working with Children's Social Care in delivering an All-Age Disability approach that stops young people feeling 'in limbo'[51] in their teenage years and instead is focused on enabling young people to build an independent life, whatever that may look like for them.

Both existing unitary services across this footprint have been noted by the Care Quality Commission as providing 'Good' services, with marked areas of strength. However, there were areas of critical improvement identified. For Oxfordshire, these included meeting complex & diverse needs, rushed hospital discharge, a lack of urgency in managing all safeguarding enquiries and varied support between urban and rural areas. West Berkshire had improvement areas highlighted in ensuring services are genuinely prevention-focused and developing a vibrant, modern care market. We believe

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[49] The Power of Prevention and Place in New Unitary Councils

[50] King's Fund & DCN, Delivering Better Health Outcomes

[51] Quote from young resident voice in Oxfordshire's Care Quality Commission report

all these challenges can be effectively met within a three unitary authority model and set up the organisations to be ready for any further reforms in the years to come.

Whilst having distinct service delivery models will enable the unitary authorities to tailor services to their local populations, we also see partnership working as being central to this model. We would envision retaining the close collaboration with Buckinghamshire, Oxfordshire & Berkshire West (BOB) ICB whilst they go undergo transformation. This includes exploring how existing strong collaboration at a county-wide level through Section 75 funding arrangements and innovative use of the Better Care Fund could continue across the 3UA footprint. Continued funding collaboration with Health may also support the unlocking of shared assets and joint working around specialist housing and health developments that would achieve preventative outcomes for the whole health and care system.

We would also propose working with the other two unitary authorities to collaboratively commission services that cross boundaries, to mitigate against localised competition for placements, and enable collaboration with the wider provider market.
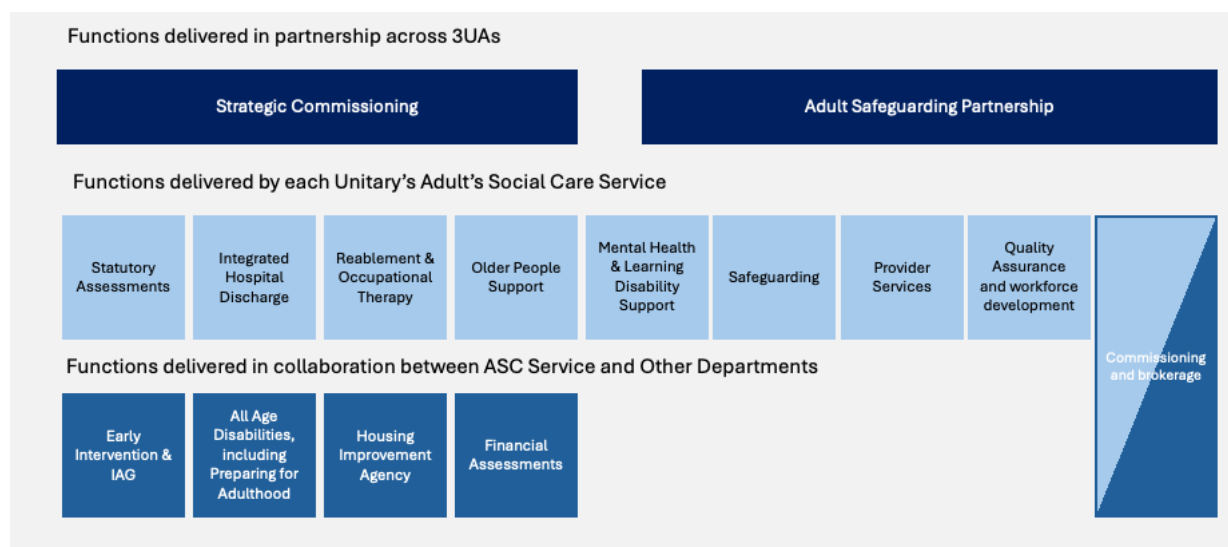

Fig 6.4: Functions of the future ASC model

Greater Oxford

Greater Oxford's adult population is markedly distinct from the wider Oxfordshire area, characterised by fewer older adults and a higher proportion of working-age residents, in part inflated by the presence of the university, but also typical of an urban region. This demographic profile means that adult social care in the city must deliver both preventative and long-term support to a diverse and growing community. This includes the highest proportion of adults with mental health needs (45% of Oxfordshire's current demand for support[52]) an older population experiencing significant loneliness and a high rate of hospital admissions due to falls[53].

Social care support will focus on enabling independence for all age groups, especially through short-term support and meaningful employment pathways. The city's proven strengths, especially in innovative housing solutions, position it to pioneer a transformative approach to accommodation for

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[52] Oxfordshire JSNA
[53] Oxfordshire JSNA

both older adults and those with learning disabilities and mental health needs, shifting away from expensive residential placements.

> **Case Study – Oxfordshire Health & Homelessness Inclusion Team**
> *Preventing homelessness and enabling independence after a hospital admission*
> This team was established in 2021, with the explicit aim of preventing rough sleeping, supporting planned, timely discharges from hospital and preventing (re)admissions where a person's needs can be better met in the community.
>
> It brings together teams from health, housing, adult social care and the voluntary sector to deliver a person-centred approach to stepping a person out of hospital and into long-term housing with wrap-around transitional support.
>
> The initial evaluation of the team's work found that in 2021/22 it had delivered savings across multiple systems, including: 89% reduction in hospital bed days, saving £657,00; £483,000 saved on preventing hospital admissions; and c£100,000 preventing rough sleeping and homelessness. In 2024-25 they supported 300 people out of hospital into settled accommodation, with only one person returning to rough sleeping and a 51% reduction in mental health readmissions. Community-based services supported 200 people to maintain or move into new accommodation.

North Oxfordshire

According to Newton analysis provided by the county, North Oxfordshire will see a 14% increase in demand for services by 2040 – rising to have the highest level of Adult Social Care demand in Oxfordshire under the current model of service delivery. North Oxfordshire also has a comparatively high disabled child population, that will need effective support as they step into adulthood. This will be a model case for the need for a collaborative approach between Adult Social Care and Children's Social Care, that will be designed into the ways of working for the service.

The new unitary should consider how it can develop hyper local methods of support for residents in rural areas to tackle risks around isolation and long stretches of time spent travelling to physical support services, including considering how technology can be used to maintain relationships and enable self-management of conditions.

As part of the new unitary authorities' approach to service delivery and market management, there is an opportunity to review the comparatively high number of bed-based care schemes in North Oxfordshire and the wider market with a focus on enabling people to live and age well at home.

Ridgeway

On vesting day, Ridgeway will have the largest population of residents drawing on support from Adult Social Care – aligned with both the unitary authorities' size and the larger number of older adults living across the area. With around a third of districts within the footprint experiencing geographical deprivation – being at a distance from social or health physical infrastructure – there is an opportunity to ensure that residents are enabled to live well at home for as long as possible, in partnership with the Early Intervention & Prevention offer.

The new unitary will have the opportunity to design new models of service delivery, that connect communities to access support independently (via travel training and investment in rural transport networks) and to develop localised community-led methods of support, building upon local community assets.

There will also be a focus on delivering person-centred, independence-focused care for all residents, and particularly those on mental health pathways. Multi-agency teams will be utilised to support residents leaving hospital to support them into safe and secure housing, employment and to enable management of ongoing mental health needs.

Existing county wide partnerships where there is a strong case for continuing (e.g. the Adults Safeguarding Board) should be retained to bring together statutory and non-statutory organisations and support these through their connection to a more localised service delivery model. Precise arrangements will need to be agreed by all affected unitaries. Market sustainability will be addressed through a joint commissioning function.

Further detail on local context and constraints across Oxfordshire that we have considered in the service model development, as well as further blueprint detail on the recommended operating model for Adult Social Care can be found in Appendix G.2.

6.2.4 Children's Social Care, SEND and Education

Children's Social Care

The three unitary authority model is optimal to deliver Children's Social Care across the Oxfordshire and West Berkshire footprint through establishing individual sovereign services. This provides an opportunity to deliver services on a smaller footprint, strengthen local leadership, partnerships and integration, and create greater alignment to place-based priorities. The Staff College notes the importance of local leadership in delivering children's services[54]. The creation of three sovereign services ensures clear accountability and improved local leadership.

This local offer will encompass local land-use to boost placement sufficiency and enable adoption of housing-led innovations to improve outcomes for children and young people including better preparation for their transition into adulthood. This will translate to more local in-house provision predicated upon hyper-local insights, enabling children and young people to remain closer to their communities and family networks; engagement with children and young people to ensure their voices shape services will continue, building on the success of Oxford's Children and Young People Partnership.

The three unitary authorities will be committed to implementing the Family First Partnership Programme reforms and principles to ensure that early intervention and crisis prevention is at the heart of service delivery, enabling families to remain together.[55] Each unitary Children's Social Care Service will build on the existing Family Solutions model delivered through children and family centres and locality-based multi-disciplinary teams across Oxfordshire. This enhances existing

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[54] New Handbook Launched to Support Local Leadership of Children's Services in Unitary Councils, Staff College 2025

[55] The Families First Partnership Programme Guide

workforce structures, partnerships and practices (i.e. team around the family and family group decision making) to establish a seamless continuum of support services that families can receive at the earliest possible point. The Children's Wellbeing and School Bill will also strengthen the role of education in multi-agency safeguarding arrangements to better protect the welfare of children and young people. These system changes will reduce family break down and prevent children and young people entering the care system.

Families across the three unitary authorities will have access to locality hubs and community venues across Oxfordshire that will be based closer to home and in areas of high need, encompassing co-located Family Help Teams and partners who operate on an integrated, shared practice model; overseen by qualified Family Help Lead Practitioners (FHLP). This will benefit families through proactive identification and engagement at the earliest point of need, with minimal handoffs and consistent support throughout social care in the form of an FHLP, who will foster and build trusted relationships with families and remain their lead point of contact. FHLPs will engage Lead Child Protection Practitioners (LCPP) and Multi-agency Child Protection Teams (MACPTs) to reduce the number of children and young people subject to child protection plans and prevent escalation of needs. MACPTs will also take ownership of achieving permanence for children in care.

Case Study: Youth Hub
Successful preventative work through co-location of activities and co-design with young people

The City Council's Youth Ambition Service has worked in collaboration with the County Council's Targeted Youth Support Service to build a state of the art Youth Hub within the Leys Leisure Centre which opened in July 2025.

The aims are to deliver a strong prevention-based model that provides young people with new opportunities to improve their mental and physical wellbeing, build skills for life and work and deliver a space to enjoy themselves and boost their confidence.

The Hub is deigned to expand and diversify the current youth offer and includes social areas, quiet rooms, a teaching kitchen, a music/ media studio, a digital space and a climbing wall. Community partners and stakeholders have all been invited to collaborate and work in supporting our young people in this inspiring and safe environment.

The space has been co-designed with young people, and they have even supported in recruitment.

The Hub development has been funded by the Youth Investment Fund and has also been awarded a full 3 years of revenue funding to underpin its sustainable evolution.

Each of the three unitary councils will assess its own unique context and design reforms based on local priorities and the voices of families and communities. Critical strategic and operational considerations will be evaluated including deprivation levels, the urban versus rural distribution and existing local initiatives. This will ensure service configuration and workforce capabilities are best suited to address identified and anticipated needs, allowing national reforms to maximise its intended impact. For example, expertise possessed by LCPPs will vary based on local factors contributing to the requirement for initial child protection conferences. Further local initiatives and innovations based on best practice from Families First for Children pathfinder authorities will also be

considered. This includes using funding for family network support packages to allow family networks to step in, reducing dependency on children's services and preventing care entries.

Collaboration will continue across the county to maintain shared benefits and economies of scale on critical areas including joint commissioning of specialist provision, provider market engagement and development, foster carer recruitment and safeguarding partnerships, whilst retaining the ability to innovate and develop policies, practices and procedures based on local challenges and improvement levers. Precise arrangements will need to be agreed by all affected unitaries.
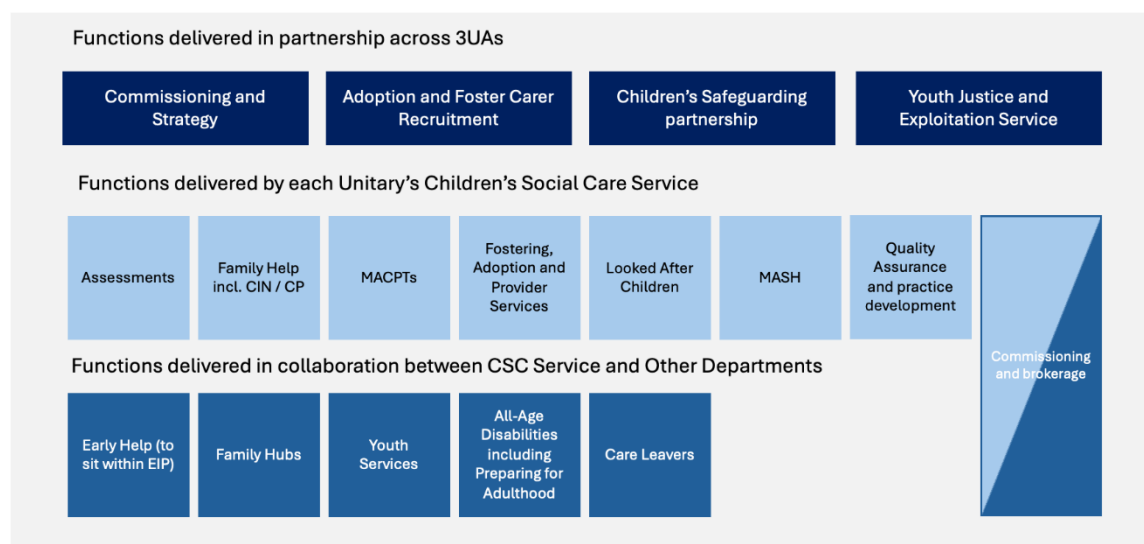

Fig 6.5: Functions of the future CSC model

Greater Oxford

For Greater Oxford this will mean developing a bespoke offer for its residents who inhabit an urban-city geography which presents its own set of challenges that adversely impact family resilience and contribute to its breakdown. This includes significant deprivation, long-term unemployment, complex mental health needs and substance misuse issues. Locality-based data and insights from partners will be harnessed to proactively meet need and respond rapidly to household requirements. Non-statutory assessments and functions including Early Help will be embedded within the early intervention and prevention function to coordinate appropriate support services, addressing concerns as they emerge. This will enable areas around the city region to benefit from existing strong good practice they may not currently be available to children and families.

North Oxfordshire

North Oxfordshire has the lowest number of children in care out of the three unitary areas, however it has the second highest proportion of children and young people subject to early help (32%), child in need (33%) and child protection cases (35%). This requires a bespoke local strategy to manage demand and prevent escalation of needs which could contribute to a significant number of children coming into care. Root causes contributing to family breakdown including poor health and housing instability (North Oxfordshire has the highest level of demand for secure suitable and permanent or long-term temporary accommodation for eligible cohorts) will need to be addressed.

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Child poverty rates are higher in North of Oxfordshire compared to the South, alongside significant levels of social housing and unemployment (North Oxfordshire has the largest proportion of adults with no qualifications out of three unitary authorities). This context can lead to children coming into care as it contributes to relationship breakdown and child neglect. Areas where deprivation is prevalent (i.e. Banbury) experience particular risks to children including criminal exploitation (county lines).

Ridgeway

Ridgeway has the largest population out of the three unitary authorities which correlates to it having the highest number of service referrals (42%), early help assessments (45%), child in need (42%) and child protection cases (43%) across Oxfordshire. Given the rural geography of Ridgeway, more services are required within communities with access enabled through affordable transport infrastructure.

Whilst Ridgeway has the lowest level of deprivation out of the three unitary authorities and the highest level of owner-occupiers - the unitary is a mixture of affluent and deeply deprived areas. This requires services to be placed in areas of high need to ensure wider social determinants (i.e. parental mental health) that dictate child vulnerability are addressed through multi-agency ways of working; the EIP function will be critical to coordinating and providing this response. Service design and staff expertise will also be aligned to local requirements, including deployment of Specialist Lead Child Protection Practitioners who are adept in addressing the types of harm more prevalent in rural geographies (i.e. intrafamilial).

West Berkshire's existing CQC and Ofsted 'Good'- rated Children's Services team forms a strong foundation for extending provision across the southern Oxfordshire geography. This also mitigates potential risks around disaggregation of Oxfordshire County Council social services, with several operational staff being TUPE'd across from one existing Children's Services structure into another.

The existing safeguarding arrangements in the form of the Oxfordshire Safeguarding Children Partnership should be retained and expanded to include West Berkshire. Precise arrangements will need to be agreed by all affected unitaries.

Further detail on local context and constraints across Oxfordshire that we have considered in the model development, as well as further blueprint detail on the recommended Children's Social Care operating model can be found in Appendix G.3.

SEND and Education

The three unitary authorities model provides an opportunity to best deliver on the UK Government's ambition to create a more inclusive and accountable national system, that enables early identification of need and provides evidence-based support that helps children and young people with SEND to fulfil their potential and be set up for long-term success.

It is acknowledged SEND services across the country have experienced rising demand - Oxfordshire saw a 14% increase in the number of children and young people with EHCPs from 2023/24 to 2024/25, with key gaps in provision and limited capacity across critical areas including special school placements and specialist resource bases. These pressures have been further compounded by

widespread systemic failing across Oxfordshire's SEND Local Area Partnership as found by the Ofsted and Care Quality Commission assessment in 2023, including low parent and carer confidence, a disconnect between strategy and practice and sufficiency of provision; it is hoped that improvements have since been made and will be assessed part of the inspection, undertaken in October 2025 with no published report available at the time of writing.[56] Findings from this report will be incorporated into the design of the three unitary authorities, during the implementation period.

The 3UA proposal is best placed, with its strong local ethos, to land the significant systems reset needed with the children, parents, education and care providers of the wider SEND community. Many of the failures in the inspection can be seen as characteristic of a larger remote authority, something the 3UA would be able to address.

The County Council has reached a fiscally unsustainable position with its high needs block deficit to reach a £100m by March 2026. The deficit is primarily driven by expensive private and independent (out of area) placements due to an insufficient number of special schools. Home to school transport expenditure has also steeply risen because of the rural geography and dispersed placement of services. Most importantly, this has contributed to a negative experience for children and families, who have found the current system difficult to navigate and insufficient capacity has meant that children and young people are not able to continue their development in settings most appropriate for their needs. Data from March 2023 showed 33.5% of children were placed out of county and more than 20 miles from home. Home to School transport costs have risen significantly (around £40 million per annum in 24/25)[57] and now exceed annual expenditure to place children in Maintained Special Schools across Oxfordshire (£35m per annum in 23/24).[58] This money would be much better spent on supporting the provision of SEND education.

The three unitary authorities' model will establish sovereign SEND services built on local delivery with control over SEND budgets to design and deliver services based on each area's unique geography and needs profile. This model will enable enhanced integration and strengthened partnerships which can be coordinated effectively on a unitary footprint to drive operational efficiency. Each Unitary will work collaboratively with schools and education providers including Multi-Academy Trusts (MATs) to support early identification of needs and development of inclusive learning environments. Early intervention will also be further supported through multi-disciplinary Teams Around Schools and Inclusion Support Teams to improve outcomes for children and young people. This includes avoiding exclusions (Greater Oxford made up 65% of all exclusions in 24/25).

Central to the three unitary proposal is the expansion and acceleration of delivering SEND provision – each unitary will have control over its capital programme planning to develop better alignment between housing and school growth plans, enabling the ability to rapidly identify and release sites for special schools and resource bases.

In Greater Oxford, the opportunity to repurpose space and capacity created by falling rolls to build bespoke provision for the SEND cohort will be explored. This will contribute to the critical strategic objective of mobilising more local provision that enables children and young people to thrive within and remain close to their communities, maximising their time on developmental activities.

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[56] Area SEND inspection of Oxfordshire Local Area Partnership, OFSTED 2023

[57] Home to School Transport Update July 2024

[58] County LGR Briefing

Operational staff will focus on building trust with parents to ensure the system is not perceived as being 'adversarial' but rather designed to meet the current and evolving needs of their children, ensuring that they are being set up to live independent lives as they enter adulthood. To meet this aim, SEND case workers will play a pivotal role in school transport decisions to boost independent travel where it is safe to do so, and wider improvement levers including procurement and commissioning will be identified to reduce spend. Improving the overall transport infrastructure to address transport poverty across the three unitary authorities, particularly Ridgeway will be a county-wide priority. Unitary authorities will also work closely with education partners to improve education, employment and training outcomes.

The SEND white paper which will outline a blueprint for system recalibration will be welcome and align to the ambition of the three unitary authorities proposal as the fundamental vision is to deliver high-quality support, strengthen mainstream schools to be more inclusive, restore parental faith in the system and better manage demand and expenditure through reducing reliance on costly provision that is contributing to the national crisis.
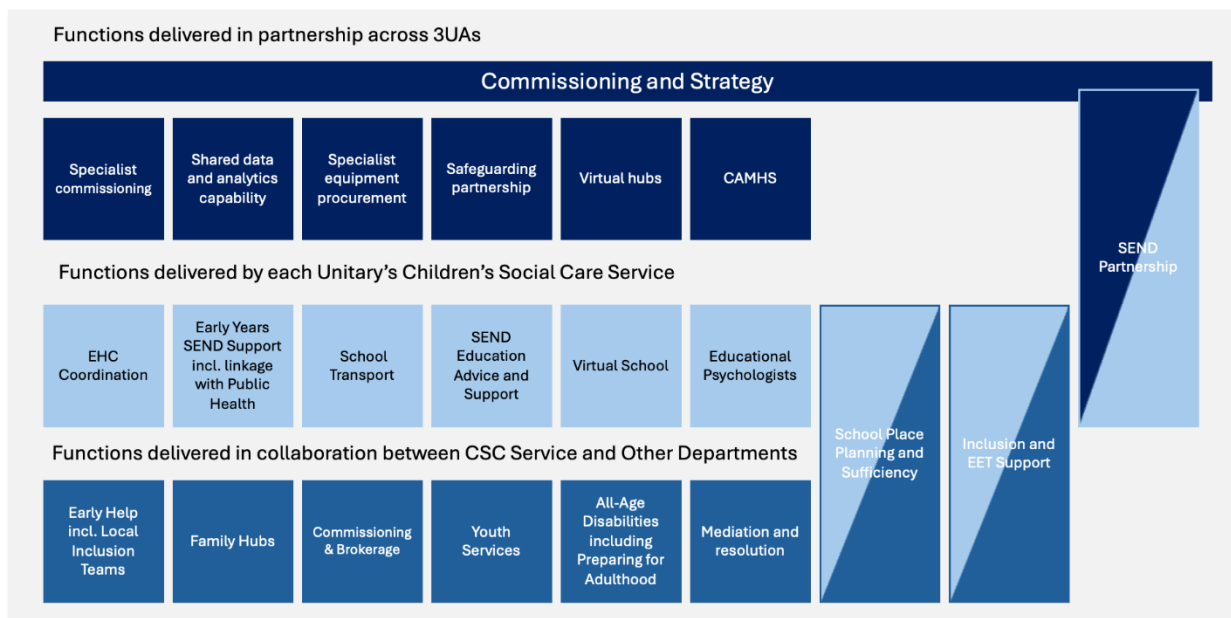

Fig 6.6: Functions of the future SEND model

Case Study: River Learning Trust

Providing better support by working locally to meet specialist needs

Oxfordshire's largest MAT, River Learning Trust, has demonstrated the success of smaller, locally embedded units that cater for the specialist needs of around a dozen children near to where they live. Its enhanced provision for deaf pupils at the Willows, is located on the site of the mainstream New Marston Primary School in Oxford, catering to children aged 5 to 8 with a specialised curriculum led by a qualified teacher and supported by experienced staff. This provision helps children who are not yet placed in specialist settings access the national curriculum and develop essential personal and social skills.

Since opening in September 2024, The Willows has helped students achieve significant milestones in communication, attention, and learning. As proved popular with pupils that may struggle in other settings, and with their parents, it delivers enhanced learning for children with SEND at a cost only just above mainstream, and a fraction of the cost of out of area special school's provision.

Further detail on local context and constraints across Oxfordshire that we have considered in the model development, as well as further blueprint detail on the recommended SEND & Education operating model can be found in Appendix G.4.

6.2.5 Place

The three unitary authorities (3UA) proposal maximises the growth in homes and jobs across Oxfordshire in the years ahead, allow housing and jobs growth and agglomeration around Oxford, while ensuring that smaller towns and villages retain their local character and natural environment. The outcomes this would deliver are outlined in detail at 3.2 and 3.3 above.

With strategic planning, strategic transport planning and delivery, skills and inward investment all shifting from the County Council to the new MSA, it is clear that when it comes to Place services, devolution undermines the case for larger more strategic unitary authorities, while underlining the case for place-based authorities. As such the 3UA proposal will work to complement, not duplicate the work at the MSA across the Place services, by bringing together planning, development, economic growth, skills and transport briefs into single authorities routed and responsive to the needs of the places they represent.

Improving infrastructure across Oxfordshire is the only way to achieve the levels of growth required to sustain the level of growth for business and homes which is proposed over the next 30 years. Growth and associated infrastructure can be controversial, and the implementation of plans needs to be down with, not to, local communities. As such, it is essential that the authorities responsible for implementing strategies in this space are representative of those areas, whether that be Greater Oxford, the market towns, or more rural areas.

Placemaking requires deep understanding of and engagement with the area. Each unitary in the 3UA is of a suitable size and scale to be able to tailor Place services at a neighbourhood level and represent efficient use of resources. Delivering at this local level will keep these serves rooted in the

communities they serve, ensuring that local priorities are met and ensuring clear connection with each unitary authority's engagement functions which engages with local voices.

The increased scale for services which would move from the current arrangements of up to six separate councils into three would provide notable advantages. This would enable some efficiencies for streamlining of management structures and rationalising systems. Moving to a larger scale of service would also support greater resilience for services such as Planning.

However, consideration must be given to the existing arrangements and contractual commitments. These would present challenges for the new unitary authorities. For services such as Waste in Ridgeway, Highways for West Berkshire and car park enforcement, there are existing contracts in place which would need to be continued. In these cases, councils would need to take longer-term approaches to rationalising services. There may be opportunities in the shorter term to unlock benefits such as coordinating operations, rationalising depots across new unitary authorities and optimisation of routes.

Development / Delivery of Homes

We need a delivery model across the 3UA geography which reflects the ambition to do better in terms of delivering homes, and affordable homes in particular, to all our residents.

We have set out above that we believe a modest level of green belt release is vital to delivering 40,000 new homes within a Greater Oxford geography, 16,000 more than the standard method will deliver. Additionally, the other two unitary authorities will deliver homes in line with the standard method.

We recognise that to achieve this ambition, we need a robust delivery model for Greater Oxford. We already have the appropriate vehicles in place to achieve these goals and a strong track record of housing development albeit within a much tighter and more constrained boundary. This provides a foundation for delivering a more ambitious programme across a wider Greater Oxford geography. This will allow the other two unitary authorities to focus on meeting housing need for their areas in line with standard method targets rather than needing to make additional sites available for Oxford's needs.

Oxford City Council has a substantial Housing Revenue Account (HRA), is a registered provider (RP) and a Homes England Investment Partner. We have a wholly owned housing company established in 2016 (OCHL trading as OX Place) that undertakes much of the direct delivery of affordable housing (itself or as the development agent for the HRA).

Our affordable housing team undertakes a clienting and commissioning role with OX Place; operates acquisition and small sites programmes to meet housing needs; operates the 'strategic housing and enabling' function – working strategically with RPs and providing housing supply expertise re s106s; manages funding and grant applications & tracking (including Homes England; Retained Right to Buy Receipts (RRTBRs); One Public Estate/Brownfield Land Release Fund, & LAHF); leads capital tracking & programme management; promotes CLH; and works with adjacent districts on strategic housing sites to meet unmet housing need.

Oxford City Council also has a strong record of demonstrating its commitment to place as a steward as well as a landowner through joint ventures with Nuffield, Grosvenor and Peabody in some of the

largest and most successful developments in the city. The benefits of being a developer as well as a facilitator means that Oxford City Council understands the nuances and commercials of development allowing Oxford to seize and leverage opportunities for the maximum wider benefit.

Within Oxford we have a target of delivering 1,600 affordable homes over a rolling four years and are on track to do so, albeit via some extremely challenging sites. Around 50% of the four-year programme is direct delivery by OCHL/HRA, 7% through the acquisition of small sites and the remainder through a 40% target on private schemes which come forward.

Sites across the rest of Oxfordshire are brought forward through the current district authorities housing delivery teams, and we expect this to continue.

In Ridgeway this includes a Temporary Accommodation (TA) landlord function. Large strategic sites including those in the Kennington/ Radley to Abingdon area (currently planned to mostly meet unmet need from Oxford), plus growth in Didcot and market towns. Ridgeway does not have an HRA and has few Council land holdings with functions predominantly focused on enabling and partnerships.

North Oxfordshire (through West and Cherwell), also undertake key enabling functions with partners RPs and developers. In West this is focused on large strategic sites including Salt Cross, Witney and Carterton. In Cherwell large strategic sites include Kidlington, Yarnton, Bicester and Banbury. Cherwell benefits from a small number of wholly owned development companies delivering individual sites.

Applying the new Standard Method across all authorities in Oxfordshire will represent a significant leap in delivery, with an intention to go further still in Greater Oxford. To ensure the capability and capacity is in place we expect all three unitary authorities to consider working with the new Mayor and/or central Government to create one or more Mayoral Development Corporation(s) (MDC) (or similar vehicle) to assemble land and capture the wider benefits. An MDC would also provide a basis to ensure land value capture across green belt release sites, which would allow for infrastructure-first development strategies, and a level of co-production and wealth retention in the local area to support work with local communities to effectively plan and deliver development to works for both existing and new residents.

Transport

There is near universal acknowledgement that the transport system in central Oxfordshire is in crisis – there is a clear priority to get people and traffic moving and to better connect surrounding areas as well as continuing to address air pollution. The County Council approach has not been a success in addressing this challenge.

Improving infrastructure across Oxfordshire and particularly those networks serving Oxford itself, as well as addressing congestion in surrounding market towns, is vital to achieving the levels of growth required to sustain the region over the next 30 years and to achieving agglomeration within Oxford, by supporting maximum growth in locations closest to the city.

In proposing a Greater Oxford unitary, we state that we must play a leading role in delivering transport change for our city. Poor quality transport infrastructure is currently a fundamental barrier

to growth. We will immediately undertake a review across all areas of transport policy. Over the last decade, various schemes have come forward through the County Council on an ad hoc basis. These have been well meaning but have lacked detail and an understanding of the interdependencies which exist between all parts of our transport ecosystem. We are clear that we must have a well thought out approach to reducing congestion in the city, and that doing nothing is not an option, but this must lead to a strategy which is fair to residents and does not penalise those living in our most deprived wards.

For Greater Oxford there is an opportunity to connect the area through a focus on transport policy and delivery of sustainable transport. The area's geography, the existing commercially viable bus services, high level of walking and cycling and work to improve rail services and station capacity provide a strong foundation to build upon. The approach will bring together transport with the approach to growth, community and health.

Oxford City Council has a strong track record in delivering significant improvements to the local transport system. This includes bringing forward the upgrade of Oxford Station and reopening of the Cowley Branch Line, introducing the UK's first Park and Rides and being a national leader in Electric Vehicle Infrastructure delivery. The Council also provides Taxi Licencing, maintains minor roads in the city using its LATCO Oxford Direct Services and provides verge maintenance for the whole city, so it is experienced in delivering operational work for transport. It has also led on successful changes to streets in the city: including temporary pedestrian-friendly experiments on George Street and Broad Street as well as more substantial resurfacing and public realm transformations of Market Street and St Michaels' Street. Oxford City Council has a good reputation as a supporter of active travel through involvement in projects such as Oxford Greenways and ZCOP – with 26% of commuting journeys made by bike (the second highest in the UK) thanks to the improvements to cycle infrastructure.

Case Study: Prioritising rail investment in the city - the Cowley Branch Line and Oxford Station

Working between government and the private sector to deliver transport infrastructure which will unlock up to 10,000 new jobs and homes [59]

The Cowley Branch Line (CBL) was closed to passengers in the 1960s and it has long been an ambition locally to have it reopen to serve the communities of Blackbird Leys, Greater Leys, Cowley, and Littlemore, as well as the many businesses at ARC Oxford (formally Oxford Business Park) and The Oxford Science Park.

Oxford Station was built in the 1970s as a temporary station that has never been fit for purpose. Its replacement is a major priority to improve the arrival into the city. As part of the development of the DfT-led Oxfordshire Rail Corridor Study (ORCS) in 2020, a long list of projects for interventions across Oxfordshire was produced with both Oxford Station and the Cowley Branch Line flagged as priority projects. However, DfT and Network Rail were clear that local funding was needed to move any projects forward.

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[59] [23 October 2025 HM Treasury Press Release](#)

The County Council (as transport authority) were not in a position to take forward either the station masterplan or the Full Business Case (FBC) for the Cowley Branch Line as priority projects, either in terms of leading the projects, or providing substantive funding. This is part of the understandable compromises that a larger authority is required to make with its capacity. The City Council therefore took the decision to step up, take the lead, and secure necessary funding to take forward these key priorities for the city. The County Council subsequently prioritised funding outside of the city, on a much longer-term opportunity, funding and leading the development of a Strategic Outline Business Case for the Witney-Carterton-Oxford rail corridor. Oxford City Council's ability to focus and prioritise the city's needs was key. Moving forward, this place-based delivery and partnership role will be vital, while strategic initiatives such as implementation of OxRail Plan will be for the MSA to take forward. For both the station and CBL, an innovative partnership led approach was needed to move this forward. The City Council was well placed given its close networks with local landowners and businesses to use its convening power to secure funds, alongside ensuring a close working relationship with County Council officers. Working with local landowners it secured funds to part fund 2 City Council officers, over £100k contribution to a masterplan for Oxford Station, and the bulk of the £4.7m needed to fund the Full Business Case (FBC) for the reopening of the Cowley Branch Line. The City Council commissioned Network Rail to complete the FBC, led the lobbying across Government departments, and secured at least £15m of contributions from the private sector. On the back of the strong business case, the City Council has approved additional funds to help deliver the scheme, and the County Council has now also come forward with substantial funding from the county's Enterprise Zone to fund the delivery phase.

On the strength of the FBC, the government has now announced £120m to fund the reopening of the Cowley Branch Line. Without Oxford City Council's leadership, ability to prioritise the needs of the city, and to use its networks to work in partnership over 4 years, we would not have got to this position. Furthermore, Network Rail has now announced it will be bringing forward the redevelopment of Oxford Station, with design work building from the initial masterplan starting in November, to take them through to a planning submission.

The re-opening of the Cowley Branch Line and creation of station at the Oxford Science Park has been praised for its improved and sustainable connection of these areas to the city and the wider Oxford Cambridge Growth Corridor. This was coupled with the announcement of a £10 billion expansion of the Ellison Institute of Technology in Oxford Science Park, which noted that the line would "help us attract world-class talent to EIT by linking up key innovation hubs with Central London via direct train services.60

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[60] [23 October 2025 HM Treasury Press Release](#)

Linking with the MSA

The specific challenges which face Oxford require a dedicated approach to delivery. However, this will form one part of a wider approach which provides support to the leading transport functions of the proposed Thames Valley MSA. The Strategic Authority will take on responsibility for publishing a comprehensive local transport plan. One unitary authority (1UA) and two unitary authority (2UA) models would not add value to that process – they would offer neither a local nor strategic perspective.

The 3UA model will complement that strategic role. Under the three unitary authorities approach, focus will be given within each unitary to the transport priorities of the city and market towns in those areas. This localised approach will allow listening to stakeholders and ensuring that proposals for development are accompanied by clear proposals for how infrastructure will serve communities and create improvements. This will mean a stronger relationship with communities, with deep partnership work seeing meaningful engagement and co-design around changes to transport. Overall, the three unitary authorities model can oversee transport in each of its specific areas - as well as linking to the wider strategic transport work of the MSA.

The reduction to bus services in 2016, which led to the loss of many services linking Oxfordshire villages to the towns and city, has resulted in an increased reliance on the car. Bus operators have confirmed that densification and agglomeration of housing around the Oxford will enable improved public transport services connecting surrounding villages into the city. The three authorities will work with the MSA to lobby central government to subsidise public transport initiatives across the geography to tackle road congestion generally but with a clear ambition for the longer-term delivery of a mass transit system for Greater Oxford.

North Oxfordshire and Ridgeway Council geographies are very different from Greater Oxford, with market towns and large rural hinterland dominating. They face challenges related to congestion and environmental impact of traffic within the market towns and villages, whilst much of the recent growth in the surrounding rural areas remains primarily car based with much of the public transport that remains requiring subsidy. Unitary Councils are therefore required to address these considerable challenges.

The countywide Milestone highway maintenance contract will continue to run beyond the formation of the unitary authorities. This will be managed for each unitary area on a collaborative basis. As this contract comes to an end there is the opportunity for the contract approach to be renewed, either based on successful working that has taken place or reshaped to focus on the priorities and needs of the areas.

The population growth and densification around Oxford proposed by the three unitary authorities model requires reducing the number of car journeys per household. There is also an advantage to the model of growth around Oxford rather than spreading this across the smaller villages: higher density growth in these areas creates a clear demand for improved bus services.

Crucial to further reducing reliance on cars will be planning and strengthening how towns and villages across Oxfordshire link together, working at a local level to best understand local priorities for transport. The three-authority model gives the best option to be able to develop deep

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understanding of local demands and develop solutions which are reliable and meet the requirements for movement in these areas.

Oxford and West Berkshire both have contractors providing maintenance on local roads. There will be opportunities to explore how these current arrangements can benefit the 3UA model through an expanded model to provide locally based responsive maintenance of the highway network to the whole of the Greater Oxford area.

Skills

Greater levels of jobs and sector growth expected in the 3UA, alongside significant new employment space, close to where people live, should then allow for a co-ordinated approach to the development of Community Employment and Procurement Plans, to support a joined up approach to the training and employment of local people at both construction and end user phases of developments, as well as support for the local supply chain. All with the aim of retaining more wealth and prosperity, locally.

County wide approaches to skills development over the last two decades have failed to deliver the interventions needed for all of Oxfordshire's residents to benefit from growth. New jobs have been created but remain out of reach for too many residents. Nowhere is this clearer than in Oxford itself, where a city of world-class innovation and prosperity also has 10 of its 83 neighbourhood areas ('Super Output Areas') among the 20% most deprived areas in England, causing deep polarisation. For a significant minority of residents, especially in our most deprived wards, the pathways into emerging opportunities remain closed. Without a new approach, the gap between those who benefit from Oxford's growth and those who are left behind will only widen.

This is why the emerging proposals for a Mayoral Strategic Authority (MSA) matter. An MSA will provide the regional oversight once held by LEPs, but with far greater accountability, devolved decision-making, and the budgets needed to act at scale.

Our delivery model will mean that top-down strategic approaches will combine with bottom-up delivery, ensuring both sides of the labour market equation are addressed: meeting employer demand and tackling the barriers faced by residents.

Oxford's prosperity masks the reality that for many residents, opportunity feels out of reach. Too many people grow up believing that the jobs and industries shaping the city's future are "not for them." Low aspirations combine with real and practical barriers: limited English, weak literacy and numeracy, and a high proportion of residents in some communities with no formal qualifications.
Even when people want to work, they are too often trapped in low-paid sectors such as care, leisure, or entry level roles, with few chances for progression.

In our most deprived wards, critical skills gaps persist. Non-native speakers face language barriers. Access to digital devices can be patchy, and digital literacy including use of AI is low. Pupils in some deprived wards struggle with overcrowded classrooms and weak GCSE attainment in English and maths. For too many, a lack of qualifications or confidence has left them disconnected from the knowledge economy on their doorstep.

Oxford's employers consistently report that they cannot recruit the skills they need from the local labour pool. The result is high vacancy rates, reliance on bringing workers in from outside Oxfordshire, and growth that risks bypassing local residents.

The skills gaps are clear: digital capability, green skills, specialist technical expertise in advanced manufacturing, life sciences and R&D, alongside customer service, hospitality, and the "soft skills" of communication, teamwork, and work readiness. Employers also face pressing skills shortages in construction, STEM, health and care, hospitality, and advanced manufacturing, roles that are critical both to Oxford's economy and to the daily functioning of the city.

The MSA will allow us to deliver change through joined-up model in each 3UA area.

With devolved powers each area can act as a commissioner for outcomes through a Procurement Framework, taking control of the Adult Education Budget locally and funding providers based on results such as moving people into jobs, progressing in work, and lifting their pay.

Key elements of each local delivery model would include:

- **One system, one pathway**: Create **one front door** (a single-entry point online and in community hubs) for residents and employers to access skills and jobs support; integrate community hubs, schools, and colleges into a single programme. Provide clear pathways from primary and secondary education through to FE, HE, and employment.
- **Data, evidence and market shaping**: Establish a Skills Observatory in each unitary to publish live labour market intelligence. Use employer feedback and real-time data to steer investment and commissioning. Grow training in priority sectors: digital, green, construction, health and care, advanced manufacturing, life sciences. Embed green and digital skills across all sectors.
- **Skills Compact:** Establish a Skills Compact with anchor institutions including schools to pool levy funds and guarantee apprenticeships, interviews, and Living Wage jobs and contracts for local businesses: Co-design training pathways with schools, colleges and businesses to match recruitment needs.
- **Planning and procurement:** Strengthen developer contributions to skills development (for example using the CEPP model as currently being delivered in Oxford) so every major development delivers training, apprenticeships, and local jobs: Pool developer contributions and align with community hubs and sector academies.
- **Sector academies and flagship projects**: Deliver dedicated training routes in growth sectors, supported by national programmes like Connect to Work. Expand Oxford Works, Green Skills Centre, and new apprenticeship hubs.
- **Place-based delivery:** Focus support in each unitary's most disadvantaged wards (in Oxford that would include Barton, Rose Hill, Blackbird Leys, Littlemore for example). Tailor training and outreach to meet the needs of residents who face the highest barriers to work.

We have developed a full delivery model for a Greater Oxford. Our proposal would be for each unitary to develop its own model to ensure the effectiveness of delivery through the MSA is maximises. The 1UA and 2UA models will fail to deliver this as they will simply replicate the regional oversight provided by the MSA.

Planning

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Currently the Development Management function is split into geographic areas, with an additional Team focussed on Major Schemes, concentrating skills and knowledge of dealing with complex and significant schemes in the city. In a 3UA model the geography-based team model will continue, and Majors team would retain their focus on (principally) employment sites with an additional team developed to focus on the delivery of the housing growth that will be enabled by our proposed green belt release.

Unitarisation provides benefits to the planning system by bringing disparate parts of the system (e.g. highways, education) as well as a single legal team and these benefits will be present at all scales. However, with strategic issues being elevated to MSA level, the 3UA ensures that greater focus can be given to local issues at an appropriate scale.

Heritage and design are critical issues in a historic city, and this team is complemented by the Oxford Design Review Panel – an independent design panel co-ordinated by the city, available as a paid service during pre-application discussions. This panel is unique in Oxfordshire and in the 3UA option will continue to provide an invaluable tool to ensure the highest quality of design in the new developments proposed across Greater Oxford.

Oxford's Planning Policy team have a track record of delivering pro-Growth Local Plans to address the need for housing, facilitating the employment growth potential of the city, whilst ensuring environmental sustainability. The immediate focus of the team in a Greater Oxford would be to deliver a comprehensive and robust green belt review, building on our high-level analysis identifying areas that should be released for the development the city needs, and an accompanying Plan that ensures releases deliver the local, regional and national benefits that a Greater Oxford can deliver.

Sustainability and Climate Action

Action to tackle climate change and protect and enhance the natural environment must be both strategic and local to be successful. The city of Oxford in particular - and Oxfordshire more widely - are already recognised as beacon areas for their work on environmental sustainability.

Oxford City Council has had a top 5 Climate Scorecard ranking for the last 3 years and was winner of the national LGC and MJ awards for Climate Leadership in 2023 and has a reputation for delivering innovation and major decarbonisation projects.[61] Oxfordshire County Council leads the Climate Scorecard rankings for county councils.

The climate teams across the proposed three unitary geography already work closely together. The City and District Councils each cover their own regulatory, core and relevant project functions suited to their demography and location, with Oxfordshire County Council providing a strategic function, particularly as the main funding recipient. West Berkshire Council combines both elements in its existing delivery.

The Zero Carbon Oxfordshire Partnership (ZCOP), established by Oxford City Council in 2021, links public, private and third sector organisations and successfully delivers significant environmental sustainability programmes.

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[61] Council Climate Scorecards

These strong foundations will ensure all three unitary authorities are well equipped to continue to demonstrate leadership in environmental sustainability work. It also ensures continuity in effective partnership working across the three unitary councils, and with the planned Thames Valley MSA geography.

The three unitaries have the resources, skills and expertise to manage key unitary workstreams including:

- **Regulatory functions**: air quality, land quality, flood mitigation, biodiversity & ecology (nature recovery, trees and canopy cover etc
- **Core functions**: local area energy planning, net zero delivery (own assets and area wide), electric vehicle infrastructure, energy efficiency and retrofit, climate adaptation
- **Project functions** (bespoke to area): such as Partnership working, nature recovery, innovation, heat networks, carbon off setting, community energy.

Given the scale of economic growth envisaged, Greater Oxford will require a specific focus on achieving sustainable outcomes. It also has additional unique challenges because of high levels of fuel poverty and high levels of ageing, poor energy efficient properties. Unitarisation will enable a focus on tackling buildings emission and working with the MSA to ensure that devolved funding (via Warm Homes etc) is targeted where it makes the most difference.

A three unitary approach will benefit local people. Enabling the right local focus of action and appropriate use of devolved funding, in relation to emissions and ability to influence. Climate leads across the Unitaries will continue to work together where there are shared areas of focus.

Regional and MSA work on environment

The climate teams in Oxfordshire have significant skills to support a wider local and regional strategic approach via the empowered Mayoral Strategic Authorities (MSAs), on an overarching ES Strategy, bringing the following expertise:

- Close climate partnership working through ZCOP which already involves the most influential organisations across Oxfordshire to act on carbon emissions and could readily be expanded to cover the Thames Valley.
- A track record of involvement in developing and delivering complex projects including Electric Vehicle Infrastructure delivery, Biodiversity Net Gain, flood mitigation and retrofit.
- Close links with regional, national and government organisations, such as Greater Southeast Net Zero Hub, DfT, DESNZ and with energy stakeholders (SSEN, NGET and RESP) working with them to unlock the grid constraints, restricting growth in Oxfordshire.
- Development of District Heat Network options for Oxford with key Partners (Universities, Hospital Trust & County Council) in preparation for heat zoning.
- Enabling the delivery of pipeline renewables schemes by supporting the MSA with strategic planning for solar farms and linking with energy infrastructure providers. A collective approach will also be taken to maximise community benefits via Great British Energy.

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Waste Services

Waste & recycling services are both a District and County function covering collection and disposal respectively. However, work to finalise a business case for integrating these operations is already well advanced, and involves four of Oxfordshire's six councils (City, WODC, CDC and County). Integrating and transforming waste operations across this geography offers the opportunity both for significant cost savings and increasing the proportion of recycling, even though Oxfordshire already has the highest rate of domestic recycling in England.

Under the three unitary councils' proposal, £63.5m of net benefit will be delivered in the first five years (by 2032/33), with an ongoing benefit of £14m per annum. This would be shared between Greater Oxford and Northern Oxfordshire Councils which would jointly own and operate the LATCo that delivers waste and environmental services across both council areas. More detail is outlined in Appendix F: Oxfordshire Waste & Environmental Services Transformation Programme (WESP).

Building Control

Building Control is already a district responsibility, and there are no direct county-level functions that lend themselves to integration in the way other areas do (i.e. Environmental Health and Trading Standards). The service does, however, work with county teams such as Highways and Fire & Rescue as statutory consultees. These partnerships are essential to the delivery of safe and compliant development, but they are distinct points of coordination rather than overlapping responsibilities.

The establishment of three new unitary councils nevertheless creates an opportunity to strengthen Building Control by consolidating services within larger, more resilient authorities. Each unitary will be able to deliver a single, locally accountable service with clearer oversight of building safety, access to a broader pool of professional expertise, and more consistent application of national building regulations. The three unitary model also secures Building Control remains closely connected with planning, housing and environmental services whilst being locally focussed. Crucially, this structure keeps Building Control rooted in the communities it serves, ensuring that local development needs and priorities are met while maintaining the capacity to respond to increasing regulatory demands and safeguard public confidence.

Regulatory Services (including Environmental Health and Residential Licensing)

The establishment of three new unitary councils in Oxfordshire provides a clear opportunity to align Environmental Health with Trading Standards, creating services that are both more efficient and more responsive to local needs. At present these functions are divided between tiers despite significant areas of overlap. For example, Environmental Health regulates food hygiene while Trading Standards covers food composition and labelling. Both investigate unsafe products, scams and unfair trading practices; and both work directly with businesses on compliance. This separation can create duplication, multiple points of contact, and the potential for gaps in enforcement.

Unifying these functions within each new unitary would deliver clearer accountability, streamlined processes, and better outcomes. For residents, this would mean a straightforward route for reporting concerns and stronger protection from unsafe housing, rogue traders or counterfeit goods. For businesses, it would provide a single source of advice and regulation across food law, product safety,

licensing and fair trading. The result would be reducing bureaucracy, supporting compliance, and ensuring that services reflect local circumstances and priorities.

Importantly, the three unitary structure allows each council to shape its service around the needs of its communities. This closer link to local priorities strengthens accountability and ensures that resources are directed where they will make the greatest difference. The wider advantages are equally significant. A locally rooted, combined service would be well placed to work with community safety and public health teams, as well as the Police and Crime Commissioner, on issues such as age-restricted sales, fraud prevention, air quality, tobacco control and infectious disease management.

Regeneration and Capital Programmes

At present, districts have distinct and individual approaches to delivering capital projects and regeneration more generally and for bidding for funds to progress schemes.

It is proposed that these remain unitary functions. The 3UA is the right geography for this approach – with each unitary having high aspirations for change backed up by strong regeneration proposals whether through new towns, science campuses, public realm programmes, transport infrastructure and housing and commercial schemes. Each of the proposed authorities has the scale and ambition of projects to benefit from in house Project Management function (PMOs) with local knowledge of regeneration and capital opportunities. Whilst we do not foresee this approach including a shared service across the three unitary authorities, we do see an opportunity for dialogue between services to make best use of resources.

Property

The City Council manages its extensive property portfolio in house with the use of agency/consultancy services where appropriate. The portfolio includes significant investment assets which are managed on a very commercial basis to maximise income. The three unitary authorities largely adopt this approach (but possibly with a reduced commercial emphasis) and can continue to do so.

The adoption of a unitary approach will doubtless bring opportunities to streamline the number of corporate assets such as community centres with inherent value created by way of capital receipt and development opportunities. The unitary model allows for shared services within buildings which means that properties are truly able to provide for the needs of different communities in a truly place based approach.

Green and Blue Spaces

OCC manages all its green and blue spaces internally with grounds maintenance and maintenance of facilities carried out by its wholly owned company. Although across the three unitary authorities some green spaces will be managed by parish councils, it is envisaged that each of the authorities would manage its other green and blue spaces in house. and there may be opportunities for savings through economies of scale across the authorities, particularly if ODS could expand its remit.

Facilities Management

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The Council provides FM services to all its corporate buildings and expects that the unitary approach supports this model across all options and that there may be opportunities for narrative with the other two authorities to reduce space and procure joint systems (booking for example).

6.2.6 Housing Services

The new unitary authorities' model would bring together a wide range of services into a comprehensive, system-wide solution with "no wrong front door" which would enhance the prevention-focused model. This would significantly drive efficiency and improve service delivery to prevent homelessness, avoiding cost to the public purse and ensuring better outcomes.

Our vision for a three unitary authority (3UA) structure would see housing, homelessness and commissioned based services rooted in prevention, building on examples of good practice that are well established and embedded across Oxfordshire. It will focus on early, targeted intervention – using data sources to effectively triage and then then better support single adults and families to ensure a person centric service across a wide range of activities including housing, mental health, substance misuse and adult and children social care services. Operating statutory homelessness over three unitary councils, on enlarged footprints from the current five teams (South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse already operate with one team), would deliver efficiencies and increased resilience with larger more specialised teams.

Case Study: Oxfordshire Homelessness Alliance

Cross-sector collaboration to end rough sleeping

The Oxfordshire Homelessness Alliance was established in 2022, in partnership between Oxford City Council, Oxfordshire County Council, the district councils and six leading providers: Homeless Oxfordshire, Connection Support, Elmore Community Services, Aspire, St Mungo's and A2 Dominion. The Alliance is a collective commitment to delivering integrated, person-centred support that breaks down silos across housing, health and social care to drive system-wide change to end rough sleeping.

Through this partnership, essential transformation work is underway across supported accommodation, outreach, and homelessness prevention services. This includes a shift from the traditional 'pathway' model of supported accommodation toward a housing-led approach, prioritising stability, long-term independence, and wraparound support. Rough sleeping levels in Oxford have remained steady, bucking the national trend, reflecting the strength of cross-sector partnerships, shared knowledge, and joint commissioning across the system.

Since the Alliance's formation, over 50 individuals have been successfully accommodated through Housing First across Oxfordshire, enabling some of the most vulnerable and entrenched individuals to access secure housing with holistic, multi-agency support.

Whilst the three areas have differing housing pressures the ethos of the service design will be consistent across the three authorities, whilst allowing for a more tailored approach responding to the different levels of demand and complexity of need.

Oxford has a different housing market to the wider county. It faces the most significant housing pressures, with high levels of both private and social rented housing, higher rents, greater areas of

deprivation and significant amounts of supported accommodation. Northern Oxfordshire and Ridgeway are in comparison more rural and have housing markets dominated by owner occupiers. For example, 144 households were accepted as homelessness in Oxford between January and March 25, compared to 23 in South Oxfordshire. 733 families and other households live in temporary accommodation across Oxfordshire and West Berkshire (June 2025), having a significant impact on these families and their children, at huge cost to local government. Oxford City Council holds the largest cost and has been recognised nationally as a beacon authority in developing programmes to mitigate the rise in temporary accommodation demand and costs, delivering £8.5 million in cost avoidance. Nonetheless, the annual pressure of TA costs are expected to rise up to £5.7m in two years, without further mitigation.

This approach to prevent demand would be coupled with an increase in housing supply from the three unitary authority model – with Greater Oxford delivering 40,000 new homes (of which 40% would be affordable), alongside the Heyford Park new town in Northern Oxfordshire and other settlements continuing to grow with home building appropriate to their local context and character. This supply side increase will help to meet housing demand and ensure, as Oxford's economy grows and produces more jobs, that there are enough homes to meet need, helping ensure affordability for local people and preventing further increases in homelessness .

 In terms of private sector housing, the service will align/interface with key private sector housing functions such as selective licensing and Houses of Multiple Occupation (HMO) standards to drive good quality private sector homes, critical to meeting the housing demand.

In line with the corporate focus on prevention, this service will work in close collaboration with the HRA (where relevant) and social housing landlord functions to manage any further increases in stock with a particular focus on reducing number in temporary accommodation and those waiting for permanent homes.

Greater Oxford Unitary will be a large social landlord with over 8,000 dwellings. The council will be a tenant focused landlord, continuing to invest in tenant's homes and services, ensuring compliance with the Social Housing Act and Consumer Standards. Services will be shaped by a strong, empowered tenant voice, helping ensure the council is a responsive and transparent social landlord.

Northern Oxfordshire would be a predominantly rural area, with larger owner occupier housing sector, and smaller private and social rented sectors. It would however contain the larger town of Banbury, and the rapidly growing urban area of Bicester. Homelessness pressures have been growing in both West Oxfordshire and Cherwell Councils in recent years, with increasing numbers in temporary accommodation, and higher rates of rough sleeping in Cherwell than the other Districts (excluding the City). Pockets of deprivation exist in Northern Oxfordshire, particularly in Banbury where three areas are in the top 20% most deprived nationally.

Ridgeway Council would also be a largely rural area, with larger towns being Abingdon, Didcot, Newbury and Thatcham, and includes the western Reading suburbs. The housing market will also be dominated by owner occupies, but with some concentrations of deprivation in areas such as Didcot, Newbury and Calcot. South and Vale Councils have historically had lower levels of homelessness and rough sleeping, but West Berkshire has more homelessness pressures and higher temporary accommodation use.

Northern Oxfordshire and Ridgeway also both have higher levels of renting from a housing association than Greater Oxford, but Greater Oxford has higher levels of renting from the council. Census data also shows that Greater Oxford has higher levels of overcrowded housing that both Northern Oxfordshire and Ridgeway.

Whilst demand in Northern Oxfordshire and Ridgeway for housing services is not of the scale of Greater Oxford the preventative and holistic service design would be a constant across the three areas.

Table 6.1: Housing indicators by unitary

Housing Indicators	No. of households	Indices of Multiple Deprivation – Average Score*	Private rented	Social rented	HHs in Temp. Accommodation	Housing Benefit claimants
Greater Oxford	**87,780**	**12.74**	**27%**	**17%**	**-**	**5%**
Northern Oxfordshire	**103,890**	**11.90**	**19%**	**14%**	**-**	**4%**
Ridgeway	**168,050**	**9.87**	**16%**	**14%**	**-**	**4%**
Cherwell	65,890	12.65	20%	13%	82	4%
Oxford	55,225	14.42	32%	21%	299	7%
South Oxfordshire	61,480	8.55	16%	12%	50	3%
Vale of White Horse	57,490	9.47	16%	14%	73	3%
West Oxfordshire	47,990	10.15	18%	13%	79	3%
West Berkshire	66,650	11.05	17%	14%	150	4%

*higher score indicates that an area is experiencing higher levels of deprivation. Indices of Multiple Deprivation 2025.

Case Study: Temporary Accommodation
Working holistically to prevent homelessness

Oxford is facing a housing crisis, with a shortage of homes driving up private sector rents by 11.7% annually (ONS), this is leading to growing homelessness acceptance rates, more than doubling in 2 years, and putting increasing pressure on temporary accommodation. Oxford City Council has responded with a comprehensive and holistic strategy to meet rising homelessness demand, focused on prevention, better quality temporary accommodation, and faster move on to a permanent home

This has led to an expansion of the Council's homelessness prevention service focused on keeping people in their home when possible, a multipronged approach to increasing temporary accommodation stock through purchases and working in partnership with private and social housing providers, and a focus on moving people on into affordable private rented homes. The team has

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delivered impressive results: 241% increase in homelessness prevention, doubling of temporary accommodation stock, and over 100 successful private rental lets in a year. Their work provides a blueprint for other local authorities striving for effective, forward-thinking solutions to homelessness.

6.2.7 Citizens Services

Public Health

Public Health functions in England are defined by the Health and Social Care Act 2012, assigning local authorities the statutory responsibility to improve health and reduce inequalities. Core statutory responsibilities include promoting healthier lifestyles, preventing disease, and addressing wider determinants such as housing, employment, and education. The public health data-led preventative approach supports the wider operating model. The three unitary authority (3UA) model proposes bringing together wider public health services such as housing, leisure, revenues and benefit services to ensure it is easier for people to get the help they need earlier.

A key requirement is appointing a Director of Public Health (DPH), who leads strategy and produces an independent Annual Public Health Report. Health protection duties involve preparing for infectious disease outbreaks and environmental hazards in collaboration with UK Health Security Agency (UKHSA) and Local Resilience Forums. As currently, there will be two DPH's, one for Ridgeway and a joint post between Greater Oxford and Northern Oxfordshire.

Public health leadership integrates with council governance via the Health and Wellbeing Board, Joint Strategic Needs Assessment, and Joint Health and Wellbeing Strategy, while collaborating closely with Integrated Care Systems (ICS).

Services focus on health improvement (e.g., smoking cessation, mental health promotion), health protection, children's services, sexual health, substance misuse, and NHS commissioning support. Delivery is through a mix of in-house teams, NHS providers, commissioned external partners, and voluntary sector organisations, with strong cross-sector collaboration to address social determinants of health.

Physical activity, exercise or activity related community rehabilitation is recommended in 98 NICE clinical and condition specific guidelines and quality standards. 72% of people with Long-Term Health Conditions (LTHCs) say that the NHS is the most trusted source of physical activity advice however only 16.6% of GPs are broadly to very familiar with the CMO physical activity guidelines. Joining services and supporting a holistic view of Public Health is an opportunity to create a system which better supports wider determinants of health to both improve long term health conditions and reduce their onset.

Case Study: Move Together

Joint regional activity pathway improving health and reducing health service pressures

Move Together is a nationally recognised physical activity pathway for adults living with long term health conditions, and a joint venture between Oxfordshire County Council Public Health, Buckinghamshire, Oxfordshire and Berkshire West Integrated Care Board, County Sports Partnership and City and District Councils. During the 24/25 reporting year Move Together continued to show a critical role in not only improving people's health but reducing pressure on the health system with a reported 43% fewer GP appointments, a 22% reduction in 111/Out of Hours demand and a 15.11 Quality Adjusted Life Years (QALY) gain across all participants.

Leisure Services

Leisure Services form part of the 3UA early intervention and prevention understanding that leisure centres can have a wider role in wellbeing and should help prevent ill-health through inclusive offers, social prescribing and location of services.

Sport England are promoting a vision in which local authority leisure moves beyond simply offering gym/swim classes to taking a broader in supporting people's overall wellbeing. This means integrating physical activity with health, social care, mental health, prevention and community outcomes. The 3UA preventative and community-focused model would continue this approach across all three unitaries.

Greater Oxford is in year two of a new 10-year Leisure Services contract in 2024 with Serco and More Leisure Community Trust. Provision across the other authorities is mixed across inhouse and external provision, including Greenwich Leisure Limited, Everyone Active and Parkwood Project Management. Length of contract varies across each council but within a reasonable timescale each unitary would be able to enjoy a single leisure offer. Each new footprint will be able to offer a greater range of services.

There will be good potential for longer term savings after re-contracting at end of each contract term. There could also be savings through the use of alternative delivery models. Investment in concessionary access for those on the lowest incomes can have a significant impact on health and wellbeing.

Culture and Heritage

Building on the strong current cultural, arts and heritage offer the 3UA proposal will support direct service delivery but also support cross-sector joint working, especially with the voluntary and community sector.

Cultural and heritage services will be delivered in each area, with models adapted to the needs of urban and rural populations and making best use of available assets, including outdoor venues. Using established locality-based working that is rooted in communities and already part of the Voluntary and Community Sector network, they will continue to grow community capacity and a sustainable cultural offer that is flexible, modern and relevant to the communities being served.

Inclusive access, whether through peripatetic offerings to rural areas or reflecting demographic diversity in urban areas, will be at the heart of the service. Identity and belonging will be reflected in the service priorities, ensuring continuity for traditions like May Morning, St Giles Fair and Abingdon bun throwing that bring people together with a positive sense of place. The established Cultural Partnership and Cultural Education Partnership will continue across all three councils, led by Greater Oxford, with an aim to set up a Cultural Compact for the Combined Mayoral Authority. Ultimately, boosting economic success and well-being, improving community cohesion and integrating culture into regional and local planning.

A small core shared library service will be maintained across the three councils for book depository, library care and management ICT systems. The assets and teams that run the libraries would transfer to each council. The central library at Westgate will be accessible to all citizens and reciprocal

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arrangements would be made to enable Ridgeway and Northern Oxfordshire citizens to use other Greater Oxford libraries and vice versa.

The Museum Service would be led by North Oxfordshire Council with their base at the Oxfordshire Museum in Woodstock and there would be service level agreements, as there are currently, with other local authorities to share collections, storage and expertise.

6.2.8 Community Safety

The three unitary model will enhance the work of the Community Safety Partnership, a statutory partnership brought together by the Crime and Disorder Act 1998 to identify local community safety priorities and developing plans to address them. Oxfordshire and Berkshire local authorities work closely with Thames Valley Police and the Thames Valley Police and Crime Commissioner on setting priorities and plans for Community Safety Partnership (CSP) area. This statutory arrangement would continue in each unitary area.

There is an important intersection between community safety and child and adult safeguarding, and homelessness. As the area within the three unitary geographies with both the highest level of homelessness and with a largest proportion of residents in council housing, Oxford has enjoyed strong partnership arrangements with organisations and teams involved in managing behaviour and providing the right support. This close collaboration will continue under a Greater Oxford Council, with parallel arrangements in each of the other unitary councils, though proportionate to their lower levels of need.

Overview of the service model

The establishment of three new unitary councils creates an opportunity to strengthen the Community Safety Service aligning a wider range of linked services:

- The Community Safety Partnership
- Anti-Social Behaviour Investigation Team
- Community Response Team and environmental enforcement
- Trading Standards
- Taxi and Alcohol Licensing Team
- Emergency Planning
- Modern slavery and adult exploitation coordination
- CCTV system management
- Corporate safeguarding policy and practice, supporting the Multi-Agency Safeguarding Arrangements (MASA)

The Community Safety Service will build on its work with local Parish Councils to implement interventions to reduce crime and disorder in neighbourhoods and local communities. The well-established collaboration between Oxfordshire local authorities and local Neighbourhood Policing Teams will be enhanced in all the three unitary council areas, recognising the differing community safety challenges in each area.

Trading Standards, Licencing and Environmental Health

Trading Standards would be brought into the Community Safety Service, enhancing the opportunities with our licensing and environmental health officers to focus on the local issues of most concern to our communities. This would include more activities targeting underage sales of cigarettes, alcohol, vapes and knives and greater join-up of our regulatory powers to disrupt those that trade in counterfeit goods or sell to children.

The taxi, alcohol, gambling, late-night entertainment and other licensing authority functions will be extended to incorporate applicants in the Greater Oxford area. The well-established NightSafe partnership approach to managing the night-time economy will roll-out into neighbouring towns, addressing alcohol-related crime and disorder.

Joint Oxfordshire-wide approach

A pan-Oxfordshire Prevent Delivery Board will deliver the Prevent Duty and support partners and businesses in meeting the requirements of the Terrorism (Protection of Premises) Act 2024, "Martyn's Law". The Channel Panel safeguarding arrangements would be administered by social care teams within the authority.

The emergency planning function will build upon and strengthen the existing Thames Valley Local Resilience Forum and single Oxfordshire Joint Oxfordshire Resilience Team. A shared resource among the three unitary councils will ensure the continued integrated and effective response to regular emergencies experienced across Oxfordshire and the wider Thames Valley, such as flooding events. Emergency planning lead officers would remain within the two other unitary councils.

Domestic abuse and drug and alcohol services are currently commissioned jointly in Oxfordshire. A lead unitary authority will continue this partnership approach, ensuring local needs are recognised and addresses whilst attaining efficiencies from commissioning at scale.

Multi-Agency Safeguarding Arrangements (MASA) will continue with the current Oxfordshire Adult Safeguarding Board and Oxfordshire Children Safeguarding Partnership providing multi-agency oversight and governance as set out in statute. A lead authority will provide business unit support to these partnership arrangements. Lead safeguarding policy officers within each authority will represent the authorities in the boards and their subgroups, and lead on the implementation of policy and practice within each area.

Impact on Staffing

Overall, existing resource levels will be maintained across the three unitary authorities for the community safety functions, due to the specialist and often professionally accredited nature of different roles. However, efficiencies will be achieved through linking complementary activities such as environmental enforcement, statutory nuisance, business regulation and licensing, as well as through the integration of systems used to identify risks and manage responses. This will lead to an overall increase in community safety capabilities deployed.

Fire and Rescue Services

Fire and Rescue Services in the Thames Valley are currently run by three separate Fire and Rescue Authorities: Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes Fire Authority (combined fire authority); Royal Berkshire Fire and Rescue Service (combined fire authority); and Oxfordshire (county council fire and rescue service). Swindon forms part of the Dorset and Wiltshire (combined fire authority).

While the different Thames Valley fire services operate independently, with the current exception of Swindon the geography shares a strong programme of collaboration which includes the handling of 999 calls, mobilising of fire engines, procurement, fire investigation and operational response, with a joint control room that has been operational across Berkshire, Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire since 2015

Oxfordshire Fire and Rescue Service deliver effective operations throughout Oxfordshire which link with the Oxfordshire Police area.

The English Devolution White Paper and accompanying Bill are clear that Mayors are accountable for the exercise of Fire and Rescue Authority functions where fire and rescue service and MSA boundaries align. At the time of drafting this proposal Oxfordshire, Berkshire and Swindon councils are developing an Expression of Interest proposal to Government for the creation of a Thames Valley MSA. Therefore, while there is not yet an agreed path to the establishment of an MSA, arrangements for Fire and Rescue Services are proposed in anticipation of its creation.

Under the three unitary authorities' proposal a Combined Fire and Rescue Authority would be established on a temporary basis to cover the Oxfordshire geography, providing oversight for an unchanged Oxfordshire Fire and Rescue Service. This would ensure a firm foundation in which to offer a straightforward transition to a future Thames Valley Fire and Rescue Service.

Local experience in neighbouring Berkshire and Hampshire demonstrates how Combined Fire and Rescue Authorities covering several council areas can operate effectively.

No changes to the operation of Oxfordshire Fire and Rescue Service are put forward within the unitary proposal, other than those already being developed to improve its operational effectiveness.

6.2.9 Enabling Services

The proposed model sees many of these services delivered separately by each unitary council to give flexibility and efficiency. A shared service approach could be considered where this enhances customer experience and financial efficiency. This approach balances efficiency with local responsiveness, ensuring services benefit from the right systems, expertise and governance, while providing clarity for residents and making it easier for them to access services.

Within each unitary council, a unified ICT and Digital infrastructure will underpin a single digital workplace, enabling collaboration, standardisation, and innovation. HR and Organisational Development will lead cultural integration and workforce transformation, embedding a shared identity and high-performance culture. Strategy, Policy, and Data functions will support evidence-based decision-making and strategic alignment across the new authorities.

Customer Services will combine a digital first approach with community-based touch points, improving access and experience for residents while reducing costs, supported by a digital-by-design Communications team to enable and improve access to services.

Legal, Audit, and Democratic Services will ensure robust governance and accountability, with consistent support for elected members and statutory functions.

There will be opportunities for shared services, service alignment and other efficiencies in areas including library depositary and lending functions, and museum and cultural services.

This model will deliver financial benefits through streamlined management, shared systems, and improved purchasing power. It will also enable the new authorities to manage contractual transitions effectively and take advantage of commercial opportunities.

The transformation of enabling services will support the delivery of high-quality, resident-focused services, close budget gaps, and ensure the new councils are equipped to meet the challenges and opportunities of the future.

Further detail on local context and constraints across Oxfordshire that we have considered in the model development, as well as further blueprint detail on the recommended Enabling Services operating model can be found in Appendix G.5.

6.3 Council Size and Structure

Portfolios and responsibilities

The blueprint for the governance of the new unitary authorities will be based on the government's preferred Leader and Cabinet model. This is already proven effective within all the councils across Oxfordshire and West Berkshire.

Under this model, executive authority will be concentrated in a Leader supported by up to nine Cabinet Members, each responsible for a coherent cluster of functions designed to reflect the full span of single-tier responsibilities.

Decision-making and delegation

Governance arrangements are already broadly similar among the existing councils across the Oxfordshire and West Berkshire geography, and so the approach to decision-making and delegation within each of the three unitary councils is expected to follow a common model:

A regular meeting of full Council to determine budgetary and policy decisions will be held every two months, with a meeting in May for the annual election of the Chairs and Vice-Chairs. Under its city charter, Oxford elects Civic Office roles including the Lord Mayor, Deputy Lord Mayor and Sheriff. These civic and ceremonial functions will be retained and clearly defined under any new Greater Oxford Council arrangement to safeguard the city's historic identity and continuity of tradition. Emphasis should be placed on preserving the symbolic continuity of civic leadership while ensuring it becomes more inclusive and representative of all communities across Greater Oxford.

Ceremonial and symbolic functions across the wider Oxfordshire area will be safeguarded through charter trusteeship or equivalent provisions, ensuring that historic rights, insignia, and civic property are maintained. These roles are non-political and focus on promoting civic pride, community engagement, and the preservation of local heritage.

The Lord-Lieutenant, as a county-level Crown-appointed role, would need to be hosted by one of the successor councils, most appropriately Greater Oxford, as a shared ceremonial function across the county. This arrangement would maintain continuity in representing the Crown and align with precedents established following other local government reorganisations.

This proposal recognises the important role that the Lord Lieutenancy plays in the ceremonial county of Berkshire, and will seek to continue with the existing arrangements there as well.

Meetings will be held in February to determine Council's annual budget. These meetings will also be an opportunity for Members to introduce motions and ask questions to the Cabinet outside of their regular meetings.

A detailed scheme of delegation will be developed for each Cabinet Member to support agile and proportionate decision-making. This will ensure that decisions can be taken within their remit between Cabinet meetings.

Cabinet itself will be reserved for matters of cross-cutting or strategic significance, enabling it to operate as a genuinely collective body. Regular meetings will be held on a monthly cycle, supplemented by joint shareholder and partnership groups where commercial ventures or shared services require oversight. The combination of clear delegation, visible leadership, and a forward plan of Cabinet business will give residents a transparent understanding of who is responsible for what and will allow scrutiny committees to target their oversight accordingly.

Scrutiny and accountability

Balanced against strong executive leadership, the councils will embed a comprehensive and multi-layered system of scrutiny and accountability.

A primary scrutiny committee will meet monthly, complemented by two standing committees focused on Education and Young People, and Health and Wellbeing. Each will meet on a bi-monthly cycle. These committees will be supported by working groups established to examine specific areas in greater detail, such as housing and homelessness, finance and performance, or climate and environment. The system will retain the power to call in executive decisions, commission reviews, and draw evidence from residents and partners. Importantly, scrutiny will not only be backward-looking but also proactive, engaging with policy proposals at an early stage, commissioning reviews, and linking directly with local area committees to ensure that community voices are embedded in the decision-making process rather than consulted after the fact.

Alongside scrutiny, the councils will retain the statutory regulatory committees needed for planning, licensing, audit, standards, and appointments. These will be reviewed to ensure that schemes of delegation and call-in thresholds strike the right balance between workload management and robust oversight, particularly in planning, where councillors are often heavily involved. Proposals will also be developed to ensure that NACs can feed into planning processes earlier, strengthening engagement at a very local level and building legitimacy. Where services are shared across unitary authorities,

joint committees will provide democratic oversight, avoiding duplication and reinforcing accountability across boundaries.

Democratic Support

Given the move to a single tier of local government, councillors must be able to respond to a wider range of elector interests and needs than under the current two-tier system. To ensure members can continue to provide effective representation, the councils will invest in enhanced democratic support.

The Committee and Member Services team would be serviced by up-to 8 full time officers, comprising of a Committee and Member Services Manager, to have oversight and responsibility of the service, a Scrutiny and Governance Manager, to lead the Scrutiny function of the Council, and to act as a formal deputy for the Committee and Member Services Manager. Three Scrutiny and Governance Advisors will support the enhanced Scrutiny function, including supporting the committees, working groups and commissioned reviews. Three Committee and Member Services Officers will clerk and support all other committees. The whole team would have responsibility for Member Support, including being a first point of contact for IT, Councillor development, expenses and any committee guidance.

Given the consolidation from seven to three separate Democratic Services structures across the new unitary councils, efficiency savings are likely compared with current resourcing levels, subject to detailed design considerations.

Councillor numbers and interim boundaries

Administrative boundaries and councillor numbers have been proposed in accordance with the Local Government Boundary Commission for England's statutory criteria of electoral equality, community identity and effective governance. In addition, proposed councillor numbers for Ridgeway and Northern Oxfordshire are based on discussions with council leaderships across the entire geography of Oxfordshire, and represent the expressed democratic preferences of neighbouring authorities.

While the precise number of councillors will be centrally determined, the authorities anticipate that one councillor will represent between 2,117 and 3,525 electors, broadly consistent with comparator authorities Slough, Swindon, Milton Keynes, Dorset, and Nottingham.[62] To ensure that a reduced cadre of councillors does not result in a democratic deficit, members will be made more visible and better supported. Enhanced casework support will be matched with fair remuneration that reflects the scale of the role, and clear pathways will be established for councillors to progress into leadership or specialist non-executive positions. Emphasis will be placed on encouraging applications from underrepresented groups, including younger people and women, with measures such as flexible meeting times, hybrid and digital participation, and development opportunities designed to make the role accessible and sustainable, whether undertaken on a full-time or part-time basis.

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[62] North Yorkshire Council: Council Size Submission

Table 6.2: Baseline Cllr. Numbers

Current Authority	Current Councillor Numbers
Oxford City Council	48
South Oxfordshire District Council	36
Vale of White Horse District Council	38
Cherwell District Council	48
West Oxfordshire District Council	49
West Berkshire Council	43
Oxfordshire County Council	69
Total	**331**

Table 6.3: Proposed Cllr. Numbers [63]

Emerging Authority	Current Councillor No. Equivalent	Cllr: Electorate Ratio (Baseline)	Emerging Authority	Cllr: Electorate Ratio (Proposed)	Proposed Councillor No Equivalent
Greater Oxford	92	1:1657	Greater Oxford	1: 2,117	72
Northern Oxon	112	1:1653	Northern Oxon	1: 3,428	Up to 54
Ridgeway	127	1:2442	Ridgeway	1: 3,525	88
Total	**331**				**Up to 214**

In accordance with Government and LGBCE guidance, the three proposed unitary councils for Oxfordshire will initially operate under interim warding arrangements. These arrangements are designed to ensure democratic continuity from vesting day, while providing a clear and flexible framework for refinement through a comprehensive boundary review to follow.

The LGBCE advises that, where local government reorganisation occurs before a full review can be completed, interim arrangements should be based on existing county divisions, district wards, and parish boundaries. This approach ensures that early elections take place on familiar, administratively workable geographies, maintaining broad electoral balance and reflecting the structure of existing communities.

In line with this guidance, the following interim arrangements are proposed to preserve local identity and community coherence while ensuring effective and proportionate representation:

- **Greater Oxford** will build upon the existing Oxford City structure, maintaining two-member wards and extending the footprint to incorporate adjacent suburban and peri-urban communities such as Kidlington, Botley, and Wheatley. This approach seeks to preserve community cohesion while accommodating growth within a coherent metropolitan geography.

- **Ridgeway**, comprising South Oxfordshire, the Vale of White Horse, and parts of West Berkshire, will adopt a flexible hybrid model derived from existing county boundaries and

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[63] The proposed councillor numbers have been developed jointly with the teams working on the 1UA and 2UA models, ensuring shared assumptions and a consistent approach.

unitary wards. Specifically, South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse councils have indicated a preference for using current county divisions, while West Berkshire would utilise a mix of single- and double-member wards to reflect local geography and representation needs. This pattern balances effective representation across large rural areas with the distinct identities of market towns such as Didcot and Wantage.

- **Northern Oxfordshire**, covering Cherwell and parts of West Oxfordshire, will use a hybrid model based on existing county divisions. Urban areas such as Banbury and Bicester will be represented by multi-member wards, while smaller rural settlements will retain single-member divisions, ensuring both accessibility and local accountability.

Following vesting day, the LGBCE will be invited to undertake a comprehensive electoral review, rationalising boundaries across parish and community lines, incorporating updated population data, and confirming long-term arrangements consistent with its statutory criteria of electoral equality, community identity, and effective governance.

In the interim, the proposals outlined above provide a stable, equitable, and locally grounded framework, aligned with the expressed democratic preferences of neighbouring authorities, for the first elections to the new unitary councils, while laying firm foundations for a refined electoral map through the full LGBCE review.

Electoral Cycles

For Greater Oxford, the current system of biannual elections will be retained to preserve continuity and stability, to reflect a councillor demographic drawn from diverse backgrounds and full-time employment, and to enhance accountability by allowing residents to respond to the authority's performance in near real time.

There is strong local political will and clear justification for maintaining this cycle. Retaining elections by halves aligns with the proposal's core principles of inclusivity and growth ambition, ensuring that public service as a councillor remains accessible to those balancing professional and community commitments. Importantly, there is no legal barrier to continuing this arrangement, as the relevant legislation does not prescribe electoral cycles and allows flexibility for locally justified approaches.

For Northern Oxfordshire and Ridgeway, an all-out election model will be adopted, in line with the practice of many comparable unitary councils, including Cumberland, Somerset, and North Yorkshire.

Together, these arrangements represent a balanced and pragmatic approach combining regular democratic renewal and responsive local accountability in Greater Oxford with the stability and strategic focus needed for the larger and more rural areas of Oxfordshire to deliver effectively on long-term priorities.

Outside appointments

Finally, the role of councillors as representatives beyond the chamber will remain central to the governance model. Members will continue to serve on outside bodies, including community associations, local trusts and charities, and strategic partnerships. Appointments will be guided by

clear principles: they must support the council's corporate policy objectives, preserve important community or historical ties, meet statutory requirements, or allow the authority to influence policy at regional and national levels. Strategic partnerships will typically be represented by Cabinet Members, while ward councillors will take on community-level appointments, ensuring that both strategic influence and local presence are maintained.

Taken together, this model of governance, scrutiny, and representation provides a long-term structure that is both efficient and resilient. It balances strong executive leadership with robust accountability, ensures councillors are well supported to represent larger electorates, and embeds local community voices within the decision-making process. It reflects the government's preferred approach, is consistent with LGBCE guidance, and builds on proven practice from Oxford and comparable unitary authorities.

Community engagement and neighbourhood empowerment

A more empowered decision-making role for portfolio holders, in addition to increased support and capacity building for members, will enable them to fulfil their community leadership and representative function more effectively. But we recognise that re-thinking the scale and function of local government requires a considered and embedded approach to local engagement and community empowerment, which doesn't begin and end with elected councillors in a unitary authority.

West Berkshire already has well-established and close partnership working with its 62 parish councils facilitated by a twice-yearly District Parish Conference. Certain powers are available to be devolved to Town and Parish Councils if requested. This successful partnership working model can be extended across the rest of the new Ridgeway unitary area.

Scaling up Greater Oxford to a size that will allow it to effectively make strategic decisions for the benefit of the city and neighbouring towns and villages, necessarily means considering stakeholders over a wider geography. Similarly, the creation of new unitary authorities across Northern Oxfordshire and Ridgeway will need a direct link to the already-existing local councils and community organisations already active in service delivery and community engagement. Ensuring that the very local voice can be heard effectively in decision-making and service delivery needs to be part of the institutional design of the new authorities.

This is to support meaningful localism, but also because we know that communities and local partners have a key role to play in embedding preventative ways of working in the new authority from the first day. We know that collectively working towards community-centred solutions is the best way to unlock the best outcomes for our people, and the new authority needs to bake this into its design.

We also know that creating a new unitary authority doesn't mean starting from nothing. We recognise the importance of already existing local organisations, ways of working, and social connections that underpin civic and community life across Oxfordshire. We know that local communities care deeply about their places and want to be more involved. Our approach will be to strengthen relationships where they already exist and build them where they don't.

The way we propose to do this, across all three of the proposed new unitary authorities, is through the government's preferred vehicle of Neighbourhood Area Committees.

Neighbourhood Area Committees

We envision NACs as having a dual role: as an enabler of local community activity for preventative ends, and as a body with some formal democratic role and power in and of itself, that gives voice to the interests of distinct communities within each unitary area.

Joining these core functions in the same vehicle brings some challenges, which will need to be carefully considered. The NACs will need to interact with local communities in ways that complement and support existing activity and capacity, rather than crowding it out. They must also provide a consistent framework that works across different places and communities, recognising that each will bring its own strengths and challenges. At the same time, they will have to integrate participatory and relational practices with the representative democratic structures of the council and with the legal and bureaucratic processes that underpin decision-making.

We recognise that creating a new body that will be an important focus for local community and partnership working will require meaningful input from stakeholders and residents to ensure it is fit for purpose. At this stage, we are proposing a set of design principles which will guide the design of this new vehicle, subject to detailed stakeholder input at the appropriate time.

Democratic representation and engagement Design Principles

Table 6.4: Assessment against Demographic Representation and Engagement Design Principles

Principle	Rationale
NACs should act as a link between local community activity and the new authority	Building and deepening relationships between actors at a very local level and the new authority could be facilitated through a dedicated link body. Having a clear and consistent approach across the new authorities would help community partners (including town and parish councils) navigate the system and build relationships. A link with scrutiny and into other decision-making bodies will enable community voice to be bought into council processes.
NACs should build on and support what already happens in places	Community activity is 'messy' in that it coalesces around particular individuals and organisations – trying to generate it based around a structure imposed from top down won't work. It needs to respond to already existing energy. In this way some of the functions of the NAC will be driven by community priorities. Already existing local partnerships will be key links to established networks.
NACs should act as an enabler and incubator of community activity	Unlocking latent community capacity can act as the gateway to community-based solutions to local challenges. Bringing community partners and actors together through the NAC can maximise what is already happening through, e.g. mapping activity and information sharing, capacity building and strengthening local partnership working. This will require dedicated resourcing to become meaningful.

NAC's enabling function should be paired with a formal governance role	To provide a direct link between community engagement and strategic governance, and to generate credibility and an incentive to engage, NACs should have *some* formal decision-making power over matters affecting the local area. This should include an element of expenditure. Ensuring that communities are not tangled up in governance requirements will be a key consideration for detailed design and implementation.
NACs formal governance role should support participation in local decision-making and service delivery	While not assuming direct responsibility for local service delivery, NACs should enable participation in local service delivery and decision making. Acting as the key link organisation between communities and the authority will facilitate this. This could include, but not be limited to, facilitating co-production and co-design of council services, facilitating engagement in spatial planning or placemaking, playing a scrutiny and advisory role by holding service providers to account and making sure delivery is well-coordinated.

Embedding and empowering NACs

To embed NACs and make them a meaningful vehicle for community engagement and empowerment will require answering several key questions, to be developed in a collaborative process with communities and partners, including town and parish councils, during the shadow authority phase aligning to the principles proposed:

Scale and geography

An appropriate geography and scale for NACs will need to be defined. They will need to be close enough to the ground to have deep insight into granular community issues, while recognising that the three unitary system inherently increases local voice by virtue of its scale.

At the same time, there needs to be a number that is manageable and not an administrative burden on the new authority. There will need to be a coherent relationship with existing ways of working and networks, preserving what matters most to residents, as well as their relationships.

Oxford City Council's current neighbourhood-based way of working, the Locality Approach, aligns its geographies with local Primary Care Networks (PCN). This creates a consistent geography among healthcare providers and council services involved in community outreach, building partnership networks with deep local knowledge and relationships. The government's aspirations to move towards community-based services, delivered at a neighbourhood scale defined around PCN geographies, mean this is a natural starting point for defining our NAC geographies, as it reinforces already-existing local networks and preventative ways of working. Government's intentions to establish Neighbourhood Health Centres as a one-stop-shop in every community which co-locates NHS, local authority and voluntary sector further bolsters the case for proposing a geography at this scale.

As such, our starting point for proposing NAC geographies will be in line with this, serving a population of c. 50,000 people each. On the current PCN footprints in Oxfordshire, this gives a working assumption of c.21 NACs across the county area. We propose this as a scale which strikes the right balance between consistency of approach across partners and networks, very-local connection, and light-touch administration. As the new governance arrangements are developed throughout the

implementation process, the scale of the NACs will be kept under review to ensure that this balance is indeed the right one.

Formal governance

Governance arrangements for the NACs will need to be carefully considered. Ensuring that NACs are constituted with some decision-making power, with the authority to influence local priorities and spend is important to make them more than tokenistic. As a genuine decision-making body, they will need some formal checks and balances to ensure democratic safeguards are in place. The right balance between elected and co-opted members in any formal decision-making function will need to be carefully considered.

Checks and balances should not be so onerous as to create a barrier to participation by community groups. Opportunities for participation which are informal and don't require stringent qualifying criteria should also be part of the design. An 'informal' function should enable, not restrict, broad and diverse community involvement.

Resourcing

To make NACs effective and sustainable, they will be provided with sufficient resources for both capacity building and direct investment in local priorities. Early identification of funding sources and establishing fair, transparent budgeting will be key parts of their design, enabling communities to act with confidence and ambition.

7 Implementation Map

7.1 Future state

Implementing LGR in Oxfordshire is a complex and ambitious undertaking. It presents a rare but vital opportunity to reshape local government around the real geographies of how people live, work and move, creating three distinct unitary authorities (3UA) that are better placed to deliver growth, prevention and innovation. Through doing this the new authorities will be able to create new relationships with their communities and partners to work together on local priorities collaboratively.

Change of this scale demands strong leadership and vision, firmly grounded in a realistic and practical approach. The councils leading implementation must balance ambition with discipline, protecting critical services while creating the conditions to realise the full benefits of reform. This implementation map sets out how the three unitary authorities will prepare, resource and deliver the transition, guided by a clear vision and design principles.
The roadmap to delivery includes designing services focused on residents and local needs, with flexibility to reflect the varying priorities of Greater Oxford, Northern Oxfordshire and Ridgeway. It will reimagine how services are delivered through a total place approach, digital by design, and smarter use of public assets, including opportunities for colocation with health, police and other public services enabling the release and disposal of properties no longer needed. Operating models will be cost-effective and prevention-led, driving better value and long-term outcomes.

The programme will be built on a clear and compelling vision for change, supported by targeted investment in workforce capability and robust, empowered governance. Together, these foundations will ensure each new authority has the leadership, capacity, and structures needed to deliver transformation effectively from the outset.

7.2 Implementation roadmap

There is a lot of work to do by April 2028 to establish three safe, secure and solid unitary councils, and to set the foundations to deliver on the benefits and ambitions for the people of the three unitary authorities. It will be crucial to establish governance structures, including the Programme Management Office (PMO) and other enablers, to drive the change and identify the essential elements and priority areas of focus across the implementation timetable.

This transformation is underpinned by core principles that connect our vision for the three unitary authorities with a clear approach to ensuring a safe, legal, and seamless transition for both residents and staff:
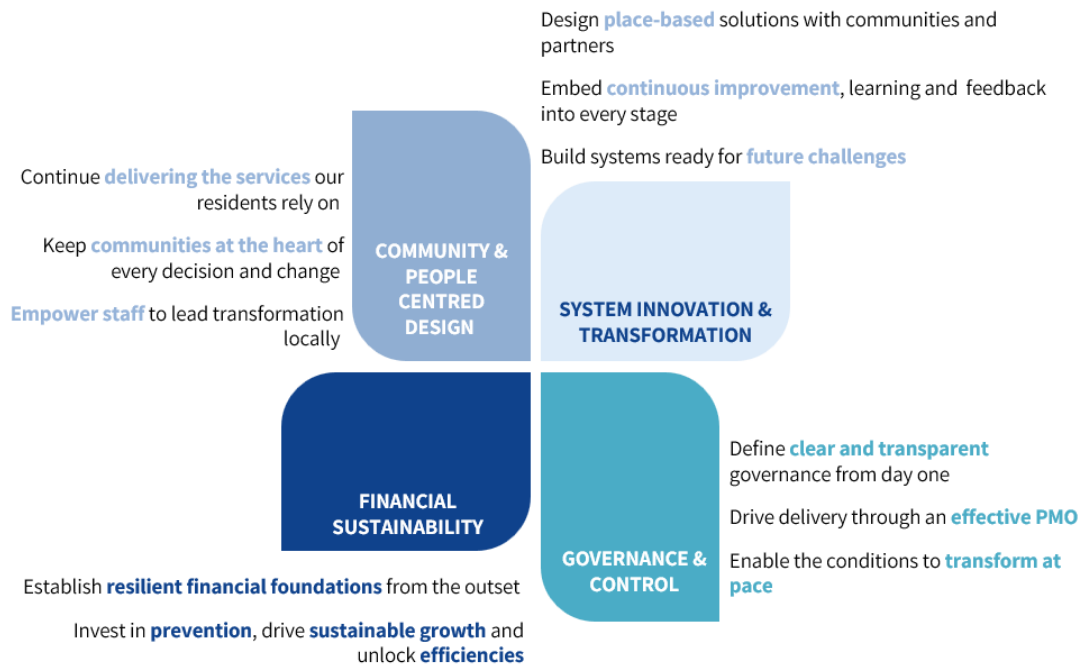
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Fig 7.1: Principles for Three Unitary Implementation

Implementing LGR will bring about more change than can realistically be delivered by the anticipated vesting day in April 2028. To manage this, we have developed a high-level implementation approach that ensures the creation of three new unitary councils that are safe, legal, and operational from Day 1, while also laying the groundwork for a bold and ambitious programme of reform that delivers lasting benefits with residents, communities and partners across Oxfordshire.

This transformation will comprise three layers of change. First, the essential elements required to establish fully functioning councils on Day 1, such as constitutions, safe transfer of services, and staffing structures.

Second, the foundational components that enable the new authorities to begin transformation immediately, such as programme governance, the Programme Management Office (PMO), partnership working and other key enablers.

Third, the longer-term reforms that - while not critical for vesting day - will be instrumental in unlocking the full potential of the three unitary model. Crucial reforms to unlock growth in Greater Oxford will include establishing devolution and structural links with a Thames Valley MSA, which it is hoped will vest at the same time, and setting in motion the Green Belt review process.

These layers of change are embedded within the four phases of our roadmap (laid out below), which align with the Government timetable and provide a structured framework for transition and transformation.
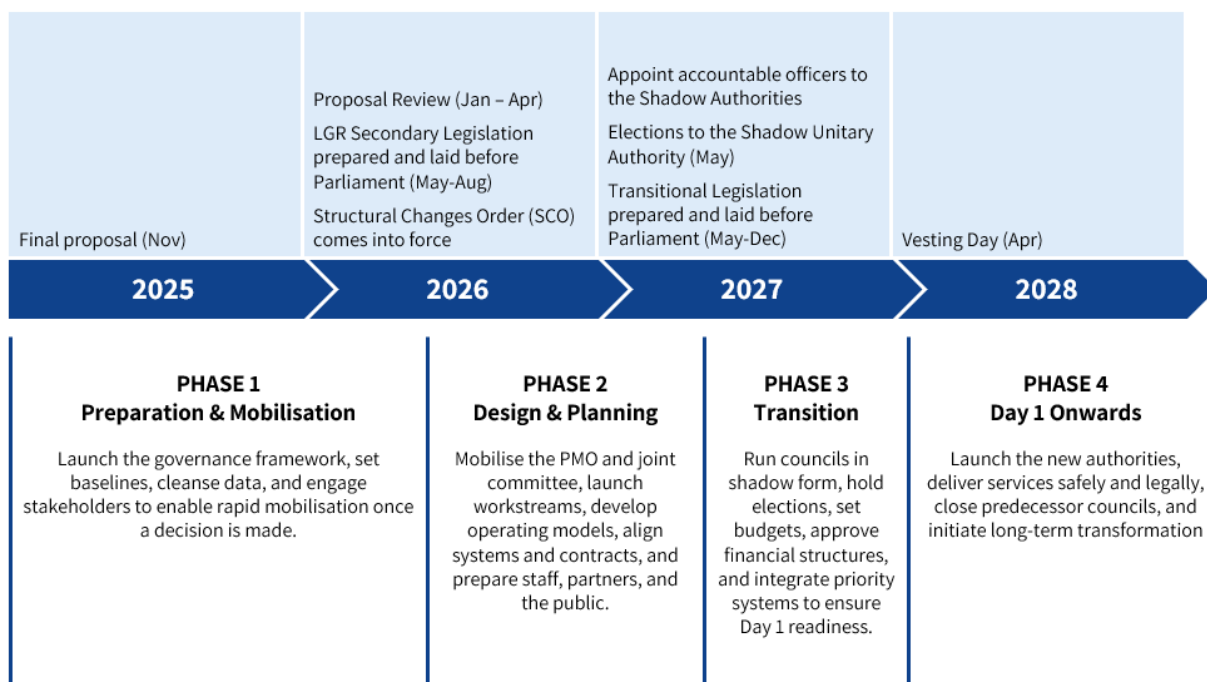
Fig 7.2: The Implementation Roadmap & Government Timetable

Phase 1 - Preparation & mobilisation

From submission of the proposal to the formal announcement of the preferred LGR option, with a focus on laying the foundations to be ready for Day 1 should the 3UA option be approved. We will continue to engage widely with our communities and partners, establishing robust programme management and governance arrangements. A detailed inventory of service data, structure, contracts, assets and systems across all will be established involving all seven local authorities in Oxfordshire and West Berkshire. This is needed to enable the design of new unitary authorities, strengthen service delivery, remove duplication, assess opportunities for shared services, maximise transformation opportunities and minimise risks as we move into the design phase.

By the end of this phase in July 2026, working with the other local authorities we will have:

- Established arrangements to continue to engage and collaborate with colleagues, communities and partners.
- Created a roadmap for transition for each service area.
- Built up readiness across the system to implement the unitary proposal for Oxfordshire chosen by Government.

Phase 2 - Design & planning

Following announcement of the chosen option, authorities will establish the programme infrastructure and embark on detailed design, alongside planning for the transition period.

We recognise that all aspects of Oxfordshire's local government and its services are vital. Our implementation approach proposes balanced governance, ensuring equal input from both current local government tiers, which encourages collaboration and reduces risks during transition. No single authority will dominate; every voice will be heard, with final governance arrangements determined by ministerial decision.

Whilst upholding the independence of each new council, we are committed to ensuring that Oxfordshire's new unitary authorities collaborate closely to fully harness the benefits of LGR. As has been mentioned, this is far more than an administrative reshuffle; it is a unique, generational chance to create councils capable of efficiently and effectively responding to the priorities and requirements of local communities.

To deliver a clear and compelling vision for transformation, we must articulate clearly and consistently what a transformed Oxfordshire looks like, with strong and stable leadership guiding the organisations through the change. The structural foundations must enable the new unitary authorities to operate at a sufficient scale to deliver services effectively, including the capacity to invest in modern systems and to attract and retain a skilled workforce. At the same time, these new authorities must remain deeply rooted in their communities, maintaining strong connections to both place and people.

Table 7.1: Guiding Design Principles for Implementation and Our Approach

Principle	Challenges and issues	Our approach
Community & people centred design		
Continue delivering the services our residents rely on	Transitioning to new structures may disrupt essential services, especially where legacy systems are outdated or fragmented.	We will map critical services and embed continuity plans. Ahead of vesting day, we will ensure accurate, complete data is safely transferred to the correct unitary to enable the safe and legal continuation of services and mitigate any disruptions to residents and service users.
Keep communities at the heart of every decision and change	Establishing new governance structures may risk disconnecting communities from decision-making.	Our vision is to develop future operating models that reflect the distinct needs of Greater Oxford, Northern Oxfordshire, and Ridgeway, enabling services to raise living standards, reduce demand, and connect residents to opportunity. We will embed community voice into our governance and design by using local forums, place-based engagement, and stronger partnerships with the voluntary and community sector.
Empower staff to lead transformation locally	Staff may face uncertainty and cultural disruption during transition to new authorities.	We will support the existing officer workforce through transition and staff transfers, with clear plans for consultation, union engagement, and redeployment. We will manage change for all staff transparently and

fairly, while building a new organisational culture rooted in place-based leadership, innovation, and resident-focused practice.

The design and delivery of the transition to new authorities will include broad engagement with all employees and consultation with trade union representatives to secure successful outcomes for individuals and the new organisations. Each new authority will develop and establish an organisation identity and purpose and a values-based culture that builds unity, supports effective change and innovation and puts local resident needs at the heart of all service delivery.

System innovation & transformation		
Design place-based solutions with communities and partners	Public services often operate in silos and do not reflect how people experience their communities and challenges. Current service boundaries may not align with community needs or local geographies.	Early on in our transition roadmap, we will establish collaborative leadership arrangements that reflect unitary ambitions, fostering coordinated delivery and shared responsibility for outcomes across the region. We will maintain and deepen partnerships with local organisations, anchor institutions, and regional bodies. We will confirm detailed baselines for each unitary and use local data to inform place-based service design.
Embed continuous improvement, learning, and feedback into every stage	Without structured oversight, transformation efforts may lack coordination and adaptability.	We will ensure data and feedback is used to drive evidence-based decision-making, seamless service delivery, and innovation tailored to local priorities. We will establish implementation boards and programme teams to guide transition and embed learning.
Build systems ready for future challenges	Legacy systems and contracts may hinder integration and future scalability.	We will review and allocate contracts across the new authorities, negotiating variations and preparing for decommissioning or re-procurement over a 3–5-year plan. Our aim is to coproduce commercial arrangements with communities within the new geography to unlock financial and social value, and the ability to respond to local needs. Our vision is to design in flexibility to our operating models, to build structures and services that are fit for the future.
Financial sustainability		

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Establish resilient financial foundations from the outset	Fragmented financial systems and legacy challenges may impact transparency and readiness on vesting day.	We will apportion budgets fairly and transparently across the new unitary authorities, while harmonising council tax and aligning financial policy with local priorities. We will work together to navigate legacy financial challenges, such as unclear savings rationales or fragmented data systems, while building resilient financial foundations that support growth and prevention for the future we will agree on shared service arrangements and establish a savings tracker for each unitary to monitor efficiencies.
Invest in prevention, drive sustainable growth and unlock efficiencies	Short-term pressures may limit capacity to invest in long-term prevention and growth.	Our target operating model embeds prevention in design and delivery of services. To support this we will modernise systems to support digital by design using ai to improve user interfaces.
Governance & control		
Define clear and transparent governance from day one	New authorities require robust governance to ensure accountability and clarity.	Our plan will establish the democratic foundations of the three new authorities, including constitutions, leadership structures, elections, and governance systems. We will embed strong local voice, balanced regional influence, and governance rooted in place, supported by effective partnerships across communities and sectors. We will establish joint leaders committees, oversight boards, and shadow elections.
Drive delivery through an effective PMO	LGR is too large and complex of a programme to deliver in silos or within existing portfolios. Without dedicated and disciplined programme management, transition activities may become fragmented, delayed, or ineffective.	We will form a joint programme team and allocate tasks to SMEs across authorities to ensure coordinated delivery.
Enable the conditions to transform at pace	LGR implementation is a serious undertaking with clear timelines set out from central government. We will need to move at pace in order to meet key delivery milestones.	We will put in place a comprehensive transition plan supported by a joint risk register and escalation process. These mechanisms will help manage risks effectively and ensure the programme delivers against the timelines set for implementation.

By the end of this phase, we will have:

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- Established robust governance arrangements, including the Oxfordshire Joint Leaders Committee and Leaders Oversight Board, as well as a Chief Executives/Programme Board, to provide clear leadership and oversight throughout the transition process.
- Advanced the devolution twin track, ensuring alignment with broader regional ambitions and preparing for simultaneous progress alongside the new unitary authorities.
- Set up the Implementation Board or design committee, with representation from each existing local authority, and form a Joint Programme Team to coordinate all transition activities effectively.
- Agreed on and allocated key tasks and responsibilities across the system, drawing on subject matter experts (SMEs) from each authority to ensure comprehensive engagement and specialist input.
- Developed a detailed operational plan to ensure readiness for Day 1, covering all essential services, systems, and processes, prioritising functional design to address statutory requirements, particularly safeguarding processes
- Reached agreement on shared service arrangements, identifying opportunities for efficiency and collaboration across the new authorities.
- Established and agreed the design principles that will underpin the future operating models and guide the transformation journey.
- Agreed the design of future operating models based on agreed principles and the organisation of shadow elections in preparation for the new governance structures.

Phase 3 – Transition

Following the Structural Changes Order (SCO) being passed, Shadow Authorities or Implementation Executives will be established to guide the preparation of authorities in readiness for vesting day.

By the end of this phase, we will have:

- Established Implementation Executives for each new unitary authority to oversee the transition process, and appointed officers to the top three tiers of leadership across the new authorities.
- Developed, in collaboration with employees and unions, distinct cultural values for each new authority and completed the workforce strategy, including creation of each authority's brand and visual identity.
- Secured agreement at the shadow council level on Day 1 operational plans, target operating models, transformation plans, and the workforce strategy.
- Ensured the devolution twin track is prepared, so that the new MSA is ready to vest at the same time as the new councils are established.
- Completed comprehensive system and user testing, agreed the year one budget and Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS), and achieved Day 1 operational readiness for buildings, systems, data, and staffing.
- Conducted the initial co-design of service areas through shadow authorities in partnership with local residents.
- Developed a comprehensive recruitment and retention strategy for social care staff, including the appointment of senior positions such as Director of Adult Social Services (DASS), Director of Children's Services (DCS), and Principal Social Worker (PSW) within Northern Oxfordshire and Greater Oxford.

- Confirmed detailed baselines for all three unitary authorities, covering disaggregated functions such as systems usage, asset management, grant funding, partnerships, contracts, and care package specific details).
- Agreed pooled budget (section 75) arrangements with Health Partners
- Identified and commissioned specialist external capacity in social care.
- Novated existing care provider contracts to the new authorities, engaging with the market prior to vesting day to minimise potential disruptions.
- Ensured alignment of CQC registration for provider services according to the footprints of the new authorities.

Phase 4 - Day 1 onwards

The new unitary authorities will go live with foundations in place to ensure safe, secure and solid services can be provided, and with each authority positioned to deliver transformation in line with the benefits and ambitions set out.

From Day 1, we will have:

- Established a robust savings tracker for each new unitary authority, ensuring clarity and transparency as we monitor financial efficiencies throughout the transition.
- Designed a comprehensive plan for integrating systems and contracts over the next three to five years, removing duplication, streamlining processes, and maximising savings opportunities.
- Launched proactive and inclusive information and engagement programmes for employees, stakeholders and the public, fostering strong communication and participation at every stage.
- Commenced a review of the Greater Oxford Green Belt, balancing environmental stewardship with future development needs and community aspirations.
- Introduced clear steps to support the operationalisation of the new Mayoral Combined Authority (MSA), aligning new unitary functions to deliver on devolution priorities and maximise local opportunities.
- Statutory roles in place, such as DASS, DCS, PSW, and DPH, and each supported by dedicated teams, with staff transferred from the county as appropriate (subject to any relevant TUPE considerations).
- Convened or refocused committees, including the Health & Wellbeing Board and Safeguarding Partnerships.

This roadmap is based on the data and time available at this stage. Further detailed design and planning will be required, in close discussion with staff, unions, and other representatives, to refine and validate the approach. For further details on the risks, assumptions and dependencies of the implementation plan, please see Appendix H.

7.3 Creating the conditions for success

Successful delivery of LGR depends on creating the right conditions for change. Ahead of launch, we will establish robust governance and reporting arrangements that meet national requirements and reflect local accountability. A dedicated Programme Management Office (PMO) will drive delivery,

coordinate workstreams, and embed the tools, controls, and agile methodologies needed to manage change effectively.

A detailed programme plan will be developed, grounded in shared design principles and a clear roadmap. This plan will reflect our commitment to place-based transformation, ensuring that delivery is tailored to the distinct needs of Greater Oxford, Northern Oxfordshire, and Ridgeway. It will be insight-led, using data to inform decisions, track progress, and target interventions where they will have the greatest impact. Innovation will be embedded throughout, enabling us to design prevention-led, responsive services that anticipate future needs and improve outcomes for residents.

Governance will be established to ensure political oversight, strategic leadership, and operational delivery are aligned and effective. Building on the joint working established during the business case, our framework will become progressively more formalised through mobilisation, design, and the Shadow Authority period. A Leaders Oversight Board will provide collective political direction and assurance, while a Programme Board comprising current Chief Executives will oversee strategic alignment, risk and interdependencies. This will transition into Implementation Boards or Joint Committees once the Structural Changes Order takes effect.

Fig 7.3: Programme Governance Structure

We are committed to engaging with other LGR programmes as proposals are approved, adopting good practice and applying lessons to our local context.

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These foundations will ensure the programme is well-managed and rooted in our shared ambition: to deliver better outcomes, smarter services, and a stronger voice for every community.

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8 Criteria Assessment

8.1 Government LGR Criteria Assessment

The below table provides an overview of the key strengths of our proposal in line with the criteria, highlighting why the three unitary authorities model is the best option for the future of Oxfordshire.

Table 8.1: Assessment against Government criteria

LGR government criteria	How the three unitary authorities proposal meets each of the criteria	Relevant section of the proposal
Unitary local government and our approach		
A proposal should seek to achieve for the whole of the area concerned the establishment of a single tier of local government.	Within this proposal, a single tier of local government is achieved as three new unitary authorities are created from the current two-tier, seven authority system, a Greater Oxford, Northern Oxfordshire and Ridgeway.	3.1.3 Three Unitary Councils
Proposals should be for sensible economic areas, with an appropriate tax base which does not create an undue advantage or disadvantage for one part of the area.	Each of the three unitary areas have ensured a sensible economic area with balanced tax bases and designed to recognise the different needs, demands, challenges and economic strengths across Greater Oxford, Northern Oxfordshire and Ridgeway. They all share a common ambition to build a more prosperous future for all of those in Oxfordshire. They link to existing economic geographies – particularly in expanding the boundaries of the city of Oxford to cover the places where people look to the city for work, leisure and services and feel the impact of decisions made by the city.	5.3 Financial Disaggregation and Aggregation Process of Baseline Appendix A Development of Boundary Proposals

Proposals should be for a sensible geography which will help to increase housing supply and meet local needs.	The three unitary model will deliver on the Government's mission to increase housing supply in responding to local need and with local coordination. It will allow for the building of up to 40,000 homes over the next 15 years through release of green belt land around Oxford – significantly ahead of Government housing targets, which alternative proposals cannot match.	3.1.3 Three Unitary Councils 4.3 Homes
Proposals should be supported by robust evidence and analysis and include an explanation of the outcomes it is expected to achieve, including evidence of estimated costs/benefits and local engagement.	The proposed service delivery models have been informed and developed through thorough engagement with council members, key stakeholders and wider engagement groups including businesses and residents. The financial implications of reorganisation - including costs, savings and income – have also been assessed for the three unitary model.	4 Case for Three Unitaries 5 The Financial Case 6 New Target Operating Model
Proposals should clearly describe the single tier local government structures it is putting forward for the whole of the area and explain how – if implemented – these areas expect to achieve the outcomes described.	Each area proposal sets out how the new unitary councils will have the required leadership and capacity at the optimum scale and proximity to residents to respond to the needs and challenges of each place.	3.1.3 Three Unitary Councils 6 New Target Operating Model 7 Implementation Plan
Unitary local government criteria		
Unitary local government must be the right size to achieve efficiencies, improve capacity and withstand financial shocks.	The modelling suggests that payback of transitional costs is within 4 years and there are then ongoing savings of around £48.6 million per annum for the aggregated position of all 3 unitaries going forward. The suggestion therefore is that this three unitary proposal is the right size.	5 The Financial Case

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As a guiding principle, new councils should aim for a population of 500,000 or more.	The total population of the three unitary areas currently is 935,000. Greater Oxford has 240,000 residents, Northern Oxfordshire has 265,000 residents, and Ridgeway has 430,000 residents. Rapid housing delivery in line with Government targets will see significant population growth by 2040 to 370,000 in Northern Oxfordshire and 545,000 in Ridgeway. Housing delivery in Greater Oxford will exceed Government targets leading to a population of 345,000 by 2040. Rationale for population sizes set out below.	3 Options Appraisal 4.1 Prosperity 4.2 Homes 4.3 Quality of Life 4.4 Identity 4.5 Voice 4.7 Engagement Unitaries 6 New Target Operating Model Appendix D Engagement Detail
There may be certain scenarios in which this 500,000 figure does not make sense for an area, including on devolution, and this rationale should be set out in a proposal.	This proposal sets out why the areas proposed are smaller than 500,000 based on the specific and distinct geographies and demographics of each unitary, the need to represent each area distinctly as part of devolution, as well as being required for suitable levels of green belt release to maximise and support growth. This is necessary to deliver the economic growth and levels of housing outlined across this proposal.	3 Options Appraisal 4.1 Prosperity 4.2 Homes 4.3 Quality of Life 4.4 Identity 4.5 Voice 4.7 Engagement Unitaries 6 New Target Operating Model Appendix D Engagement Detail
Efficiencies should be identified to help improve councils' finances and make sure that council taxpayers are getting the best value for their money.	The 3UA proposal will deliver efficiency savings in aggregate and in the individual new unitaries arising from ICT, support services, managerial, democratic processes, the disposal and rationalisation of property transferred and external audit costs. Additionally, savings will be driven from transformation of early intervention, adult social case and children's services, as well was waste collection and disposal. In the Greater Oxford proposal, in addition to increased council income for all new unitaries arising from the ability to levy the Adult Social Care Premium, significant increased income will arise from	5 The Financial Case

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	growth in dwelling numbers and new businesses. Payback of additional one-off costs for all unitaries will be approximately 4 years.	
Proposals should set out how we will seek to manage transition costs, including planning for future service transformation opportunities from existing budgets, including from the flexible use of capital receipts that can support authorities in taking forward transformation and invest-to-save projects.	Payback of initial costs for each new unitary authority is an estimated 4 years from investing. The balance sheet financial strength analysis suggests that each unitary should be able manage these transitional costs with some of the authorities such as Oxford already making early provision of costs in the current round of medium-term financial planning. Where possible, use will be made of the flexible use of capital receipts to support transformation projects.	5.6 Transition Costs and Longer-Term Transformation Savings
For areas covering councils that are in Best Value intervention and/or in receipt of Exceptional Financial Support, proposals must additionally demonstrate how reorganisation may contribute to putting local government in the area as a whole on a firmer footing and what area-specific arrangements may be necessary to make new structures viable.	West Berkshire was granted one off Exceptional Financial Support of £16m in 2025. This was noted as a one-off measure and the authority has a clear path to securing a balanced financial position in the immediate future. The strong balance sheet position shows that none of the unitary authorities in this proposal will be looking for exceptional financial support.	5.2 Existing council budgets and pressures 5.3 Financial Disaggregation and Aggregation Process of Baseline position

Public service delivery

Unitary structures must prioritise the delivery of high quality and sustainable public services to citizens.	The proposals will ensure services are tailored to local circumstances and will be developed collaboratively with local communities and partners. The focus will be on the development of a transformative, preventative model that links growth to improved outcomes and reduced inequality. Independent assessment has shown all three unitary authorities would be able to provide sustainable services. Each unitary will be able to take a single coordinated approach to addressing priorities for their	4.6 Future Fit 6 New Target Operating Model

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	area. Decisions can focus on the needs of specific areas and the integrated model allows for more agile service delivery.	
Proposals should show how new structures will improve local government and service delivery and should avoid unnecessary fragmentation of services.	The proposal shows how three unitary authorities will be more agile, connected to their local communities and able to work collaboratively with partners. Services will be commissioned and delivered at the most appropriate level, some across multiple authorities. For example, each authority will have its own sovereign children's services, but Safeguarding Boards will operate across all three unitary authorities. Services will achieve better outcomes for the lives of residents by being explicitly designed to respond to local circumstances, with a mix of direct delivery and shared services. It will achieve this through the creation of efficiencies from consolidation while also investing in new capacity, digital capability, and innovative service models to underpin long-term viability.	4.3 Quality of Life 4.6 Future Fit 6 New Target Operating Model
Opportunities to deliver public service reform should be identified, including where they will lead to better value for money.	The proposals align with the wider public sector reform agenda including the NHS ten-year plan, and devolution. They focus on data-led place-based and integrated early intervention and prevention, tailoring collaborative service delivery to respond to community needs effectively in each unitary area, ensuring better value for money organisationally and at a systems level.	4.3 Quality of Life 4.6 Future Fit 5.7 Transformation Savings 6 New Target Operating Model
Consideration should be given to the impacts for crucial services such as social care, children's services, SEND and homelessness, and for wider public services including for public safety.	The proposal for three unitary authorities has considered the impact of a range of crucial public services and how the new unitary authorities can deliver better public services that improve outcomes for residents, through identifying and addressing needs in a timely manner. This includes:	4.3 Quality of Life 4.6 Future Fit 6 New Target Operating Model

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	Localised approach to Children's Social Care, Adult Social Care and SEND – the three unitary authorities will deliver their own sovereign services with collaboration on critical areas with other unitary authorities to effectively fulfil statutory duties, maintain economies of scale and avoid unnecessary disaggregation Community-based early intervention and prevention model boosting community networks and resilience In-house statutory homelessness services rooted in prevention	
Local engagement		
Proposals should show how councils in the area have sought to work together in coming to a view that meets local needs and is informed by local views.	Collaborative work with the five other Oxfordshire councils, and West Berkshire, took place to develop proposals for reorganising local government. Collective agreement was made to a shared data protocol to ensure consistent baseline comparisons, and a series of teach-in sessions were delivered across the councils. As a proposer of a three unitary model for Oxfordshire and West Berkshire, Oxford City Council's Leader, Chief Executive, and Leadership Team actively worked with the other councils, and West Berkshire, to shape the proposal.	4.7 Public Engagement Appendix D Engagement Detail
It is for councils to decide how best to engage locally in a meaningful and constructive way, and this engagement activity should be evidenced in your proposal.	A comprehensive and inclusive engagement programme was delivered across Oxfordshire and West Berkshire to support the proposal for Local Government Reorganisation. A diverse range of methods and strategies were carefully designed to ensure meaningful, constructive, inclusive, and representative participation throughout the process.	4.5 Voice 4.7 Public Engagement Appendix D Engagement Detail
Proposals should consider issues of local identity and cultural and historic importance.	The proposal protects Oxfordshire's historic and cultural identity while aligning governance with natural community boundaries. It gives residents more say in local planning	4.4 Identity 4.5 Voice 4.7 Public Engagement Appendix D Engagement Detail

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	and ensures services are tailored to urban, rural, and market town needs. Development is directed to less sensitive areas, balancing growth with housing, heritage, and environmental protection. It strengthens local representation and delivers smarter, place-based decision-making.	
Proposals should include evidence of local engagement, an explanation of the views that have been put forward and how concerns will be addressed.	Feedback indicated strong support for smaller, locally responsive councils, alongside concerns regarding transport, housing, respecting local identity, and representation. Feedback has been used to tailor approaches and respond to green space protection, urban – rural balance, financial sustainability and improving services and access.	4.7 Public Engagement Appendix D Engagement Detail
Boundary change		
Existing district areas should be considered the building blocks for your proposals, but where there is a strong justification, more complex boundary changes will be considered.	The proposal is based around creating a scale and geography for each unitary authority that allows them to respond to the distinct strengths and challenges of each distinct place. These are based on coherent economic areas and housing markets. In the case of Greater Oxford, we are proposing to create a new unitary authority that encompasses the full existing urban conurbation together with already planned urban extensions, rather than an under-bounded city authority. Encompassing the contiguous urban area and surroundings will allow the city to coherently plan for meeting the significant under supply of housing in Oxford, as well as providing sufficient space to meet ambitions for growth which are nationally significant in their impacts. This has used parishes as the building blocks of the proposed boundaries. Redrawing the city boundaries will at the same time allow rural areas and towns in Oxfordshire to govern themselves based on their distinct	3 Options Appraisal 4.1 Prosperity 4.2 Homes Appendix A Development of Boundary Proposals

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local needs and priorities, as opposed to having to respond to the gravitational pull of the city into existing districts.

Devolution support		
New unitary structures must support devolution arrangements.	This proposal for unitary structures was developed concurrently with preparation of an Expression of Interest for devolution to create a Thames Valley Mayoral Strategic Authority.	4.5 Identity
Where no Mayoral Combined County Authority is already established or agreed then the proposal should set out how it will help unlock devolution.	This proposal sets out how it will provide constituent authorities which provide a balance of three voices for Oxfordshire to the Mayoral Strategic Authority, representing its distinct places and suitably balancing representation of the urban and rural populations.	4.1 Prosperity 4.5 Identity 3 Options Appraisal
Proposals should ensure there are sensible population size ratios between local authorities and any strategic authority, with timelines that work for both priorities.	The creation of three unitary authorities across Oxfordshire and West Berkshire will help ensure there is closer parity in scale among the constituent unitary authorities within a Thames Valley MSA than a single Oxfordshire unitary council which would be over two and a half times the size of the others, and at least 37% the population size of the MSA itself.	3 Options Appraisal 4.5 Identity 6.3 Council Size and Structure
Community engagement		
New unitary structures should enable stronger community engagement and deliver genuine opportunity for neighbourhood empowerment.	Three unitary authorities will allow for governance that is more tailored and representative. This proposal will support local leaders better understand and tackle the unique challenges and opportunities within their areas. Explicit within this proposal are arrangements that will support increased community engagement in democratic processes, but also the design of local authority services and community empowerment more generally.	4.5 Voice 6.3 Council Size and Structure

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Proposals will need to explain plans to make sure that communities are engaged.	A community place-based approach will see enhanced neighbourhood engagement and delivery models. The three unitary authorities will co-design with residents and partners neighbourhood governance arrangements to support local requirements. This will deliver decision making at the lowest effective level to speed up delivery and growth, tailored to each community's circumstance.	4.5 Voice 6.3 Council Size and Structure 7 Implementation
Where there are already arrangements in place, it should be explained how these will enable strong community engagement.	Parish and Town Councils will retain their independence and functions. Where present, they will be invited to participate in NACs. Our approach supports local decision-making building on existing networks understanding the Oxford speaks clearly for the city, while towns and villages across Northern Oxfordshire and Ridgeway are empowered to speak for themselves.	4.5 Voice 6.3 Council Size and Structure

8.2 Devolution Criteria Assessment

Devolution is a key criterion in considering Local Government Reorganisation; the two must be complementary. There are currently no devolution arrangements in place that cover the Thames Valley area, but an expression of interest (EoI) is being developed jointly by all 13 councils across Oxfordshire, Berkshire and Swindon for the proposed creation of Mayoral Strategic Authority (MSA).

Reports by Inner Circle Consulting and Metro Dynamics, working on behalf all 13 councils across Oxfordshire, Berkshire and Swindon have produced an evidence base to enable a better understanding of the sectoral and economic complementarity of the Thames Valley geography. These show there is significant opportunity for the region and scope for it to contribute even further to UK plc. They find the region's economic success has masked persistent challenges, including a rural-urban divide, housing pressures, fragmented infrastructure and skills misalignment with businesses' needs. They also find that the area does not sufficiently act as an integrated economic whole, but there are many overlaps in terms of sectoral composition and economic potential. The proposed MSA is needed to overcome this fragmented approach, strengthen connections across the main economic centres and unleash the region's growth potential in a way that both increases inclusivity and supports UK global competitiveness.

Establishing a Thames Valley MSA with Level 3 powers will unlock high-value, innovation-driven growth by integrating fragmented labour markets, accelerating economic recovery, and enabling the region to contribute even more to national prosperity through coordinated investment, infrastructure, and skills development. Subject to the councils' approval, the EOI will be submitted in

December 2025, with the ambition that a Thames Valley MSA could be established to vest in April 2028 at the same time as the new unitary council's vest.

The new unitary structures proposed for Oxfordshire and West Berkshire sit within the same geography as the planned MSA and directly support the devolution arrangements. A strong Oxford is good for Oxfordshire and UK plc. Three unitary councils will ensure there is a distinct voice for the city region of Oxford at the MSA table alongside those of Thames Valley's other economic engines – Reading, Slough, Bracknell and Swindon. Working together with an elected Mayor, we will help relight the fire of our economy and ignite growth – the Government's number one mission – and share prosperity.

Three unitary councils will also provide distinct voices for interests of northern Oxfordshire and Ridgeway areas that form part of the knowledge spine and part of the Ox-Cam Corridor. Oxford forms just 22% of Oxfordshire and so either a single unitary council or two unitary councils would see Oxford's needs and voice competing from a minority position among wider council interests. Under these circumstances the interests of the rural majority, not the urban growth engine will likely be represented at the MSA table.

LGR proposals must also ensure that there are appropriate population size ratios between local authorities and strategic authorities. We consider that this condition is better met by three unitary councils than by two or one unitary authorities. The mean average population of the existing Berkshire unitary authorities and Swindon is 174,000, while an Oxfordshire unitary would be 763,000 - creating a clear size imbalance. Three unitary councils would have a mean average size of 312,000, providing a more equitable balance.

The table below provides further evidence of how the proposal meets these criteria and provides detail on how model will support the future success of our MSA:

Table 8.2: Assessment criteria for Local Government Reorganisation Criteria

Strategic benefits of Multi-Unitary authorities	Opportunity
Representation of Place	The proposed authority will cover a large geographic area which, while not yet formally defined, is likely to have a population in the region of 2 million residents. The area is predominantly rural but contains several highly productive urban centres including Oxford, Reading, Slough, Bracknell and Swindon. It is vital to ensure that the complexities of this combined area can be appropriately represented within the MSA. Three constituent authorities closely linked to the distinct places across Oxfordshire and West Berkshire will provide strong voices which can represent place and champion their priorities and strengths at a more local level than one single voice representing a single county – or by a two unitary model where the voice of urban Oxford is diluted by the rural priorities of the current West Oxfordshire and Cherwell. Smaller businesses and community groups will have a better vehicle to advocate for them to be heard by the MSA by having a more locally available unitary which

	is working closely with them to build relationships and actively represent their views. Across the region, our past achievements and successes through collaboration have always been built on having several voices and constructive challenge which ensures enhanced scrutiny as well as local stakeholder representation. A multi unitary model will ensure that this approach is continued.
Capacity and Capability	Three unitary authorities present the opportunity to ensure there is the capacity, skills and capability across the wider system to deliver on the strategic priorities of the MSA. They will bring diverse skillsets and local knowledge to effectively respond to the proposed model and enable wider joint investment and coordination on key issues such as transport, housing and skills. This will ensure that the strengths of working together at a MSA level will combine with the local knowledge and capabilities of three distinct authorities.
Governance, enhanced local representation and democratic legitimacy	Thames Valley is a large region with a population of around 1.9 million, but with constituent parts that include current West Oxfordshire – the second most sparsely populated area in south east England with less than 5% ethnic minority population, and Oxford – the fifth most densely populated area in south east England and 29% ethnic minority population. Three unitary authorities covering such diverse places and populations will provide more effective local representation and democratic legitimacy than a single unitary or two unitary authorities could. Multi-unitary authorities will ensure these voices are heard in balance at the MSA and presents a distributed leadership and delivery model. This will ensure a fair, inclusive and democratic approach to decision making is achieved. It will also see more ideas introduced, more challenge to status quo decision-making, and ultimately more positive change. In particular, given the importance of the Oxfordshire knowledge spine and the wider Ox-Cam Corridor, the businesses and universities that drive innovation and growth across the wider geography will be better heard and their and their interests and needs championed at the MSA. Spreading decision making across multiple unitary councils encourages ownership of outcomes across those areas. It also ensures that the authorities are suitably representative of and hold strong relationships with their local communities. This means that they can suitably cascade messages and key priorities from the MSA down to their local area and secure buy in through deep knowledge of and trusted relationships with their local communities.
Scrutiny	A mayoral combined authority which contains multiple unitary authorities enhances the ability of the governance structure to scrutinise policy and performance effectively. Multiple unitary authorities contribute layered and diverse oversight, as well as bringing the unique perspectives from local experience. This strengthens transparency and ensures decision making at the MSA level is subject to robust, evidence-based review which drives continuous change. It enables clear escalation routes, peer accountability and strengthens public confidence in how they are being governed. Scrutiny functions within the three authorities will be better resourced and diversified, which will ensure that each authority is able to suitably scrutinise decision making at the MSA level.

Risk (including financial)	The strengths of governance and scrutiny offered by the three unitary authorities also reduces the risks which are associated with poor governance. The strong oversight and reduction of political bias or status quo thinking will improve decision making and the management of risks. The strong and shared scrutiny across multiple authorities makes it harder for risky or one-sided decisions to pass without appropriate checks and brings the advantages of adding different perspectives for identifying, assessing and mitigating against risks. Additionally, multi-authorities will be able to spread financial risks which the constituent authorities may have to absorb if there is a lack of financial management within the MSA itself. This would reduce the risk of a severe financial impact on a single authority.
Trust in Institutions	Public and businesses confidence will be fostered by a balanced multiple unitary structure which engages with them at the local level and has a deep understanding of local priorities and requirements. Their trust will be built by seeing their communities and business interests reflected in the make-up of regional governance and their experience of services which understand and respond to their local context. The visible local leadership present in their local area and fairer representation across diverse places assures both communities and commerce that their area is well represented, listens to them and their priorities are being advocated for in a way which suitably balances with other voices across the MSA. Public and business confidence in institutions is not simply a result of good governance, it is required to give long-term democratic legitimacy, civic engagement and compliance with policy. A model of three unitary authorities will feel accessible, equitable and responsive – which will help to create the conditions for shared ownership of regional priorities and a stronger public backing for change.

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Why do an Equalities Impact Assessment (EqIA)?

1. Equalities Impact Assessment (EqIA) is part of Oxford City Council's **Public Sector Equality Duty (PSED) (Equality Act 2010).**

   The General PSED enables Oxford City Council to:

   a. **identify and remove discrimination,**

   b. **identify ways to advance equality of opportunity,**

   c. **foster good relations.**

2. An EqIA must be done before making any decision(s) that may have an impact on people and/or services that people use and depend on.

3. An EqIA form is one of many tools that can simplify and structure your equalities assessment.

4. We are passionate about equalities, and we highly recommend that Corporate Management Team (CMT) reports and all projects must attach an EqIA.

A good EqIA has the following attributes:

1. **Comprehensively considers the 9 protected characteristics.**

1. Age	6. Race & Ethnicity
2. Disability	7. Religion or Belief
3. Gender Reassignment	8. Sex
4. Marriage & Civil Partnership	9. Sexual Orientation
5. Pregnancy & Maternity	Socio-economic inequalities (voluntary adoption)

2. It has **considered equality of treatment** towards service users, residents, employees, partners, council suppliers & contractors, and Council Members

3. Sufficiently considered **potential and real impact** of proposal or policy on service users, residents, employees, partners, council suppliers & contractors, and Council Members.

4. **Systematically recorded and reported** any potential and real impact of your proposal or policy on service users, residents, employees, partners, council suppliers & contractors, and Council Members

5. **Collected, recorded, & reported sufficient information and data** on how your policy or proposal will have an impact.

6. Offers **mitigations or adjustmen**ts if a PSED has been impacted.

7. Provides clear **justifications** for your decisions.

8. It is written in **plain English** with simple short sentence structures.

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	Section 1: General overview of the activity under consideration				
1.	**Name of activity being assessed.**	Local Government Reorganisation: A Three Unitary Authorities proposal.	2.	**The implementation date of the activity under consideration:**	May 2028
3.	**Directorate/Department(s):**	Corporate Services Directorate	4.	**Service Area(s):**	Corporate Services
5.	**Who is (are) the assessment lead(s):**	Lucy Cherry Corporate Policy & Partnerships Officer Law, Governance and Strategy lcherry@oxford.gov.uk	6.	**Contact details, in case there are queries:**	Mish Tullar Transition Director Corporate Resources Directorate mtullar@oxford.gov.uk **Error! Bookmark not defined.**
7.	**Is this a new or ongoing EqIA?**	NEW ☒	8.	If this is an extension of a previous EqIA, please indicate where the previous EqIA is located and share the link to the said EqIA.	N/A
9.	**Date this EqIA started:**	16 October 2025			
10.	**Will this EqIA be attached to Corporate Management Team (CMT) reports/updates, which will be published online?**	Attached to a report to the Cabinet, 10 November 2025	11.	**Give a date (tentative or otherwise) when this assessment will be taken to the** CMT.	Not known

Section 2:   About the activity, change, or policy that is being assessed.

12.	Type of activity being considered:	☒ Budget	☐ Decommissioning	☐ Commissioning	☒ Changes to an existing activity
		☒ New Activity	☒ Others. On 5 February 2025, the Government issued to all councils in Oxfordshire a statutory invitation to prepare proposals for Local Government Reorganisation (LGR).		

13.	Which priority area(s) **within Oxford City Council's Corporate strategy (2024-2028)** does this activity fulfil?	☒ Good, affordable homes	☒ Strong, fair economy	☒ Thriving Communities	☒ Zero Carbon Oxford	☒ Well run council

14.	Which priority area(s) within **Oxford City Council's Equality, Diversity & Inclusion Strategy (2022)** does this activity fulfil?	☒ Responsive services and customer care.	☒ Diverse and engaged workforce.	☒ Leadership & organisational commitment.	☒ Understanding and working with our communities.

15.	Outline the aims, objectives, & priorities of the activity being considered.	Oxford City Council's proposal for three unitary authorities aims to create a governance model that is locally responsive, efficient, and inclusive. The objectives are to improve local public services through early intervention, support sustainable housing and economic growth, and protect the unique character of rural communities. Priorities include delivering equitable access to opportunities, addressing housing and infrastructure challenges, and ensuring that all communities - urban and rural - benefit from growth. This approach embeds equality considerations at every stage, ensuring that diverse needs are reflected in planning and delivery. **Aims** • To create three unitary authorities that strengthen local governance and deliver services closer to communities. • To align with Government's ambition for modern, efficient, and locally responsive structures. **Objectives**

		- Improve service delivery through early intervention and prevention, ensuring equitable access for all residents. - Support sustainable housing and economic growth while protecting rural character and environmental assets. - Foster strong partnerships with communities and stakeholders to co-design solutions. **Priorities** - Deliver inclusive growth that benefits urban and rural areas equally. - Address key challenges such as housing affordability, transport connectivity, and climate resilience. - Ensure decision-making reflects the diverse needs of Oxfordshire's communities, and those in West Berkshire.
16.	**Please outline the consequences of not implementing this activity.**	**Missed Opportunity for Local Government Reform** Failure to align with Government's ambition for modern, efficient governance could result in: - Reduced influence in shaping future policy, housing, growth, etc. - Potential loss of funding or support tied to reform initiatives. **Continued Fragmentation and Inefficiency** Existing or alternative proposal models might: - Maintain duplication of services and administrative costs. - Limit ability to deliver streamlined, cost-effective public services. **Slower Economic Growth** Without a unified approach: - Housing and infrastructure development may remain uneven. - Opportunities for inward investment and innovation could be missed. **Inequitable Access to Services** - Current disparities between urban and rural areas may persist or worsen. - Vulnerable groups could face barriers to accessing timely, inclusive services. - Changes within other proposals could widen gaps in Oxford. **Reduced Capacity to Address Strategic Challenges** - Climate resilience, transport connectivity, and housing affordability may remain under-addressed. - Lack of coordinated planning could hinder long-term sustainability. **Weaker Community Engagement** Other LGR proposal governance models may: - Limit opportunities for co-design and partnership working. - Reduce trust and participation from residents and stakeholders. - Make residents feel disconnected if decision make shifts to a broader unitary structure. **Risk to Regional Identity and Collaboration** Failure to create complementary structures could: - Undermine historic and economic links with neighbouring areas (e.g., West Berkshire). - Lead to inconsistent policy approaches across Oxfordshire, and neighbouring authorities.

Section 3: Understanding service users, residents, staff and any other impacted parties.

17.	Have you undertaken any consultations in the form of surveys, interviews, and/or focus groups? .	Engagement has been central to shaping the proposal and continues to inform how the Council collaborates as the proposal develops and governance arrangements are refined. Early, inclusive engagement has built trust and strengthened the quality of the proposal, reflecting a clear appetite for localised governance that meets community needs. Stakeholders have consistently highlighted the importance of transparency and co-design in shaping future governance, alongside clear communication on service delivery, cost efficiencies, and democratic accountability. These priorities have helped embed a more responsive and informed approach. Fuller details of engagement activities and feedback from specific groups are provided in Appendix One: *Engagement Detail.* The Council have undertaken an extensive, inclusive and impactful engagement programme across Oxfordshire and West Berkshire. This engagement was facilitated through a variety of channels, such as meetings, online surveys, social media, roundtable discussions, community-based events across Oxfordshire and West Berkshire, and short-form video content. This breadth of engagement ensured a representative and inclusive understanding of public and stakeholder views. The Council has engaged in wide-ranging and inclusive consultation to understand what people across Oxfordshire, and West Berkshire want from this once in a generation opportunity to reshape how local government is structured, to ensure that the proposal is responding to their priorities. This includes universities, developers, major businesses, parish councils, Members of Parliament, statutory bodies, and the Council's Residents' Panel. These discussions have been instrumental in shaping the final three unitary proposal. The representative views from across the city contribute a more representative city-wide view, balancing the narrower perspectives often found in self-selecting consultations. Businesses, the voluntary sector, MPs, parish councils, universities, residents, and community groups responded positively to the increased local representation and engagement this model would offer, while businesses welcomed the potential for economic growth and streamlined services. The engagement programme reached thousands of people through multiple channels, including: • 3 surveys with over 1,580 responses • 340 residents engaged through 11 drop-in events • Engagement with more than 75 stakeholder organisations and statutory bodies • Surveyed local businesses to inform the Council's proposal, and how Oxford and Oxfordshire can meet it housing needs while supporting business growth and sustainable development. Through digital engagement, the Council achieved significant reach and high engagement across six social platforms, connecting with thousands of residents and stakeholders.

- Delivered 32 content pieces and 11 Facebook events, driving both online and in-person engagement.
- Targeted communications reached audiences in Oxfordshire and West Berkshire, averaging 2.8 views per person, with TikTok generating standout engagement among 18 to 34 year olds.
- 2.6M+ impressions and 38.8K link clicks
- 1,650 hours of video viewed
- 8.3K reactions, 2.7K comments, 1.5K shares, 1.1K saves.

The Council worked through established partnerships and networks across Oxford, Oxfordshire, and the wider region to ensure the proposal reflected a shared, informed approach.

Locally, it engaged with the Oxford Strategic Partnership – uniting public, private, and voluntary sector leaders to shape city priorities - and collaborated with the Oxford Economic Growth Partnership, and other county-wide forums to align with growth and investment strategies.

Regionally, the Council drew on its membership of the Fast Growth Cities Group (consisting of Oxford, Cambridge, Milton Keynes, Norwich, Peterborough, and Swindon) and the Cathedral Cities Group (consisting of Oxford, Cambridge, Exeter, Gloucester, Ipswich, Lincoln, and Norwich).

Feedback from these partnerships refined the proposal by highlighting shared ambitions, identifying challenges, and shaping actions that address local needs while aligning with regional and national priorities.

Key findings from a Resident's Panel Survey in February 2025, which had 266 responses, found:

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

Key findings from the main public engagement survey in July and August 2025 show:

- **69% agree** "councils are most effective when they are smaller and closer to the people they serve, enabling them to respond and adapt more easily to local needs"
- **80% agree** "urban and rural areas often require different approaches to housing, transport, education and skills, and other key council services"
- **88% agree** "councils have an important part to play in supporting the local economy, including through housing, infrastructure and transport policies"

These are the foundation principles of the council's three unitary proposal.

Two additional questions were asked in the Councils annual Residents Survey 2025 in relation to Local Government Reorganisation:

- The majority of residents **(62%) agree** that councils are most effective when they are smaller and closer to the people they serve, enabling them to respond and adapt more easily to local needs
- **An even bigger majority (72%) agree** that urban and rural areas often require different approaches to housing, transport, education and skills, and other key council services
- **A substantial majority of 90% agree** that the council should prioritise good quality services and responding to local need.
- Whilst **levels of agreement (43%) and disagreement (40%) were fairly equal** on the council prioritising cost savings.

The City Council sought the views of local businesses and employers to help inform the shape of Local Government Reorganisation that best supports future planning for housing and economic growth in and around Oxford city. Insights from this short survey contributes to ongoing work to understand how Oxford can meet its housing needs while supporting business growth and sustainable development.

35 responses were received to the City Council survey, across the Health, Technology, Engineering, Arts, Entertainment and Recreation, Education, University, Property, Retail and Voluntary sectors.

- **Over 80%** of respondents said being located in or near Oxford is very or extremely important to their business success.
- **Around 68% strongly agree** that Oxford should go beyond government's housing delivery targets.
- **Almost 85% agree** that affordable housing near Oxford is important for business growth.
- **46% favour** building additional homes close to the city, including suitable locations within the Green Belt. (23% would prefer development beyond the Green Belt)
- **Over half (54%) believe** future development should balance new homes with employment space.

The comprehensive public engagement programme has been central to the development of the three-unitary proposal. Feedback from this process demonstrates strong support for councils that are smaller, closer to their communities, and more responsive to local needs.

Responses from residents, businesses, and partners consistently indicate a preference for a locally responsive governance model that:
- Delivers tailored services
- Strengthens local representation
- Balances economic growth with heritage and environmental priorities

- Commitment to Local Voice.

This feedback underpins the Council's commitment to enhancing democratic participation through formal engagement structures that reflect both urban and rural perspectives. Each new authority will be rooted in its community, preserving local identity, enabling distinctive service models, and creating councils that residents recognise, trust, and feel part of.

The three Unitaries proposal reflects these priorities by:
- Preserving Oxfordshire's historic and cultural identity while aligning governance with community boundaries.
- Empowering residents through stronger local voice and participatory governance.
- Supporting economic growth and delivering affordable housing in sustainable locations.
- Integrating health, education, and social care services.
- Embedding principles of transparency, co-design, and tailored strategies for urban and rural needs

This approach ensures responsive, resilient, and equitable governance - safeguarding community identity while enabling Oxfordshire to thrive.

18.	List information and data used to understand who your residents or staff are and how they will be impacted.	- Horizon Scanning and Insight. - Third-party research - Reports - Discussions and support from Locality Managers - Partnership and Stakeholder liaison - Statistics about Oxford - Population data including density and projections - Demographic and socio-economic data - Required levels of council tax equalisation - Housing and homelessness data - Public health metrics - Skills data - GVA and business rates - Financial data - Predictive modelling on spends on key services.
19.	If you have not done any consultations or collected data & information, are you planning to do so in the future?	The Government's formal consultation process for Local Government Reorganisation is a statutory requirement. This process ensures that any proposed structural changes to local governance are subject to transparent and inclusive public scrutiny. Following the submission of reorganisation proposals, the Government initiates a public consultation inviting feedback from affected councils, stakeholders, and the wider community. The Secretary of State is obligated to consult with councils not submitting proposals and any other relevant parties. Responses gathered during this consultation are carefully considered before any

final decisions are made, ensuring that equality, community impact, and diverse perspectives are integral to the decision-making process.

Section 4: Impact analysis.

20.	Who does the activity impact?						
		Service Users	Yes ☒	No ☐	Don't Know ☐
		Members of staff	Yes ☒	No ☐	Don't Know ☐
		General public	Yes ☒	No ☐	Don't Know ☐
		Partner / Community Organisation	Yes ☒	No ☐	Don't Know ☐
		City Councillors	Yes ☒	No ☐	Don't Know ☐
		Council suppliers and contractors	Yes ☒	No	Don't Know ☐

21.	Does the activity impact positively or negatively on any protected characteristics as stated within Equality (Act 2010)?					
Protected Characteristic	**Positive**	**Negative**	**Neutral**	**Don't know**	**Data/information/evidence supporting your assessment**	**Analysis & insight Mitigations**
Age	☐	☐	☒	☐	No adverse impact identified; Inclusive service design will be maintained.	As with other characteristics, more detailed and through analysis, including engagement with impacted residents, can be carried

	☐	☐	☒	☐	Older and younger residents may benefit from services designed around local structures.	out later as implementation plans take shape and are delivered.
Disability **(Visible and invisible)**	☐	☐	☒	☐	Opportunities exist to improve physical and digital access through more responsive structures.	As with other characteristics, it is expected that work can be done to align policies, and thus until these proposals are developed it may be difficult to pinpoint specific examples of potential impact.
Gender re-assignment	☐	☐	☒	☐	No specific impacts identified at this stage.	As with other characteristics, more detailed and through analysis, including engagement with impacted residents, can be carried out later as implementation plans take shape and are delivered.
Marriage & Civil Partnership	☐	☐	☒	☐	No specific impacts identified at this stage.	As with other characteristics, more detailed and through analysis, including engagement with impacted residents, can be carried out later as implementation plans take shape and are delivered.
Race, Ethnicity and/or Citizenship	☐	☐	☒	☐	No specific impacts identified at this stage.	As with other characteristics, more detailed and through analysis, including engagement with impacted residents, can be carried out later as implementation plans take shape and are delivered.
Pregnancy & Maternity	☐	☐	☒	☐	No adverse impact identified; Inclusive service design will be maintained. Potential for positive impact through better local access to services (e.g., Children's Services, Adult Social Care and Maternity)	As with other characteristics, more detailed and through analysis, including engagement with impacted residents, can be carried out later as implementation plans take shape and are delivered.
Religion or Belief	☐	☐	☒	☐	No adverse impact identified; Inclusive service design will be maintained.	As with other characteristics, more detailed and through analysis, including engagement with impacted residents, can be carried out later as implementation plans take shape and are delivered.

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					Continued engagement with diverse communities will help address any specific local access needs. No differential impacts identified.	
Sex	☐	☐	☒	☐	No disproportionate impact identified. Monitoring through service redesign processes will ensure fairness.	As with other characteristics, more detailed and through analysis, including engagement with impacted residents, can be carried out later as implementation plans take shape and are delivered.
Sexual Orientation	☐	☐	☒	☐	No adverse impact identified. Inclusive service design will be maintained.	As with other characteristics, more detailed and through analysis, including engagement with impacted residents, can be carried out later as implementation plans take shape and are delivered.
Socio-economic inequalities such as: This was voluntarily adopted by Oxford City Council on the 13th of March 2024.	☐	☐	☒	☐	No disproportionate impact identified. Monitoring through service redesign processes will ensure fairness.	The new unitary authorities may have the freedom to tailor social and economic policies (e.g., on housing, employment, welfare support) to better reflect the unique socio-economic needs of their populations. Commissioning and procurement practices can be redesigned to prioritise local jobs, apprenticeships, and inclusive economic growth, with a more direct link between service planning and economic regeneration. There is also the potential that more localised services would mean a possible reduction in travel costs associated and reduced distances being travelled by residents. As with other characteristics, more detailed and through analysis,

						including engagement with impacted residents, can be carried out later as implementation plans take shape and are delivered.
Council of Sanctuary	☐	☐	☒	☐	No adverse impact identified; Inclusive service design will be maintained.	As with other characteristics, more detailed and through analysis, including engagement with impacted residents, can be carried out later as implementation plans take
Children and Young People (SEND, education, early years)	☐	☐	☒	☐	No disproportionate impact identified. Monitoring through service redesign processes will ensure fairness.	The three unitary authorities' proposal highlights the opportunity for better place-based delivery of education and early years support, particularly for children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND). Smaller Unitaries will allow for closer working with schools and care providers. Localised oversight is likely to reduce transport times and increase inclusion in mainstream settings. As with other characteristics, more detailed and through analysis, including engagement with impacted residents, can be carried out later as implementation plans take shape and are delivered.
Adult Social Care and Independent Living	☐	☐	☒	☐	No disproportionate impact identified. Monitoring through service redesign processes will ensure fairness.	Unitary authorities will have clearer accountability for social care. The proposal references greater opportunities to integrate adult social care with housing, healthcare and voluntary support services. This has specific benefits for older residents, disabled people, and carers through improved service navigation and responsiveness.

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						As with other characteristics, more detailed and through analysis, including engagement with impacted residents, can be carried out later as implementation plans take shape and are delivered.
Transport and Access to Services	☐	☐	☒	☐	No disproportionate impact identified. Monitoring through service redesign processes will ensure fairness.	Transport data shows variation in access to employment and education opportunities across Oxfordshire. Smaller councils with local insight are better positioned to advocate for improvements on critical routes and to enhance rural connectivity. This is likely to benefit those without access to private transport, such as older adults and low-income families. As with other characteristics, more detailed and through analysis, including engagement with impacted residents, can be carried out later as implementation plans take shape and are delivered.
Health and Inequalities	☐	☐	☒	☐	No disproportionate impact identified. Monitoring through service redesign processes will ensure fairness.	Localised Health Strategies: • Moving to three smaller Unitaries in Oxfordshire would allow each authority to design health initiatives that reflect local needs. • Oxfordshire has diverse communities - urban Oxford, rural areas, and market towns - each with different health challenges (e.g., access to services, lifestyle-related conditions). Smaller units could better target these variations.

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Addressing Wider determinants of Health
- The three unitary proposal could enable more integrated planning around housing, transport, healthcare and employment, which are key determinants of health.
- For example, rural areas might prioritise transport access to healthcare, while urban areas might focus on air quality, housing conditions, alongside healthcare.

Tackling Health Inequalities:
- Oxfordshire has pockets of deprivation (e.g., parts of Banbury and Oxford city) alongside affluent areas.
- Smaller Unitaries could focus resources on these high-need areas, reducing barriers for people with long-term conditions and mental health needs.

Equalities Implications:
- A more localised governance structure could improve engagement with vulnerable groups, ensuring services are culturally appropriate and accessible.
- This aligns with the goal of reducing barriers for those with chronic conditions or mental health needs.

As with other characteristics, more detailed and through analysis, including engagement with impacted residents, can be carried

						out later as implementation plans take shape and are delivered.
Community Safety and Cohesion	☐	☐	☒	☐	No adverse impact identified; Inclusive service design will be maintained. The three unitary authorities' proposal will continue and could better enable consistent local partnership working on community safety, including safeguarding, anti-social behaviour, and hate crime prevention. This is relevant to all protected groups but especially to women, younger people, and LGBTQ+ communities who may be at greater risk of targeted harm.	As with other characteristics, more detailed and through analysis, including engagement with impacted residents, will be carried out later as implementation plans take shape and are delivered.
Carers and Unpaid Carers	☐	☐	☒	☐	No disproportionate impact identified. Monitoring through service redesign processes will ensure fairness. Smaller authorities may be more attuned to local carer needs and able to provide more tailored support (e.g. localised carer breaks, peer groups, or training). A closer partnership between local authorities and voluntary/community sector organisations may make carer services more accessible and better coordinated with community assets	As with other characteristics, more detailed and through analysis, including engagement with impacted residents, can be carried out later as implementation plans take shape and are delivered.
Homeless population	☐	☐	☒	☐	No disproportionate impact identified. Monitoring through service redesign processes will ensure fairness.	As with other characteristics, it is expected that work will be done to align policies, and thus until these proposals are developed it may be difficult to pinpoint specific examples of potential impact.
Council employees	☐	☐	☒	☐	There will be impacts on working practices and changes to staffing as we transition to the new council/s.	Further work can be done to understand the specific impacts on

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					As with other characteristics, it is expected that work will be done to align policies, and thus until these proposals are developed it may be difficult to pinpoint specific examples of potential impact.	select groups of staff from across the different services. As implementation plans are developed and closer working continues throughout the process, the council will continue to analyse the potential impact of LGR on staff across all the council, and policies for the new authorities will ensure greater levels of consistency. As with other characteristics, it is expected that work will be done to align policies, and thus until these proposals are developed it may be difficult to pinpoint specific examples of potential impact.
Cabinet Members	☐	☐	☒	☐	No disproportionate impact identified. Monitoring through service redesign processes will ensure fairness.	As with other characteristics, it is expected that work will be done to align policies, and thus until these proposals are developed it may be difficult to pinpoint specific examples of potential impact.
Council suppliers & contractors	☐	☐	☒	☐	No disproportionate impact identified. Monitoring through service redesign processes will ensure fairness.	As with other characteristics, it is expected that work will be done to align policies, and thus until these proposals are developed it may be difficult to pinpoint specific examples of potential impact

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Section 5: Conclusion(s) of your Full Impact Assessment

22.		**Conclusions.**					
	☐	Stop and reconsider the activity.	☐	Adjust activity before beginning the activity	☒	**No major change(s) or adjustments**	☐	No major change(s) or adjustments and continue with the

			and continue to monitor.	**and continue with activity but continue to monitor.**	activity. No need to monitor in the future.

23.	**Please explain how you have reached your conclusions above.**	The reorganisation of local government is a once in a generation opportunity. This gives a key moment both locally and nationally to restore trust in local government by creating organisations which are fit for the future while reflecting their people and place.

Oxford City Council's three unitary authorities' proposal for Oxfordshire, presents three distinctive places with different opportunities, different demographics, different geographies, and different challenges. The greatest challenge is the demand for growth in housing to enable more people to be able to live – and live well – in Oxfordshire. The greatest opportunity is to unlock Oxfordshire's nationally significant economic growth potential at a scale that will help meet the Government's number one mission.

The proposed Greater Oxford area stands out from the rest of the county. Its population is younger, much more diverse, and more densely housed. The average age in Oxford is 31 years.[1], the youngest of any settlement across the three areas, compared to averages in the 40s elsewhere. Oxford is the fifth most densely populated district in the South East of England, and Greater Oxford is the most densely populated of the three unitary authorities, with an estimated 626 residents per square kilometre[2]. It has an estimated population of 240,000.

Young adults aged 15–24 years, make up 19% of Greater Oxford's population, which is above the national average of 12%[3],. This is largely due to the student and postgraduate population in Oxford, where nearly a quarter (23%) of residents fall in this age group. These factors, combined with the area's thriving knowledge economy, contribute to Greater Oxford being one of the most highly educated areas in England: 47% of residents hold qualifications at Level 4 or above, compared to 42% across Oxfordshire and 34% nationally[4],.

As a result of its younger profile, Greater Oxford has the lowest proportion of older residents, with just 15% of the population aged 65 or over; lower than England (19%), Northern Oxfordshire (19%) and Ridgeway (20%)[5],. Conversely, it also has the smallest proportion of children under 15 (16%) of the three unitary authorities, which compares to 19% in Northern Oxfordshire and 19% in Ridgeway[6],. |

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[1]Census 2021.

[2] Census 2021.

[3] ONS mid-year population estimates 2022

[4] Census 2021

[5] ONS mid-year population estimates 2022

[6] ONS mid-year population estimates 2022

Housing tenure reflects this demographic profile. Only 56% of residents in Greater Oxford own their home (with or without a mortgage), compared to 65% across Oxfordshire. Private renting is more common, with 27% of households renting privately or living rent-free, compared to 20% countywide. Greater Oxford also has higher rates of social renting (17% vs 15% countywide), rising to 21% in Oxford and 37% in Berinsfield, which lies in the south of the Greater Oxford area[7].

Of the three unitary authorities, house prices are highest in Greater Oxford, averaging £542,800[8]. This is driven largely by Oxford's average of £556,900, making it the least affordable of the three unitary authorities.

Greater Oxford is the most ethnically diverse part of Oxfordshire. Only 76% of residents identify as White, compared to 87% countywide. The proportion of Asian, Asian British or Asian Welsh residents is 13%, more than double the county average (6%). Just 70% of Greater Oxford residents were born in the UK, compared to 83% across England, 86% in Northern Oxfordshire, and 88% in Ridgeway.[9]

This diversity underscores the need for inclusive representation and services that engage with and reflect the needs of different communities.

As with many prosperous areas, Greater Oxford experiences stark inequalities. While overall health outcomes are better than the England average, there is a 10-year gap in male life expectancy between different areas.[10] Wealthy wards within Oxford, like Jericho, Marston, and Summertown are among the least deprived in the country, but they exist alongside areas such as Blackbird Leys and Rose Hill, which face long-standing challenges including low income, long-term unemployment, and poor health. In other more deprived parts of Greater Oxford such as Berinsfield, 21% of children live in absolute poverty, more than double the county average (10%) and 26% of households claim Universal Credit, compared to 16% in Oxfordshire as a whole.

To tackle these disparities, the new authority must take an integrated and coordinated approach, bringing together public health, housing, education, and wider community engagement into a single system of delivery. Localised decision-making will be crucial in ensuring services are shaped by and for communities, particularly those experiencing entrenched disadvantage.

The proposed Northern Oxfordshire authority includes towns such as Banbury, Bicester, Carterton, Chipping Norton, Witney, and Woodstock. The area is a mix of market towns and rural villages, with a more dispersed population than Greater Oxford. Banbury and Bicester serve as larger urban centres, while towns like Chipping Norton, Witney and Woodstock retain a more rural character. The population of the Northern Oxfordshire area is approximately 265,000.

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[7] All tenure figures are from Census 2021

[8] Land registry data; September 2024 to August 2025

[9] Census 2021

[10] Office for National Statistics. Life Expectancy tables

With around 222 residents per square kilometre, Northern Oxfordshire is the least densely populated of the three unitary authorities, well below the national average of 425 residents per square kilometre. There is wide variation across the area in terms of diversity and affluence between rural communities to more urban and diverse towns like Banbury and Bicester.

Residents in the Northern Oxfordshire area are generally older than Greater Oxford, with most towns having average ages in the 40s. Conversely, Northern Oxfordshire has the highest proportion of children under the age of five (6%), and 19% of the population are under 15, higher than Greater Oxford (16%) but similar to Ridgeway (19%).

Home ownership is high, with 67% of residents owning their homes. This is above the Oxfordshire average (65%) and higher than Greater Oxford (56%). Northern Oxfordshire also has the highest proportion of people living in houses (88%) of the three unitary authorities. This compares to the England average of 77%.

As is the case for Greater Oxford, there are clearly inequalities within the Northern Oxfordshire area. Towns such as Banbury and Carterton face high levels of deprivation, lower qualification levels, and significant private renting. Banbury has six areas ranked among the 20% most deprived in England. By contrast, places like Woodstock, Burford, and Standlake are among the least deprived.

Child poverty is higher in Northern Oxfordshire than Ridgeway, with 10.5% of children living in absolute poverty, compared to 8.5% in Ridgeway, although both have lower child poverty rates than Greater Oxford at 11%. Within the Northern Oxfordshire area, Banbury has child poverty rates as high as 17%, compared to just 6% in Woodstock.

Just over 36% of residents who are aged 16 and older, have level 4 and above qualifications. Whilst this is the lowest of the three unitary authorities, it is higher than the England average of 34%. Additionally, 15% of adults in Northern Oxfordshire have no qualifications, the highest proportion of the three areas but lower than the country average of 18%.

Ethnic diversity is lower than Greater Oxford, with 91% of residents identifying as White, compared to 76% in Greater Oxford and 87% countywide. The largest ethnic minority group is Asian (4%), though this remains below the Oxfordshire average (6%). Greater diversity exists in towns such as Banbury and Bicester.

These characteristics call for a place-based and locally responsive approach. While much of the area is relatively affluent, inequalities persist, particularly in the more urban centres such as Banbury. A joined-up system that brings together housing, education, health, and infrastructure will be essential. Tailored solutions for isolated rural communities, older residents, and disadvantaged towns must be informed by the voices of local residents.

The proposed Ridgeway authority area stretches from the outskirts of Reading across the hills of the North Wessex Downs and includes a mix of towns, villages, and rural communities. Larger settlements include Abingdon, Didcot, Henley and Newbury; market towns such as Wantage and Wallingford; and smaller villages across West Berkshire, South Oxfordshire, and the Vale of White Horse. It has the largest population of the three unitary authorities, at approximately 430,000 residents.

While some towns such as Abingdon, Didcot, and Henley act as commuter and economic hubs with strong rail and road links, much of Ridgeway is rural, with lower-density settlements and open countryside. Population density is approximately 248 people per square kilometres, higher than in Northern Oxfordshire but still below national and Greater Oxford figures.

Ridgeway shares many similarities with Northern Oxfordshire, including a market town and rural profile that contrasts with the more urban Greater Oxford.

Residents in Ridgeway are older on average than Greater Oxford, with most settlements having average ages in the 40s. It has the highest proportion of people aged 65 and over, of the three unitary areas (20%), compared to 19% in Northern Oxfordshire and 15% in Greater Oxford. However, Ridgeway also has a higher proportion of children under 15 (19%) than Greater Oxford, pointing to a mixed-age population with intergenerational needs.

Home ownership is highest in Ridgeway, with 70% of households owning their home outright or with a mortgage. This is above both Northern Oxfordshire (67%) and Greater Oxford (56%). Only 16% of households rent privately (compared to 27% in Greater Oxford), and social renting is also lower, at 14%, versus 17% in Greater Oxford.

Ridgeway is the least deprived of the three areas, with a higher overall Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) score. It has the highest proportion of residents who fall in social grade AB (35%), and the lowest level of children in absolute poverty overall (8.5%) of the three unitary authorities.

However, as is the case for both Greater Oxford and Northern Oxfordshire, Ridgeway is not an homogeneous area. While child poverty rates are low overall (around 5% in many areas within Ridgeway), there are places where poverty levels are much higher. In parts of Abingdon, Didcot, and Calcot for example, up to 16% of children live in absolute poverty.

Ridgeway is the least ethnically diverse of the three unitary areas. Around 92% of residents identify as White, compared to 87% countywide and 76% in Greater Oxford. The largest ethnic minority group is Asian, making up 3% of the population. However, more diverse populations exist in Didcot and Abingdon, where 80% of residents identify as White.

The area's large geographic spread and varied settlement types mean services must be tailored to a wide range of needs. Coordinating transport, health, housing, and education at a local level will be vital to ensuring equity. Engaging directly with communities, particularly in areas facing disadvantage, will help shape responsive and inclusive services across Ridgeway's diverse social and geographic landscape.

Oxford itself is also the second most unequal city in the UK, while the city alongside areas of Banbury and Abingdon have a number of wards in the bottom 20% of the Indices of Multiple Deprivation.[11]

The proposal for three unitary authorities is fundamentally designed to deliver the best possible outcomes for the people, places, and economy of Oxfordshire. It is a direct response to the clear needs and ambitions of the area, providing a blueprint for a modern, effective, and equitable model of local government.
In developing the case for a three unitary council – a city unitary with expanded boundaries, a northern unitary and a southern unitary including West Berkshire – the council have compared the preferred option to alternative proposals to ensure they are proposing the best option for the Oxfordshire region. Each option has been appraised and scored against the Government's LGR criteria.

Based on the Councils assessment, the three unitary proposition with modified boundaries for Greater Oxford represents the option which best meets the government's LGR criteria, its wider growth mission and, most importantly, the needs of the residents and communities of Oxfordshire.

The three unitary model empowers locally accountable, place-based leadership to deliver services which are tailored to the needs of communities and creates significant benefits of size and scale.

Greater Oxford, Northern Oxfordshire and Ridgeway would represent, co-produce with and serve areas which have their own distinct identities, context and existing partnerships. Three Unitaries represent a model of councils with a sustainable scale and geography to work with a Mayoral Strategic Authority with a balance of voices which truly represent the communities for which they advocate.

The council's proposal for three unitary authorities is fundamentally designed to deliver the best possible outcomes for the people, places, and economy of Oxfordshire, and West Berkshire. It is a direct response to the clear needs and ambitions of the area, providing a blueprint for a modern, effective, and equitable model of local government.

The three Unitaries will deliver a future where Oxfordshire achieves its full potential across six critical dimensions:
- where **prosperity** is unlocked through Oxford's economic engine;
- where good **homes** are available to all, and fit well into Oxfordshire;
- where **quality of life** is enhanced through preventative, integrated services;
- where community **identity** is strengthened rather than diluted;
- where democratic **voice** is empowered at every level; and
- where governance is **future-fit** and financially sustainable.

For Oxfordshire, and West Berkshire communities, the implementation of proposed three unitary authorities is expected to deliver significant benefits through more streamlined governance and improved coordination of services.

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[11] https://www.centreforcities.org/reader/cities-outlook-2017/city-monitor-latest-data/

As the county's economic and cultural hub, Oxford would gain from a governance model that prioritises housing delivery, transport connectivity, and infrastructure investment, supporting inclusive growth and addressing long-standing affordability challenges.

Enhanced collaboration between councils and partners would enable better integration of services for diverse communities, including students, ethnic minorities, and low-income households. The proposal emphasises equitable distribution of opportunities and active engagement with all communities to ensure that Oxford growth complements, rather than overshadows, the wider county.

The three unitary authorities model has at its core communities, the councils, and partners working together to co-deliver early intervention and preventative outcomes in efficient and inclusive ways. This proposal strikes the balance of Oxfordshire's diverse needs in serving three distinct geographies and their communities across the county and into West Berkshire, which shares long historic links with southern Oxfordshire. It enables complementary and connected co-existence into the future.

The proposal delivers three local authorities that:

- Are of significant size and scale;
- Have economic opportunities which can unlock new homes, new skills and new jobs for local people in the most sustainable way, anchored in the character of Oxfordshire's distinct historical city, towns and villages;
- Have different communities and geographies with distinct needs which are best served by locally tailored and delivered public services which ensure local voices are heard and identity retained; and
- Are financially sustainable, safe and legal, with real opportunities to drive efficiencies, savings and local benefit not only through economies of scale but meaningful reform which reduces demand for services and ensures the most people have access to fulfilling lives.

Section 6: Monitoring and review plan.

The responsibility for maintaining a monitoring arrangement of the EqIA action plan lies with the service/team completing the EqIA. These arrangements must be built into the performance management framework such as KPIs or Risk Registers.

24.	Who or which team or service area will be responsible for monitoring equalities impact?	1. Corporate Services Directorate. 2. Law, Governance and Strategy Services.

25.	Who (individual, team, or service area) will be responsible for carrying out the EqIA review?	1. Corporate Leadership Team. 2. Transition Director. 3. Corporate Policy and Partnerships Officers.			
26.	How often will the equality impact be reviewed for this activity?	At least annually	27.	Date when the EqIA will be reviewed again.	Spring 2026

Section 7: Sign-off

Name: Mish Tullar

Job Title: Transition Director

Signature:

29 October 2025

Name: Sally Hicks

Job Title: Business Intelligence Lead

Signature: *Sally Hicks*

29 October 2025

Name: Sobia Afridi

Job Title: Diversity and Inclusion Specialist

Signature: *Sobia Afridi*

23 October 2025

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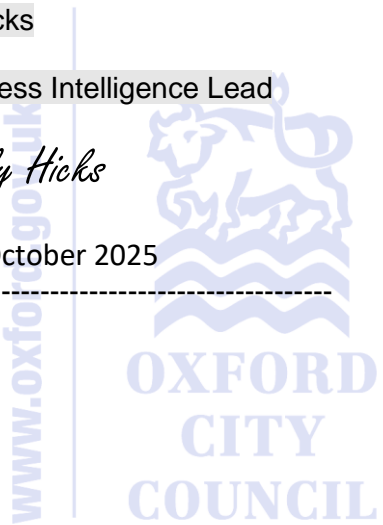
APPENDIX ONE: ENGAGEMENT DETAIL

Stakeholder engagement is ongoing. The Council have worked with thousands of stakeholders from across Oxford and Oxfordshire's diverse communities and partnerships including citizens, businesses, public services, voluntary sector, employees, MPs and neighbouring councils.

 The Council has engaged with, amongst others:

- Residents across Oxfordshire and West Berkshire
- Oxfordshire businesses
- Police & Crime Commissioner and Oxfordshire Police Commander
- Oxfordshire Fire & Rescue Service
- Universities
- Oxfordshire MPs and Berkshire MPs
- Healthwatch Oxfordshire
- ICB and health trusts
- Oxfordshire voluntary and community sector stakeholders and partners
- Oxfordshire Association of Local Councils
- Oxford Civic Society
- Oxford City Council employees and their representatives, Unison and Unite.
- Our Partnerships Fast Cities (Oxford, Cambridge, Milton Keynes, Swindon, Norwich Peterborough) and Cathedral Cities (Oxford, Cambridge, Norwich, Exeter, Lincoln) Groups
- Multi-Academy Trust education partners
- Parish Councils
- Conference of Colleges (Oxford) in particular landowning colleges
- Oxford Growth Commission
- Oxford Bus Company
- Leaders of 6 other local authorities within the proposed geography, and Leaders of 3 neighbouring councils in Berkshire and Swindon

In addition, the Council has engaged and listened through a range of media including:

- Meetings and calls
- Workshops
- Inviting letters of support
- Online surveys
- Social media
- Round table events
- Community based venues across Oxfordshire
- Short-form videos
- Bus shelter posters
- Public events.

Three Unitary Authorities engagement programme

The engagement programme launched in June 2025 with a website, special edition newsletters, press release, short-form video, bus shelter posters and, Facebook and Instagram advertising. The goal was to raise awareness for 3 Unitary Authority proposal Oxford and drive traffic to the website.

In July 2025, the online survey and drop-in events were launched. The Council issued a press release, Facebook events, Facebook and Instagram advertising and TikTok advertising. The Council also created a series of short-form videos, with Cabinet Members inviting residents to visit drop-in events in Berinsfield, Botley, Kennington and Kidlington.

A series of short-form videos explored themes of 3 Unitary Authority proposal: transport, housing, local identity and the economy.

Drop-in Events and Community Forums

A series of drop-in events were held across Oxfordshire in Oxford, Abingdon, Banbury Berinsfield, Botley, Didcot, Kennington, Kidlington, Wheatley and Witney, and one in Newbury (West Berkshire).

These events provided opportunities for residents to ask questions, share concerns, and engage directly with council officers and elected members. Engagement took place with approximately 340 citizens across all eleven events.

Public responses to the proposals reflected a wide range of perspectives, highlighting both areas of support and concern across key themes.

Many respondents expressed uncertainty regarding future council tax levels, councillor representation, and election timelines. There were notable concerns about the potential loss of local identity, particularly in rural communities. A recurring theme was the need for greater clarity on the role of parish councils and how local voices would be incorporated under the new governance structure.

Feedback on transport and infrastructure was strong, with widespread concern about currently inadequate public transport links. Respondents called for improvements to Park & Ride services and raised issues around congestion, Low Traffic Neighbourhoods (LTNs), and road closures in and around Oxford. Many expressed a view that transport decisions about the city were being made by councillors representing distant parts of the county. Some felt that current infrastructure capacity may be insufficient to support the scale of proposed growth.

Views on housing expansion were mixed. While some welcomed growth and the potential for increased availability of affordable housing, others expressed concerns over the potential for overdevelopment, particularly in areas lacking adequate services. Concerns were raised about building on flood plains and contaminated land, and there was a clear desire to preserve rural character.

Some respondents questioned the alignment of the proposals with climate goals and expressed concern that a focus on science and innovation could come at the expense of community identity. There were calls for deeper grassroots engagement and reforms to welfare systems to ensure social equity.

Concerns were voiced about council tax revenues being disproportionately allocated to urban centres, and questions were raised regarding job security for existing local authority staff. However, there was also interest in opportunities for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and a strong desire for equitable service provision across districts.

Three major surveys of residents were conducted:

- The Council held an initial online Residents Panel survey in February 2025 that focused on gauging public appetite for change and understanding priorities, using its standing representative panel of Oxford citizens.

- The Council held an open survey on its consultation portal about local government reorganisation between 1 July and 12 August 2025. The survey was promoted via social media, local media, and community networks across Oxfordshire and West Berkshire. It explored public preferences for different governance models and gathered detailed feedback on the three-unitary proposal.

- A second survey of the Oxford Residents Panel was undertaken between 23 July and 15 September which added questions on LGR to the standard annual survey of residents' satisfaction with Council services.

Key findings from our surveys:

February 2025 Oxford Residents Panel Survey

In February 2025, Oxford City Council conducted a survey on the interim proposals using its Residents' Panel. The panel is a representative sample of Oxford residents managed on the Council's behalf by independent polling company Beehive.

The survey, which had 266 responses, found:

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

A press release was issued on the survey results: Greater Oxford: The survey results are in

July – August 2025 Public Survey on LGR

Over 1,580 people participated in the Council's main public survey on LGR, with a strong representation from across Oxfordshire's diverse communities and West Berkshire residents.

Table 1: Survey responses by current District and percentage of total responses

	Total	Percentage
Cherwell	153	9.68%
Oxford City	611	38.67%
South Oxfordshire	236	14.94%
Vale of White Horse	294	18.61%
West Berkshire	115	7.28%
West Oxfordshire	120	7.59%
Other	51	3.23%

Key survey findings include:

- 69.4% agreed or strongly agreed with the statement: "Councils are most effective when they are smaller and closer to the people they serve, enabling them to respond and adapt more easily to local needs;" 17.1% disagreed or strongly disagreed.
- 80.0% agreed or strongly agreed with the statement: "Urban and rural areas often require different approaches to housing, transport, education and skills, and other key council services;" 12.1% disagreed or strongly disagreed.
- 75.1% agreed or strongly agreed with the statement: "Housing, transport, education and skills need different approaches between urban and rural areas;" 16.4% disagreed or strongly disagreed.
- 68.0% agreed or strongly agreed with the statement: "I want to see more housing built in the right places to meet local needs (including affordability, proximity to family/friends, and access to jobs);" 16.6% disagreed or strongly disagreed.

The Council also asked residents whether councils should prioritise "good quality services and responding to local need" or "cost savings." The results showed a strong preference for "good quality services and responding to local need."

A total of 914 comments were collected in response to this open-ended question, representing 58% of the 1,581 overall survey responses.

A press release was issue on the survey results: Residents prefer smaller, more responsive councils, survey finds

July-September Oxford Residents Panel Survey
Two additional questions were included in the 2025 survey specifically to inform the Council's LGR submission. These questions explored views on:

- The effectiveness of council structures in relation to size and proximity to communities.
- The need for differentiated service approaches between urban and rural areas.
- Preferences regarding service quality versus cost-saving priorities.

406 responses were collected from the representative sample of Oxford residents, using a structured survey format, with participants asked to indicate their level of agreement on a scale. The data was analysed to produce net agreement and disagreement scores, providing a clear indication of overall sentiment and areas of divergence.

October 2025 Oxford Housing and Growth – Business Stakeholder Survey
The Council is seeking the views of local businesses and employers to help inform the shape of Local Government Reorganisation that best supports future planning for housing and economic growth in and around Oxford city. Insights from this short survey will contribute to ongoing work to understand how Oxford can meet its housing needs while supporting business growth and sustainable development.

1. Council Size and Local Responsiveness

A majority of respondents (62%) agreed that councils are most effective when they are smaller and closer to the communities they serve. This reflects a clear preference for governance models that enable responsiveness and adaptability to local needs. Only 22% disagreed, indicating broad support for more localised decision-making. Some residents expressed reservations, potentially reflecting concerns about fragmentation, reduced economies of scale, or inconsistencies in service delivery across different areas.

2. Differentiated Approaches for Urban and Rural Areas

An even larger proportion (72%) agreed that urban and rural areas often require distinct approaches to housing, transport, education, skills, and other key services. This supports the strategic case for place-based policy design and delivery. A minority (12%) disagreed, suggesting some concerns about fairness or the risk of unequal service standards, particularly in areas that straddle urban-rural boundaries. 214

3. Service Quality vs. Cost Savings

When asked about service priorities, 90% of respondents expressed a strong preference for councils to prioritise good quality services and responsiveness to local need. In contrast, views on prioritising cost savings were more divided, with 43% in agreement and 40% in disagreement.

Stakeholder and Organisational Feedback

Engagement with key stakeholders provided valuable insights:

- University, Colleges and developers: Interested in the scale of growth proposed and opportunity to address Oxford's housing crisis, highlighted the need to maintain strong links across the knowledge spine and noted the context of Devolution placing responsibility for strategic transport and skills with an MSA.
- Business and Community Groups: Generally supportive of streamlined services, delivery of affordable housing, local accountability, and economic development opportunities.
- Healthwatch Oxfordshire: Emphasised the importance of safeguarding public health and social care integration, and ensuring local voice in health governance
- Parish and Town Councils: Expressed mixed views—some welcomed the opportunity for greater localism, while others sought clarity on powers and funding

Insights and Lessons Learned

The engagement process highlighted several key lessons:

- Early and inclusive engagement builds trust and improves proposals
- There is a strong appetite for localised governance that reflects community needs
- Clear communication about service delivery, cost savings, and democratic accountability is essential.
- Stakeholders value transparency and co-design in shaping future governance

Three Unitaries engagement

Between June and August 2025, the three Unitaries engagement programme achieved strong digital visibility and engagement across six platforms over the period. A total of 32 unique content pieces were shared across Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, LinkedIn and X, with 11 Facebook events were created to support in-person activities.
The communications targeted the messages to Oxfordshire (763,218 residents) and West Berkshire (163,367 residents). This means everyone in our region saw our social media posts on average 2.8. times. A significant proportion of the views were on TikTok, where 74% of our audience is 18 to 34 years old.

Key outcomes included:

- 2.6M+ impressions – broad reach and visibility
- 38.8K link clicks – strong interest in content
- 1,650 hours of video watched – high engagement with video formats
- 8.3K reactions, 2.7K comments, 1.5K shares – active user interaction
- 1.1K saves – content perceived as valuable by users

The communications successfully combined reach with meaningful engagement, particularly through video content and link-driven actions. These results suggest a well-targeted strategy that encouraged both awareness and interaction. Content output included:
- 32 unique content pieces shared across six platforms
- 11 Facebook events created for in-person activities
- Performance Highlights (4-month period):
  - 2,613,111 impressions – total times content was displayed to users
  - 8,358 likes/reactions – user engagement through likes and other reactions
  - 2,771 comments – direct user responses and discussions
  - 1,476 shares – content redistributed by users
  - 1,100 saves – content bookmarked for later
  - 38,874 link clicks – users clicking through to external content
  - 1,650 hours watched – total video watch time across platforms (video content only)

TikTok and Instagram were especially effective in driving saves and shares, indicating strong audience resonance.

Key themes from verbatim feedback:

- Transport and Housing videos sparked the most discussion, with users expressing both support and concern
- Positive sentiment focused on solutions like the Cowley Branch Line to ease congestion
- Concerns included scepticism about housing developments respecting the Green Belt and fears of increased traffic
- Emerging narratives included:
- *Need genuinely affordable housing*
- *Avoid additional housing leading to more congestion*
    - *LTNs are the core issue*
    - Suggestions for tram lines and critiques of bus commuting costs.

Oxford City Council Member workshops

Four Member workshops were delivered as part of the Council's 3 Unitary Authority Local Government Reorganisation proposal. Each workshop focused on key themes, were led and facilitated by one of the Councils senior officers and were open to all Members.
- Housing delivery and economy
- Transport
- Social Services, communities and housing integration
- Governance and local representation.

The Council's core LGR team supported the workshops, and the discussions helped the Council to develop the overall proposals for a three-unitary arrangement across Oxfordshire and West Berkshire.

Oxfordshire Parish Council engagement

Two parish council engagement events have been held to consider each of the LGR proposals. The first organised by the Oxfordshire Association of Local Councils, with about 50 parish councillors attending. The second organised by Beckley Parish Council in the form of a public meeting, with many parish councils represented. Key issues raised include rural identity and concerns about villages becoming urban extensions, the scale of development, and the need for improved bus and rail services. There was a need for better engagement, increased resources and a clearer voice for parishes with new unitary councils – with a hope that they might be co-opted onto proposed new Neighbourhood Committees.

Voluntary and Community Sector engagement

Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS) partners were engaged through an LGR briefing session organised by the umbrella body Oxfordshire Community and Voluntary Action and through participation in focus groups organised by Oxford City Council. The engagement confirmed that smaller, place-based councils would help build local connections between residents, groups and local authorities. There was strong support for a more place-based approach highlighted strong support for community-led, locally responsive services, alongside several key concerns and opportunities for improvement.

VCS organisations included those from working in cultural, careers, social care, environmental, mental health, housing older people, children and local community groups. A summary of feedback is set out below.

Community Strengths and Assets

- Strong support for **hyperlocal, community-centered, and thematic engagement**, with smaller VCS partners seen as agile, responsive, and central to prevention and wellbeing.
- **Existing community activity and partnerships** are valued, and building on these will improve prevention, resilience, and connections across Oxfordshire.
- **Neighbourhood hubs and community centres** are key touchpoints, particularly where the co-location of staff has already shown positive outcomes.

Collaborative Action and Governance

- **Local partnerships and subgroups** (e.g., nature partnerships, community associations) demonstrate the power of collaborative working. Sustaining and expanding these is a priority.
- Clear appetite for **participatory governance models** such as neighbourhood budgeting and community-led decision-making.
- Strong support for the **three-unitary proposal** as more responsive to local needs, with a focus on long-term outcomes rather than just cost savings.

Support for Vulnerable Residents and Communities

- Rising demand for services for **SEND children, young carers, and families** is placing pressure on small charities, who face funding gaps and capacity strains.

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- Ongoing need for **sustainable support and funding models** for VCS, including reforms to commissioning and contract processes with a much more engaged and local approach, connecting residents to more local and bespoke support in their communities.

Nature, Culture, and Identity

- Enthusiasm for **green and blue spaces** as drivers of health and wellbeing, antisocial behaviour reduction, and community cohesion, with alignment to **Local Nature Recovery strategies**.
- **Align environmental and cultural priorities** across planning—embed nature recovery, green space protection, and cultural amenities in housing and transport growth.
- Protecting **Oxford's cultural identity** and ensuring cultural amenities and activities are distributed across new housing developments is vital to community cohesion and reducing travel pressures.
- **Align environmental and cultural priorities** across planning—embed nature recovery, green space protection, and cultural amenities in housing and transport growth.

Services and Accessibility

- Broad support for **person-centered, locally accessible services**, with blended digital and face-to-face delivery.
- Concerns about gaps in **basic local facilities** like GP surgeries, swimming pools, and community centres.
- **Transport and connectivity**, especially in rural and outlying areas, is a major concern. Better links to Oxford are needed for access to jobs, education, and healthcare. Integration with housing and support for sustainable transport is essential.

Opportunities and Next Steps

- Strengthen and scale up **local VCS partnerships**, especially within prevention and wellbeing work.
- Explore **participatory budgeting and neighbourhood governance** to increase community autonomy.
- Align transport, housing, and environmental planning to ensure **growth directly benefits local communities**.
- Ensure **clear protections for green spaces** and transparent communication of plans.
- Build **capacity in the Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise sector** through revised funding processes that address gaps and better link investment to local growth.

Public Meeting on Local Government Reform – September 2025

Beckley and Stowood Parish Council hosted a public meeting in September 2025 to discuss proposals for Local Government Reform. Oxford City Council was invited to present, alongside representatives from other councils and local stakeholders.

The meeting provided an overview of the three proposed Unitary Authority models, outlining their respective implications and potential benefits for the community. Attendees had the opportunity to ask questions and engage in discussion.

Presentations were delivered by:
- The Leader of Oxford City Council (Three Unitary Authorities proposal)
- The Leader of Oxfordshire County Council (Single Unitary Authority proposal)
- The Leader of South Oxfordshire District Council (Two Unitary Authorities proposal)

Approximately 90 people attended, including residents, Parish Council representatives, and local activists.

Stakeholders expressed significant interest in the implications of Local Government Reorganisation, raising a range of questions and concerns. Key themes included financial clarity and sustainability, with queries about funding arrangements and long-term financial resilience.

Governance and representation were also prominent, particularly regarding the future role and capacity of councillors, the balance between efficiency and effective representation, and the preservation of local identity. The importance of maintaining local identity and ensuring accessibility to council services - including the ability to speak to someone in person in an office-based environment - was highlighted, particularly in the context of a potentially larger, or more remote unitary authority.

Environmental issues featured strongly, with calls for robust greenbelt protection and clarity on how environmental sustainability would be prioritised amid planning and housing pressures.

Partnership working was another area of focus, with questions about integration with key partners such as Thames Valley Police, the BOB Integrated Care Board, and South-Central Ambulance Service. The need for clear communication and engagement with Parish Councils was also highlighted.

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Finally, concerns were raised about whether public views, such as opposition to congestion charges, are genuinely considered in decision-making, transport and connectivity, and 'Will Parish Councils really be involved and listened to'.

October 2025 Oxford Housing and Growth – Business Stakeholder Survey

The City Council sought the views of local businesses and employers to help inform the shape of Local Government Reorganisation that best supports future planning for housing and economic growth in and around Oxford city. Insights from this short survey contributes to ongoing work to understand how Oxford can meet its housing needs while supporting business growth and sustainable development.

35 responses were received to the City Council survey, across the Health, Technology, Engineering, Arts, Entertainment and Recreation, Education, University, Property, Retail and Voluntary sectors.

- Over 80% of respondents said being located in or near Oxford is very or extremely important to their business success.
- Around 68% strongly agree that Oxford should go beyond government's housing delivery targets.
- Almost 85% agree that affordable housing near Oxford is important for business growth.
- 46% favour building additional homes close to the city, including suitable locations within the Green Belt. (23% would prefer development beyond the Green Belt)
- Over half (54%) believe future development should balance new homes with employment space.

Summary findings from the Business Stakeholder survey:

Location Importance
How important is being located within or near Oxford to the success of your business? - Please explain why being located within or near Oxford is important (or not) to your business, and any benefits or challenges you experience.

- Being located within or near Oxford is generally considered highly important for most stakeholders, with significant benefits in client proximity, community engagement, academic and professional networking, and operational efficiency.

  Challenges such as congestion, cost of living, and planning complexity are acknowledged but often seen as manageable trade-offs for the strategic advantages of an Oxford location. 30 responses received.

Housing Delivery Target
To what extent do you agree that Oxford should go beyond the government's target for delivering new homes in and around the city?

- 26 Responses received on this question.

Stakeholders generally support additional housing in and around Oxford, with a strong emphasis on affordability, accessibility, and community integration. Many highlight the need to ensure housing supports the local workforce, including essential and lower-paid employees, while avoiding sprawl or unsustainable development.

Some stakeholders also stress that housing growth must be carefully managed to protect green spaces, historic areas, and the city's character, and be accompanied by supporting infrastructure such as transport, schools, and community facilities.

Importance of Affordable Housing for Business Growth
To what extent do you agree that the supply of affordable housing near Oxford is important for business growth?

- 21 responses received.

Stakeholders consistently highlight that affordable housing is essential for attracting and retaining a full spectrum of workers, supporting local businesses, and sustaining Oxford's broader economy. Without access to reasonably priced housing, recruitment and workforce stability are significantly constrained, which can impact productivity, service delivery, and the city's research and innovation ecosystem.

Affordable housing is also seen as important for community cohesion, sustainable commuting, and supporting public services, such as schools, while helping create a diverse and vibrant city centre that sustains businesses and the wider economy.

Priorities for Housing Locations
Alongside sites within the city, where should we prioritise building the additional homes Oxford needs?

- 19 responses received.

Overall, stakeholders support a balanced approach: densifying the city, making use of brownfield and greyfield sites, carefully extending into areas with good transport links, and avoiding or minimally impacting Green Belt land and existing green spaces.

Priorities for Future Development
How should future development be prioritised?

- 17 responses received.

Stakeholders emphasise the need for a balanced, mixed-use approach that supports both housing and economic growth. While there is strong support for new homes, particularly to address affordability and workforce recruitment, many also stress the importance of preserving and providing commercial, office, and research space to sustain Oxford's economy, including the arts, leisure, and high-tech sectors.

Commercial Development and Jobs Near Oxford
What do you feel about delivering more commercial development and jobs close to the city of Oxford, in suitable locations in the Green Belt?

- 19 responses received.

Stakeholders support strategic commercial development near Oxford, particularly to support the knowledge economy and sustainable commuting, but stress that Green Belt land should generally be protected, brownfield sites prioritised, and housing provision integrated to support the workforce.

Stakeholder Engagement register

Stakeholder	Sector	Format
GP Partner - Clinical Director - Oxford	Health	Meeting
Boundary Commission for England	Public administration and governance	Meeting
3 Unitary Authority - Survey	Public	Survey
Key Oxford City Stakeholders	Cross-sector strategic collaboration - Oxford	Letter
Oxford Civic Society	Civic registered charity	Meeting and
Oxford Residents Panel	Public	Survey
Oxford Growth Commission	Economic development and infrastructure	Meeting
Oxford Strategic Partnership: - Public Sector - Business Sector - Community Sector - Health Sector - Education Sector - Thames Valley Police - Voluntary Sector	Cross-sector strategic collaboration - Oxford	Meetings
Oxfordshire Association of Local Councils	Public administration and governance	In-person. (All Oxfordshire proposals represented)
Oxfordshire Community & Voluntary Action workshop - 23 VCSE organisations were represented	Third Sector	In-person. (All Oxfordshire proposals represented)
Oxfordshire Fire and Rescue Service	Public administration and governance	Meeting
Oxfordshire County Council	Public administration and governance	Meetings
Cherwell District Council	Public administration and governance	Meeting
South Oxfordshire District Council	Public administration and governance	Meetings
Vale of White Horse District Council	Public administration and governance	Meetings
West Oxfordshire Council	Public administration and governance	Meetings
West Berkshire County Council	Public administration and governance	Meeting
Abingdon (Vale of White Horse District Council)	Public - In the community	Drop-In Event
Banbury (Cherwell District Council)	Public - In the community	Drop-In Event
Berinsfield (South Oxfordshire District Council)	Public - In the community	Drop-In Event
Botley (South Oxfordshire District Council)	Public - In the community	Drop-In Event
Didcot (South Oxfordshire District Council)	Public - In the community	Drop-In Event
Kidlington (Cherwell District Council)	Public - In the community	Drop-In Event

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Newbury (West Berkshire Council)	Public - In the community	Drop-In Event
Oxford (Oxford City Council)	Public - In the community	Drop-In Event
Wheatley (South Oxfordshire District Council)	Public - In the community	Drop-In Event
Witney (West Oxfordshire District Council)	Public - In the community	Drop-In Event
Beckley and Stowood Parish Council - Public & Parishes	Public - In the community	Public meeting
Oxford City Council - Corporate Policy Officers Group (internal)	Public administration and governance	Meetings
Oxford City Council - Employees	Public administration and governance	Meetings
Oxford City Council & Oxford Direct Service - Employee Focus Groups	Public administration and governance	Focus Groups
Oxford City Council - Leadership Conversation	Public administration and governance	Meetings
Oxford City Council - Internal Officer groups	Public administration and governance	Workshops
Oxford City Council - Internal Framing Groups	Public administration and governance	Workshops
Oxford City Council - Leaders Group	Public administration and governance	Meetings
Oxford City Council - Group Leaders	Public administration and governance	Meetings
Oxford City Council - Elected Member sessions - Social Services, Communities, and Housing Integration - Transport - Governance and Local Representation - Housing and Economy	Public administration and governance	Workshops
Lee Dillon MP (MP for Newbury)	UK Parliament	Meeting
Calum Miller MP (MP for Bicester and Woodstock)	UK Parliament	Meeting
Charlie Maynard MP (MP for Witney)	UK Parliament	Meeting
Freddie Van Mierlo MP (MP for Henley and Thame)	UK Parliament	Meeting
Layla Moran MP (MP for Oxford West and Abingdon)	UK Parliament	Meeting
Olly Glover MP (MP for Didcot and Wantage)	UK Parliament	Meeting
Rt Hon Anneliese Dodds MP (MP for Oxford East)	UK Parliament	Meeting
Sean Woodcock MP (MP for Banbury)	UK Parliament	Meeting
Olivia Bailey MP (MP for Reading West and Mid-Berkshire)	UK Parliament	Meeting
Matt Rodda MP (MP for Reading Central)	UK Parliament	Discussion
Yuan Yang MP for Ealrley and Woodley)	UK Parliament	Discussion
Thames Valley Police Crime Commissioner	Public administration and governance	Meeting
Thames Valley Police Chief Superintendent	Public administration and governance	Meeting
Unison and Unite	Public Service Unions	Meeting
Healthwatch Oxfordshire	Health	Written feedback
Secondary Education	Education	Meetings

Voluntary and Community Stakeholders - 3 sessions, with representation from 13 organisations.	Third Sector	On-line Drop-In Events
Oxfordshire County Council - Service Transformation for Adult Social Care	Teach-In Session	Briefing
Oxfordshire County Council - Service Transformation for Children's Services & SEND (Teach-In session)	Teach-In Session	Briefing
Oxfordshire Fire and Rescue Service	Teach-In Session	Briefing
Conference of Colleges - University and landowning colleges	Higher Education	Meeting
Oxford Housing & Growth - Business Stakeholders	Oxford Business Stakeholders	Survey
Oxford Business Stakeholders	Oxford Business Stakeholders	Meetings
Oxford Brookes University (Vice-Chancellor, Oxford Brookes University)	Higher Education	Meeting
Oxford Bus Company	Public Transport	Meeting
Fast Cities Group: - Cambridge City Council - Milton Keynes Council - Norwich City Council - Oxford City Council - Peterborough City Council - Swindon Borough Council	Public administration and governance	Meetings
Oxford Health NHS Foundation Trust	Health	Meeting
Cathedral Cities Group: - Cambridge City Council - City of Lincoln Council - Exeter City Council - Gloucester City Council - Ipswich Borough Council - Norwich City Council - Oxford City Council	Public administration and governance	Meetings
District Councils Network	Public administration and governance	Meetings
Mayoral Strategic Authority - Summits	Public administration and governance	Meetings
Reading Borough Council	Public administration and governance	Meeting
Swindon Borough Council	Public administration and governance	Meeting

APPENDICES:
OXFORDSHIRE LOCAL GOVERNMENT REORGANISATION
Three Unitary Authorities Proposal

Empowering People, Growing Prosperity, Building Communities

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Appendix A: Development of Boundary Proposals

Our proposal is for three unitary councils covering the current Oxfordshire geography and extending to include West Berkshire. This lay-down of boundaries enables three viable unitaries, close to the people they serve, and each with a distinctive identity and profile for future generations.

1. Greater Oxford Council, based on the city and its Green Belt
2. Northern Oxfordshire Council merging West Oxfordshire and most of Cherwell
3. Ridgeway Council bringing together most of Vale of Whitehorse and South Oxfordshire with West Berkshire.
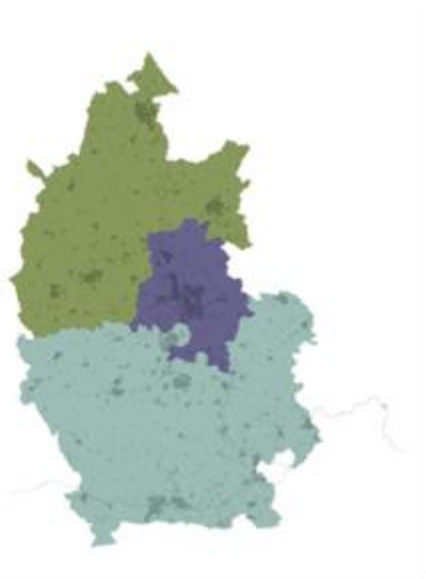
Fig A.1: Boundary proposal for a three unitary option with expanded boundaries for Greater Oxford

Early iterations of the boundary options included a self-governing city area surrounded by a single unitary authority for the rest of Oxfordshire. This option was discounted in light of the aspiration of the southern districts and West Berkshire for cross-boundary unitarisation. This significantly altered the population and financial calculations, both for a doughnut option and for a potential to create three unitary authorities.

The inclusion of West Berkshire to extend the boundaries of the overall geography fits the legislative framework as a Type C proposal: a single tier that includes adjoining areas.

Greater Oxford

Oxford has been self-governing for centuries, and the starting premise for this proposal was that the city continues to need to its own governance for its own unique circumstances. The city's international renown, its ability to attract investment and its growing innovation economy present both challenges and aspirations among its residents and businesses that are not shared by the surrounding areas.

Oxford's young, diverse, highly qualified and very mobile population cites the lack of access to affordable housing as a key issue and identifies directly with the opportunities brought through growth. The Oxford2050 Vision – produced with the input of the city's residents and businesses - set an aspiration that "Oxford's population will continue to grow over the next thirty years as people are drawn to live, work and study in our attractive, vibrant and thriving city." A recurring theme of the vision is the desire for more affordable housing, homes near jobs, and protection for renters.

But Oxford's pro-growth outlook is not shared in many other parts of the county. An inbuilt rural majority has generally prioritised conservation over growth. For decades the democratic will of this rural majority has led to the return of councils across Oxfordshire's other districts and at the county level that have sought to minimise the amount of growth planned, or delivered.

Government has made clear that growth is its number one mission. Yet, either of the one unitary and or two unitary proposals would create an anti-growth majority electorate within any of these councils. The democratic will of those populations is likely to lock in a status quo and stymie any real dash for growth in Oxfordshire. The creation of Greater Oxford establishes an area, unique in economic potential, that is likely to see continued pro-growth majority, and support for an acceleration of housing delivery and the creation of skilled jobs

Northern Oxfordshire

The Northern unitary brings together most of Cherwell District Council with West Oxfordshire, to form a single unitary with a clear identity and priorities. This is an area with a good financial foundation and strong opportunities for future growth. There is good alignment both politically and in the priorities of residents, and good co-operation within existing partnership working on which to build. We have listened to West Oxfordshire and Cherwell concerns about their economic viability without the city, but detailed work with Pixel Financial provides us with confidence that this unitary is financially viable from day one, with strong opportunities for future growth.

Our proposals recognise the opportunities for economic and housing growth in these areas, with the economies of Bicester and Banbury demonstrating strong growth, and significant plans for new housing including at Heyford Park. Oxford's economic agglomeration will see the city's economy grow faster and further than other proposals forecast, creating further opportunities in both the supply chain and the foundational economy. Our modelling demonstrates that concerns about economic viability, while understandable on the existing basis, can be answered by the pro-growth approaches of unitarised Greater Oxford and Northern Oxfordshire.

Ridgeway

Early in the process of developing options, the councils of West Berkshire, South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse opened discussions about the creation of a single Ridgeway unitary council. As a proactive move by these councils, which until the 1970s had been largely a unified area, this was included positively in our considerations.

The inclusion of West Berkshire in the total geography gives a current-day population of approximately 0.9million, providing a base for three financially viable authorities. Although West Berkshire has previously sought Exceptional Financial Support, its inclusion with South Oxfordshire and Vale of the Whitehorse in a Ridgeway Council mitigates the risk of future financial failure.

The creation of Ridgeway reflects a historic sense of place for the population of the area, and as a largely rural area with similar demographics across the piece there are shared issues and opportunities for service delivery and future growth. The incorporation of an existing unitary with associated services and structures reduces the disaggregation challenges of creating three unitary councils, further mitigated by our proposal for shared services in areas where scale is important, such as NHS commissioning and Public Health provision.

Boundary development process

In the early stages there were a number of options for the division of Oxfordshire that retained a self-governing city region. The remainder of the county could be retained as a single 'doughnut' unitary, with a separate Greater Oxford at its heart, or the area could be divided into two smaller unitary authorities. The proactive work between West Berkshire, Vale of White Horse and South Oxfordshire to open discussions to join as a single unitary created an opportunity for to explore the viability of a three-way split. On this basis, we commissioned 5th Studio, specialists in urban design, infrastructure, landscape and architecture, to develop a number of approaches to designing suitable boundaries that enable a self-governing city-based unitary alongside other unitary arrangements for the rest of the geography.

Early mapping highlighted the topography and major settlements that dictate development and shapes how lives are lived. Alongside this, current and future economic and housing growth had to be considered.

	0	1a	2a	3a	4a
Baseline	208k	217k	234k	283k	266k
+ Allocated Growth	258k	279k	296k	363k	346k
+ Additional Growth	300k	328k	344k	436k	412k
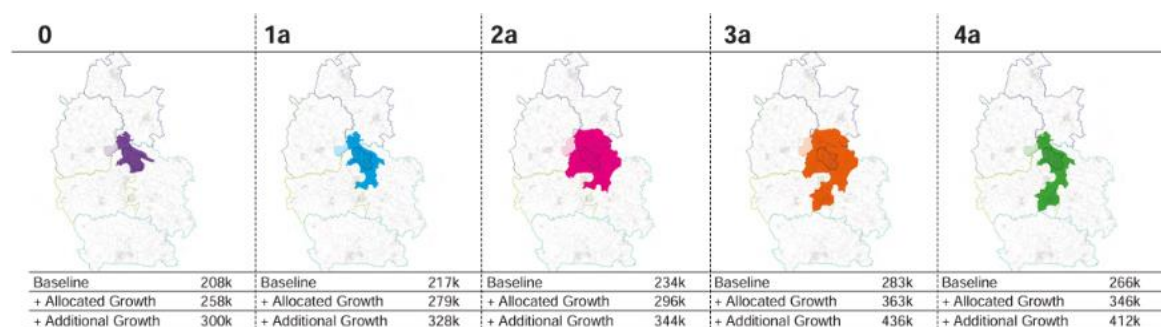
Fig A.2: Samples of geographies developed by 5th Studio

In discussions with stakeholders in transport, business and science, there was a particular interest a single authority based around the knowledge spine (3a and 4a above). This would create one authority across the rapid growth areas of the local economy, creating a focus on economic development. However, from the perspective of statutory service delivery, this approach harmed the viability of services in the remaining areas, and removed important places of employment, education and care. The role of the Mayoral Strategic Assembly to deliver strategic planning,

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transport, skills, and inward investment, addresses key issues of co-ordination across the wider region. Considering the government criteria on efficiencies and better services across the whole geography, alongside the powers of the new MSA, this option was discounted.

Alternative options included a city extended around the designated sites that will provide for Oxford's current unmet housing need, which created limited opportunities for the city and failed to provide for long-term strategic development. Variations of the greenbelt options including Abingdon and/or the science areas around Harwell were discounted as unbalanced for the remaining areas in terms of the identity, economy and urban centres.

The logic of the Green Belt is compelling. This area was created in the 1970s directly in relation to the city, and is well understood by residents, who understand it as the green lungs of the city. The boundary is already clearly established and can be mapped closely to existing parish boundaries. The majority of places within the greenbelt look to the city for work, leisure and services, and feel the influence of issues and decisions in the city. Importantly, this option enables agglomeration around Oxford, while also ensuring the Northern and Ridgeway councils have strong centres of innovation and growth to meet the financial viability criteria.

The three unitary boundaries were arrived at after detailed exploration of the options, including populations, economic and financial viability and a sense of place. The proposed boundaries create room for growth and drivers for prosperity for all three unitary authorities. They also facilitate strategically managed expansion of business and housing close to the city. Local cohesion and shared identities are also important. The boundaries recognise the different drivers for local decision-making, from settlement patterns to local demographics, and create places with a shared sense of identity and priorities. Mapping has also been conducted for new wards in the Greater Oxford area to ensure parity of representation in this model.
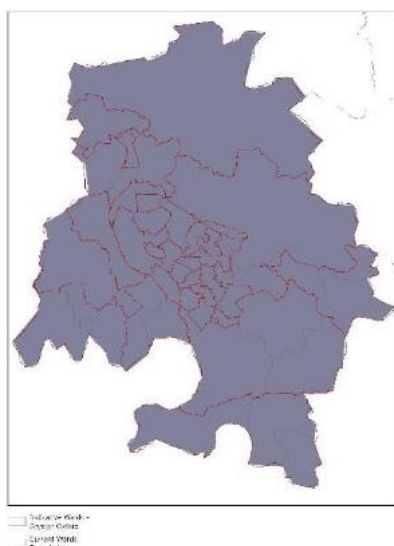
Fig A.3: Greater Oxford wards

The proposal for a Green Belt-based boundary for Greater Oxford requires three local authority boundary changes around the city. In line with government guidance, parish councils have been used as the building blocks for these changes. Where parishes straddle the boundary, an in-out decision has been made largely on the basis of settlement patterns. Parishes that sit in the natural expansion space for Abingdon (Ridgeway) have been included in the Ridgeway geography. Eynsham is included in Northern Oxfordshire as an area with direct links to Witney (Northern Oxfordshire), and recognising that the topography would leave it untouched by Greater Oxford's strategic Green Belt release.
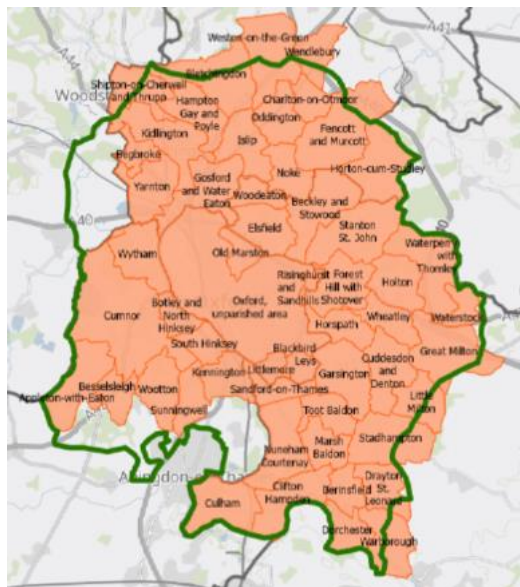
Fig A.4: Parish councils within Greater Oxford

The final proposal on boundaries has been thoroughly tested to ensure sufficient population, financial robustness, and a sense of local identity. The administrative boundaries use recognised building blocks as set out in government criteria, and where possible existing administrative boundaries have been conserved. The proposed geography has also been part of the ongoing engagement with stakeholders, including public engagement across the entire area, discussions with statutory partners covering the area, and engagement with key delivery partners. This division of the area recognises historic identities and future needs, it provides local government that is rooted in place and financially stable, and ensures every unitary can deliver homes, prosperity and quality of life for the people they serve.

Appendix B: Options Appraisal Further Detail

This appendix follows from section 3 in the main proposal and provides a more detailed rationale for our scoring of each of the LGR options against the government criteria. We set out our scoring for each option and the factors which have informed that score in the table below.

We have scored each of the options using the six government criteria which has been published and shared with all councils.

We have used a 0-3 scale. 0 represents an option which does not meet government criteria at all. 3 represents a complete match.

B.1 Single Unitary Option

LGR Criteria	Score	Rationale
A single tier and sensible geography to improve housing supply and outcomes avoiding creating (dis/)advantaged areas	1	This option would create a single unitary covering a diverse area of over 1,000 square miles and a total population of around 763,200. [1] This would be of a larger population size than any current single unitary authority in England other than Birmingham and Leeds, and far larger than recently created unitary authorities such as Somerset or North Yorkshire. While this would create a single tier of local government, it would need to cover a varied region with significant variations in priorities and geographies. For example: Geography – the area north of Oxfordshire is populated largely by a network of market towns and villages, with the area currently making up West Oxfordshire being one of the least densely populated in the South East of England. The areas to the south are again more rural with a strong network of market towns. Oxford is a the fifth most densely populated urban area in the South East of England which shares more in common with other UK city regions than is geographical neighbours. Demography – The area around Greater Oxford has a far younger population than the wider Oxfordshire, with almost a quarter of its residents being of student age and only 15% of its population aged 65 or over, while the wider county is more in line with the England average of 19%. The Greater Oxford area is more diverse than the wider county, with only 76% of residents identifying as White, compared to 87% countywide. The proportion of Asian, Asian British or Asian Welsh residents in Greater Oxford area is 13%, more than double the county averages of 6%. Economic – While the Oxfordshire Knowledge Spine runs across the area and makes it a global centre for high tech research and industries, each area has different economic characteristics, priorities and strengths currently, as well as having distinct opportunities for the future. The North of the county has a strong base in advanced manufacturing, logistics and green technologies,

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[1] ONS 2024, https://data.oxfordshire.gov.uk/population/current-population/

alongside key tourism and retail destinations such as Blenheim Palace and Bicester Village. The South of the county is a centre for science and energy innovation, with strong life sciences, space and quantum technology companies. Oxford is home to a world-renowned university and Science Park with major global companies seeking additional sites to locate further businesses and research centres alongside the existing clusters of innovation and talent.

Housing – Each area faces its own specific challenges around housing, however these are largely caused by the demand for housing within Oxford, which drives prices and demand across the wider county. Oxford is the least affordable city in the UK, with average house prices 13.6 times the national wage, and average rents are 68% of the average wage in the city. The Greater Oxford area has the lowest levels of home ownership (56%, compared with 56% in Northern Oxfordshire and 69% in Ridgway), with higher levels of private and social renting in the city compared to the wider county.

A single unitary authority would find it hard to develop and deliver strategies which would meet the diverse priorities and demands of such a varied area. It would also struggle to address the key priority of housing demand and prices as a lack of ability to strategically release green belt land around Oxford would require building to be spread across the wider county, changing the characteristics of the smaller settlements and placing greater strains on infrastructure. A two or three unitary model would be better placed to develop and implement local strategies and plans in ways which can focus on the specific understanding of the places, economic opportunities and priorities of different areas.

Unitary local government must be the right size to achieve efficiencies, improve capacity and withstand financial shocks	2	A single unitary would have a council tax base of 347,536 and an estimated total annual expenditure of £906.6m. The short-term financial benefits of economies of scale across management structures and contracts are highest for a single unitary authority. However, economies of scale alone would not sufficiently address the cost of demands in the future. Fundamental public service reform is required to develop a more preventative and responsive service which is tailored to local needs. This will better manage demand and reduce the cost of service delivery. A single unitary is much less well placed to do this across such a large geographical area, different demographics and the different approaches required to delivering services to rural and urban areas. The size of the organisation required would also likely make the single authority less agile in its ability to deliver transformational change. The differences across Oxfordshire in terms of demographics and geographies would make a single unitary less able to develop tailored services which meet specific local needs and therefore manage demand, due to the diversity of local communities. Additionally, a single unitary authority would consolidate all financial risks into a potential single point of failure. Should financial demands or shocks arise, which cause risks to the authority, this would have an impact across a far larger area.

Prioritise the delivery of high quality and sustainable public services to citizens	1	A move to a single unitary would mean that vital statutory services such as Adults and Children's social care would face the least disruption, as they are currently provided by the existing County authority. However, LGR presents a key opportunity to reconsider and re-structure public service delivery to ensure that it is high quality and sustainable for the future. The 2023 Ofsted and CQC SEND inspection highlighted a need for a significant programme of change. Driving real change relies on a deep understanding of local communities at a place-based level, an ability to deliver transformation of services in an agile and rapid fashion and a flexibility to tailor services and partnerships around the needs of specific areas. The relative harder task of disaggregating services to a larger number of unitary authorities would result in services which can better respond to the priories and demands of specific localities. A single unitary would be least well placed to meet this criterion as the broad reach and size of the organisation would mean it is furthest removed from the communities and places it serves and can therefore be less able to respond to specific needs. This would result in weaker services which would be less able to address demand and mean that efficiencies at Day One are lost in longer term demand for services due to worse outcomes.
Councils must work together in coming to a view that meets local needs and is informed by local views	1	As outlined in earlier criteria, a single unitary council would span a very large geographical area, and a population larger than almost any other unitary authority in the country. Travel from the north to south of the county (for example from Banbury to Henley-on-Thames) takes over an hour by car and an hour 45 minutes by public transport. This relative distance make it harder for councillors and staff to travel across a single unitary, which will be necessary to build relationships and collaborate in person. Oxfordshire contains distinct identities, and this has been reflected in engagement across the county in the development of proposals. A single unitary would dilute the wide variety of local identities across Oxfordshire and therefore the voice and varied priorities of its communities. Public engagement undertaken by the proposers of all three unitary options (3UA, 2UA and 1UA) has consistently shown that people in Oxfordshire want councils which are closely linked to their communities and worry that bigger authorities lose touch with its residents – citing that some communities already feel they feel less in touch with services currently delivered on a county-wide scale. While the rural areas of Oxfordshire contain smaller settlements and market towns which each have their own identities and priorities, there has been a consistent voice in engagement that they see themselves as distinct from the city and would not want to have their identity merged with the city authority. A single unitary would cover the densely populated Oxford area alongside the sparsely populated West Oxfordshire. It would be required to address both the urban deprivation issues of the city alongside the issues of rural isolation which drives deprivation across much the north of the county. Across other criteria we have set out the different areas of the county – and a single unitary authority across them would not be felt by Oxfordshire residents to be able to adequately address the distinct local priorities of its diverse places.

New unitary structures must support devolution arrangements	**1**	A new Mayoral Strategic Authority (MSA) spanning Oxfordshire and Berkshire is being proposed. This could cover a population up to of 1.9m, dependant on the authorities which form it.[2] A single unitary would be too close in size to the MSA and would account for at minimum 37% of its population. It would aim to take a strategic view across the whole county, which would be insufficiently distinct in remit to the strategic role of the MSA across the wider geography. A single unitary would not give sufficient ability to engage on local concerns and priorities. This would dilute the local voices at the MSA level by far greater than that of the next largest authority in the area: Swindon (if becoming part of the authority, with 233,100 residents at 2021 census) .[3] This would also weaken the voice of the city when compared to other major metropolitan areas within this MSA area – particularly Reading, Slough and Swindon (should these form parts of the emerging authority) – which would each have their own unitary authority to represent them.
Enable stronger community engagement and deliver genuine opportunity for neighbourhood empowerment	**1**	As covered in earlier criteria, the single unitary would cover a broad geography, large population and several communities and settlements with distinct demands and priorities. This fundamentally makes it harder to engage at a local level. There is a risk that a single unitary would be too remote from the communities it serves to be able to engage most meaningfully. The requirement to work across such a broad range of places and priorities would make it harder to co-design services which meet local needs and mean a greater balance would need to be struck between the distinct requirements of places. This would cause issues when needing to be flexible to work to meet the specific needs of small rural hamlets, larger market towns and a densely populated urban area. The larger scale of the authority would reduce the ability to work flexibly and closely with specific neighbourhoods to empower them to shape the services in their areas.

[2] 2021 Census
[3] 2021 Census

B.2 Two Unitary Option

LGR Criteria	Score	Rationale
A single tier and sensible geography to improve housing supply and outcomes avoiding creating (dis/)advantaged areas	2	A two unitary model, based on the proposed Oxford and the Shires and Ridgeway Councils would serve populations of 471,716 and 482,703 respectively. These are of more appropriate scale than the 1UA proposal. For this option, the existing unitary of West Berkshire would be incorporated into Ridgeway. This would cement an artificial boundary around within the Oxford conurbation, that would see residents on either side of the artificial dividing line – in some cases on adjacent streets – receiving different services. It would also see continued cross-boundary issues around development. Broadly, the proposal of Ridgeway appears to give a suitable geography for a single authority. The proposed Ridgeway authority would serve an area of distinct market towns and smaller settlements, but is across an area with strong historical ties and a relatively consistent set of demographics and priorities. Much of Ridgeway is rural with lower-density settlements and open countrysides, although there are some larger towns such as Abingdon, Didcot and Henley which act acts commuter and economic hubs. There are strong rail links which connect the towns in the south of the area to London via Reading. Ridgeway is the least deprived area of Oxfordshire with a relatively affluent population and shares similar overall demographic characteristics as highlighted in the Indices of Multiple Deprivation 2025.[4] However, there are some distinct challenges within the towns of Abingdon, Didcot and Calcot where up to 16% of children live in absolute poverty, compared to around 5% across the wider area of Ridgeway. It has the highest level of people aged 65 and older across Oxfordshire – although at 20% this is only slightly higher than the national average of 19%. Ridgeway. A proposed Ridgeway authority which retains the current boundary with Oxford City Council (which would become part of Oxford and the Shires under this proposal) would retain a tight boundary around the city. This would mean a large proportion of Oxford's current Green Belt would be within Ridgeway. Retaining this would limit the ability to release Green Belt land for housing development, given the large areas of land available across Ridgeway. This would require housebuilding to be spread across a wider area. However, broadly plans developed historically by authorities in this area have emphasised a priority to preserve the countryside and characteristics of existing settlements, which spreading housing demand would conflict with. The proposed authority of Oxford and the Shires would create a unitary with two distinct characteristics – the urban area of Oxford and the rural or market towns of the remaining area. This would present challenges to meeting the quite distinct needs of these two contrasting places. The geographies within this authority would be highly contrasting – containing both the second least densely populated area (current West Oxfordshire) with the fifth most densely populated urban area (Oxford) in the

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[4] Indices of Deprivation, 2025

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south east. This also reflects in very different needs for the areas – with the rural areas experiencing deprivation of access to services while in Oxford deprivation is more in line with those seen in other urban areas across the country.

Demographic statistics – and fresh data from the Indices of Multiple Deprivation 2025 - show relative consistency across the existing Cherwell and West Oxfordshire, with the city of Oxford presenting a significantly distinct population. Oxford is distinctly younger in age, driven particularly by student age population. In 2022, only 11% of Oxford's population was of state pension age, compared to 17% in Cherwell and 20.77% in West Oxfordshire.[5] Differences are also reflected in homes – with only 46.7% of residents of Oxford owning their own home, compared to 67% in Cherwell and 69% in West Oxfordshire. Similarly, there is a far higher rate of private and social renting in Oxford than seen in the rest of the authority.[6]

Oxford and the Shires would also struggle to release Green Belt land for development due to the wide availability of land across the rest of the authority. This would result in less homes being built, less ability to address the chronic housing shortage which drives demand and high house prices in Oxford and requiring more homes to be built in rural areas, impacting the countryside and changing the characteristics of settlements.

Unitary local government must be the right size to achieve efficiencies, improve capacity and withstand financial shocks	**2**	Oxford and the Shires and Ridgeway would have council tax bases of 156,233 and 191,302 respectively. They would also have total annual expenditure in the region of £556m for Oxford and the Shires and £561m for Ridgeway, which would put them in a strong position to withstand financial shocks.

A two authority model would be able to make substantial savings from the economies of scale by streamlining management structures, staffing and systems. However, this would not save as much as a single unitary would.

However, this should be seen within the larger context of the cost of demand for services. Savings from rationalisation will deliver in the short term, but growth in demand for services would be greater than this amount unless public service reform delivers place-based preventative work which addresses needs. While Ridgeway would be able to focus on its relatively consistent priorities, Oxford and the Shires would face challenges in needing to balance the varied and unique circumstances of their communities. Most difficult for this would be balancing Oxford's needs as a major city with the priorities and demands of the dispersed population of the current West Oxfordshire. Combining these into a single authority would be less likely to deliver the right services to address demand than a three unitary model.

The two unitary model would, however, be more agile and able to deliver public sector reform than a single unitary.

It should be noted that there is no reason why two or more unitary authorities would not be able to partner to deliver shared services and leverage economies of scale at a larger level where it would make sense to do so. |

[5] Subnational population projections for England: 2022-based, ONS
[6] Census 2021

Prioritise the delivery of high quality and sustainable public services to citizens	2	A two unitary model would, while incorporating two existing two social care structures into two new authorities, would till involve some disruption to key statutory services such as Children's and Adults Social Care. Additionally, lower tier services would also undergo change through aggregating functions across districts. As set out elsewhere in the proposal, LGR should be seen as a major, generational opportunity to deliver public sector reform. This should focus on high quality, sustainable services which meet current need and can be agile to future requirements. Doing this relies on: • Deep understanding of the circumstances and needs of local communities; • An ability to deliver transformation rapidly and in an agile manner; and • The flexibility to join and tailor services to meet local needs (for example around social care, housing, health, benefits, education and employment). The two unitary model would be more able to tailor services to meet the needs of its geographies than the single unitary option. However, while it would be most able to do this in the Ridgeway area, the contrasting populations, demands and priorities of Oxford and the Shires would require a constant balance between two very distinct areas within one authority. This would impact on the quality of services, as they would be less able to be tailored to these very varied communities.
Councils must work together in coming to a view that meets local needs and is informed by local views	2	The issues outlined elsewhere in this appraisal would be apparent here in relation to Oxford and the Shires. While the Ridgeway would be able to respond to local needs across its villages and market towns, Oxford and the Shires would need to meet the very different needs of both the city and the rural areas it contains. It would need to consider the views of the highly rural and dispersed population of West Oxfordshire alongside those of a major city (Oxford), as well as the major market towns (such as Banbury and Bicester). The two unitary proposal has been developed by district councils across Oxfordshire and the current unitary of West Berkshire. This work has developed a view of the place across Oxfordshire informed by these places, which any successful proposal should listen to. However, engagement across Oxfordshire by both the two and three unitary authorities proposals has consistently stated that there is a strong local view that councils should be close to their communities and not be so big that they lose touch with residents. Residents want to see councils based on areas relevant to their communities. As demonstrated even by name, Oxford and the Shires would clearly be trying to balance between two distinct areas and trying to respond to these views rather than able to focus on more specific local needs.

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New unitary structures must support devolution arrangements	**2**	A new Mayoral Strategic Authority (MSA) spanning Oxford and Berkshire is being proposed. This could cover a population up to of 1.9m, dependant on the authorities which form it.[7]

The two unitary authority proposal would better suit the ambitions of the MSA than a single unitary for the county, by being able to focus better on specific areas and work in a more place-based way.

However, the rural areas of the north of the county and the city would only have one voice in this MSA. The Oxford and the Shires seat at the table would always have to speak for two places, with distinct demands and priorities always requiring balance. The authority would be made up of 63% voices outside Oxford and only 37% of those within Oxford – meaning that a major UK city contributing to the growth of the MSA and country would not be the majority voice within its own authority.

This would also weaken the voice of the city when compared to other major metropolitan areas within this MSA area – particularly Reading and Slough – which would each have their own authority represented. |
| Enable stronger community engagement and deliver genuine opportunity for neighbourhood empowerment | **2** | As covered in earlier criteria, the Ridgeway authority would be able to engage strongly with its populations and speak for the more aligned priorities and concerns of this area which has a historically strongly connected identity. However, there would be a greater challenge in being able to co-create services across Oxford and the Shires. While any community engagement will need to respond to hyper local responses which can vary across neighbourhoods, taking in the highly different experiences and priorities of rural areas with the city of Oxford presents a significant challenge.

In engagement, the citizens of rural towns and villages across the county have been clear: the city of Oxford does not define Oxfordshire. Creating an authority which attempts to combine these communities would not be responding to this engagement. It would mean that those living in "the shires" would always feel that their priorities are always having to be considered in balance with that of Oxford, and vice versa. This would limit the feeling of true empowerment for these areas. |

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[7] 2021 Census

B.3 Three Unitary authorities Option

LGR Criteria	Score	Rationale
A single tier and sensible geography to improve housing supply and outcomes avoiding creating (dis/)advantaged areas	3	Within this proposal, a single tier of local government is achieved as three new unitary authorities are created from the current two-tier, seven authority system, a Greater Oxford, Northern Oxfordshire and Ridgeway. Each of the three unitary areas have ensured a sensible economic area with balanced tax bases and designed to recognise the different needs, demands, challenges and economic strengths across Greater Oxford, Northern Oxfordshire and Ridgeway. They all share a common ambition to build a more prosperous future for all of those in Oxfordshire. They can best achieve this by being focussed on their own particular areas. No part of Oxfordshire has a single unified identity or demographic. However, by splitting the broadly different rural and market town areas of Northern Oxfordshire and Ridgeway from the Greater Oxford's urban geography and the satellite villages which have close connections to the city, the three unitary authority proposal creates authorities which can best work within the context of its own place. The three unitary model will deliver on the Government's mission to increase housing supply in responding to local need and with local coordination. It will allow for the building of up to 40,000 homes over the next 15 years through release of green belt land around Oxford – significantly ahead of Government housing targets, which alternative proposals cannot match. The proposed service delivery models have been informed and developed through thorough engagement with council members, key stakeholders and wider engagement groups including businesses and residents. The financial implications of reorganisation - including costs, savings and income – have also been assessed for the three unitary model. Each area proposal sets out how the new unitary councils will have the required leadership and capacity at the optimum scale and proximity to residents to respond to the needs and challenges of each place.
Unitary local government must be the right size to achieve efficiencies, improve capacity and withstand financial shocks	2	This proposal sets up three authorities: Greater Oxford with an annual revenue expenditure of £396m; Northern Oxfordshire with an annual revenue expenditure of £431m; and Ridgeway with an annual revenue expenditure of £749m. All three unitary authorities are therefore of a scale which would suitably withstand financial shocks. They are optimally sized for success: large enough to achieve economies of scale but not so large as to dilute local identity or weaken financial control. They are far from outliers in either tax base or population served and each demonstrates a scale consistent with fiscal viability and capacity. All authorities would be able to demonstrate strong core spending power supported by their tax base size and composition. The modelling suggests that payback period for this proposal is within 4 years and there are then ongoing savings of around £48.6 million per annum for the aggregated position of all 3 unitary authorities going forward. The analysis shows this three unitary proposal is the right size to achieve these

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efficiencies. These are c£14m pa lower than the 1UA or 2UA proposals in 2032/33. However, it is noted that this this modelling hasn't included the additional tax revenues that will be generated by the significant increase in both business rates and council tax in Greater Oxford due to its growth proposals.

The total population of the three unitary areas currently is 935,000. Greater Oxford has 240,000 residents, Northern Oxfordshire has 265,000 residents, and Ridgeway has 430,000 residents. Rapid housing delivery in line with Government targets will see significant population growth by 2040 to 370,000 in Northern Oxfordshire (including the delivery of 13k homes in Upper Heyford) and 545,000 in Ridgeway. Housing delivery in Greater Oxford will exceed Government targets leading to a population of 345,000 by 2040.

This proposal sets out why the areas proposed are smaller than 500,000 based on the specific and distinct geographies and demographics of each unitary, the need to represent each area distinctly as part of devolution, as well as being required for suitable levels of green belt release to maximise and support growth. It is also noted that national research has found that there is not a corelation between better outcomes and larger population size of authorities (outlined in section 4.3 of this proposal).

The three unitary proposal will deliver efficiency savings in aggregate and in the individual new unitary authorities arising from ICT, support services, managerial, democratic processes, the disposal and rationalisation of property transferred and external audit costs. Additionally, savings will be driven from transformation of early intervention, adult social case and children's services, as well was waste collection and disposal. In the three unitary authority proposal, in addition to increased council income for all new unitary authorities arising from the ability to levy the Adult Social Care Premium, significant increased income will arise from growth in dwelling numbers and new businesses. The balance sheet financial strength analysis suggests that each unitary should be able manage these transitional costs with some of the authorities, such as Oxford, already making early provision of costs in the current round of medium-term financial planning. Where possible, use will be made of the flexible use of capital receipts to support transformation projects.

Prioritise the delivery of high quality and sustainable public services to citizens	**3**	The proposals will ensure services are tailored to local circumstances and will be developed collaboratively with local communities and partners. The focus will be on the development of a transformative, preventative model that links growth to improved outcomes and reduced inequality. Independent assessment has shown all three unitary authorities would be able to provide sustainable services. Each unitary will be able to take a single coordinated approach to addressing priorities for their area. Decisions can focus on the needs of specific areas, and the integrated model allows for more agile service delivery. The proposal shows how three unitary authorities will be more agile, connected to their local communities and able to work collaboratively with partners. Services will be commissioned and delivered at the most appropriate level, some across multiple authorities. For example, each

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authority will have its own sovereign children's services, but Safeguarding Boards will operate across all three unitary authorities. Services will be explicitly designed to respond to local circumstances and improve outcomes to give residents the best quality of life with a mix of direct delivery and shared services. It will achieve this through the creation of efficiencies from consolidation while also investing in new capacity, digital capability, and innovative service models to underpin long-term viability.

The proposals align with the wider public sector reform agenda including the NHS ten-year plan, and devolution. They focus on data-led place-based and integrated early intervention and prevention, tailoring collaborative service delivery to respond to community needs effectively in each unitary area, ensuring better value for money organisationally and at a systems level.

The proposal for three unitary authorities has considered the impact of a range of crucial public services and how the new unitary authorities can deliver better public services that improve outcomes for residents, through identifying and addressing needs in a timely manner. This includes:

- Localised approach to Children's Social Care, Adult Social Care and SEND – the three unitary authorities will deliver their own sovereign services with collaboration on critical areas with other unitary authorities to effectively fulfil statutory duties, maintain economies of scale and avoid unnecessary disaggregation
- Community-based early intervention and prevention model boosting community networks and resilience
- In-house statutory homelessness services rooted in prevention

Councils must work together in coming to a view that meets local needs and is informed by local views	3	Collaborative work with the five other Oxfordshire councils, and West Berkshire, took place to develop proposals for reorganising local government. Collective agreement was made to a shared data protocol to ensure consistent baseline comparisons, and a series of teach-in sessions were delivered across the councils. As a proposer of a three unitary model for Oxfordshire and West Berkshire, Oxford City Council's Leader, Chief Executive, and Leadership Team actively worked with the other councils, and West Berkshire, to shape the proposal.
		A comprehensive and inclusive engagement programme was delivered across Oxfordshire and West Berkshire to support the proposal for Local Government Reorganisation. A diverse range of methods and strategies were carefully designed to ensure meaningful, constructive, inclusive, and representative participation throughout the process.
		The proposal protects Oxfordshire's historic and cultural identity while aligning governance with natural community boundaries. It gives residents more say in local planning and ensures services are tailored to urban, rural, and market town needs. Development is directed to less sensitive areas, balancing growth with housing, heritage, and environmental protection. It strengthens local representation and delivers smarter, place-based decision-making.

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		Feedback indicated strong support for smaller, locally responsive councils, alongside concerns regarding transport, housing, respecting local identity, and representation. Feedback has been used to tailor approaches and respond to green space protection, urban – rural balance, financial sustainability and improving services and access.
New unitary structures must support devolution arrangements	3	This proposal for unitary structures was developed concurrently with preparation of an Expression of Interest for devolution to create a Thames Valley Mayoral Strategic Authority. It sets out how it will provide constituent authorities which provide a balance of three voices for Oxfordshire to the Mayoral Strategic Authority, representing its distinct places and suitably balancing representation of the urban and rural populations.
		The creation of three unitary authorities across Oxfordshire and West Berkshire will help ensure there is closer parity in scale among the constituent unitary authorities within a Thames Valley MSA than a single Oxfordshire unitary council which would be around 37% the population size of the MSA itself.
		This would ensure that Oxford would have a suitable voice representing this key city and growth area to the MSA. The Greater Oxford proposal ensures that 71% of the residents of this unitary would be in the city of Oxford. This is a far greater proportion than the two unitary (37%) or single unitary (22%) proposals – which would mean needing to balance competing rural and urban voices to a far greater extent. This proposal means that Greater Oxford can speak for Oxford and its immediate surroundings, and Northern Oxfordshire and Ridgeway can speak to their own distinct communities rather.
		Alignment of timing for vesting of the three new unitaries and the MSA in 2028 will also ensure a smooth transition for Fire & Rescue Services and associated emergency planning functions to the new strategic authority.
Enable stronger community engagement and deliver genuine opportunity for neighbourhood empowerment	3	Three unitary authorities will allow for governance that is more tailored and representative. This proposal will support local leaders better understand and tackle the unique challenges and opportunities within their areas. Explicit within this proposal are arrangements that will support increased community engagement in democratic processes, but also the design of local authority services and community empowerment more generally.
		A community place-based approach will see enhanced neighbourhood engagement and delivery models. The three unitary authorities will co-design with residents and partners neighbourhood governance arrangements to support local requirements. This will deliver decision making at the lowest effective level to speed up delivery and growth, tailored to each community's circumstance.
		Parish and Town Councils will retain their independence and functions. Where present, they will be invited to participate in NACs. Our approach supports local decision-making building on existing networks understanding the Oxford speaks clearly for the city, while towns and villages across Northern Oxfordshire and Ridgeway are empowered to speak for themselves.

Appendix C: Volterra Oxfordshire LGR Economic Growth Report

Please see attached separate paper

Appendix D: Engagement Detail

Local government reorganisation in Oxfordshire needs governance that meets today's challenges and tomorrow's ambitions. The Three Unitary Authorities proposal delivers modern, efficient, and community-focused governance.

A comprehensive and inclusive engagement programme was delivered across Oxfordshire and West Berkshire to support the proposal for Local Government Reorganisation. A diverse range of methods and strategies were carefully designed to ensure meaningful, constructive, inclusive, and representative participation throughout the process.

Thousands of residents, businesses, partners, and stakeholders across Oxfordshire, and West Berkshire and regionally shaped this proposal through extensive engagement.

The City Council delivered wide-ranging and inclusive engagement to understand what people across Oxfordshire and West Berkshire want from this once in a generation opportunity to reshape how local government is structured, to ensure that our proposal is responding to their priorities.

Engagement is guiding how the City Council continues to collaborate as the proposal evolves and authorities are developed in greater detail. Early and inclusive engagement has built trust and improved the quality of the proposal, reflecting a strong appetite for localised governance that meets community needs.

The Council has engaged with, amongst others:

- Residents across Oxfordshire and West Berkshire
- Dozens of Oxfordshire businesses including large strategically important employers
- Police & Crime Commissioner and Oxfordshire Police Commander
- Oxfordshire Fire & Rescue Service
- Universities
- 7 Oxfordshire MPs and 4 Berkshire MPs
- Healthwatch Oxfordshire
- ICB and health trusts
- Oxfordshire voluntary and community sector stakeholders and partners
- Oxfordshire Association of Local Councils
- Oxford Civic Society
- Oxford City Council employees and their representatives, Unison and Unite.
- Our Partnerships Fast Cities (Oxford, Cambridge, Milton Keynes, Swindon, Norwich Peterborough) and Cathedral Cities (Oxford, Cambridge, Norwich, Exeter, Lincoln) Groups
- Multi-Academy Trust education partners
- Parish Councils
- Conference of Colleges (Oxford) in particular landowning colleges
- Oxford Growth Commission
- Oxford Bus Company

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- Leaders of 6 other local authorities within the proposed geography, and Leaders of 3 neighbouring councils in Berkshire and Swindon.

In addition, the Council has engaged and listened through a range of media including:

- Meetings and calls
- Workshops
- Inviting letters of support
- Online surveys
- Social media
- Round table events
- Community based venues across Oxfordshire
- Short-form videos
- Bus shelter posters
- Public events.

Three Unitary Authorities engagement programme

The engagement programme launched in June 2025 with a website, special edition newsletters, press release, short-form video, bus shelter posters and, Facebook and Instagram advertising. The goal was to raise awareness for 3 Unitary Authority proposal Oxford and drive traffic to the website.

In July 2025, the online survey and drop-in events were launched. The Council issued a press release, Facebook events, Facebook and Instagram advertising and TikTok advertising. The Council also created a series of short-form videos, with Cabinet Members inviting residents to visit drop-in events in Berinsfield, Botley, Kennington and Kidlington.

A series of short-form videos explored themes of the 3 Unitary Authority proposal: transport, housing, local identity and the economy.

Drop-in Events and Community Forums

A series of drop-in events were held across Oxfordshire in Oxford, Abingdon, Banbury, Berinsfield, Botley, Didcot, Kennington, Kidlington, Wheatley and Witney, and one in Newbury (West Berkshire).

These events provided opportunities for residents to ask questions, share concerns, and engage directly with council officers and elected members. Engagement took place with approximately 340 citizens across all eleven events.

Public responses to the proposals reflected a wide range of perspectives, highlighting both areas of support and concern across key themes.

Many respondents expressed uncertainty regarding future council tax levels, councillor representation, and election timelines. There were notable concerns about the potential loss of

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local identity, particularly in rural communities. A recurring theme was the need for greater clarity on the role of parish councils and how local voices would be incorporated under the new governance structure.

Feedback on transport and infrastructure was strong, with widespread concern about currently inadequate public transport links. Respondents called for improvements to Park & Ride services and raised issues around congestion, Low Traffic Neighbourhoods (LTNs), and road closures in and around Oxford. Many expressed a view that transport decisions about the city were being made by councillors representing distant parts of the county. Some felt that current infrastructure capacity may be insufficient to support the scale of proposed growth.

Views on housing expansion were mixed. While some welcomed growth and the potential for increased availability of affordable housing, others expressed concerns over the potential for overdevelopment, particularly in areas lacking adequate services. Concerns were raised about building on flood plains and contaminated land, and there was a clear desire to preserve rural character.

Some respondents questioned the alignment of the proposals with climate goals and expressed concern that a focus on science and innovation could come at the expense of community identity. There were calls for deeper grassroots engagement and reforms to welfare systems to ensure social equity.

Concerns were voiced about council tax revenues being disproportionately allocated to urban centres, and questions were raised regarding job security for existing local authority staff. However, there was also interest in opportunities for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and a strong desire for equitable service provision across districts.

Three major surveys of residents were conducted:

- The Council held an initial online Residents Panel survey in February 2025 that focused on gauging public appetite for change and understanding priorities, using its standing representative panel of Oxford citizens; 266 responses received.
- The Council held an open survey on its consultation portal about local government reorganisation between 1 July and 12 August 2025. The survey was promoted via social media, local media, and community networks across Oxfordshire and West Berkshire. It explored public preferences for different governance models and gathered detailed feedback on the three-unitary proposal; over 1,580 responses were received.
- A second survey of the Oxford Residents Panel was undertaken between 23 July and 15 September which added questions on LGR to the standard annual survey of residents' satisfaction with City Council services.

D.1 Key findings from our surveys

February 2025 Oxford Residents Panel Survey

In February 2025, Oxford City Council conducted a survey on the interim proposals using its Residents' Panel. The panel is a representative sample of Oxford residents managed on the Council's behalf by independent polling company Beehive.

The survey, which had 266 responses, found:

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

A press release was issued on the survey results: Greater Oxford: The survey results are in

July – August 2025 Public Survey on LGR

Over 1,580 people participated in the Council's main public survey on LGR, with a strong representation from across Oxfordshire's diverse communities and West Berkshire residents.

Table 1: Survey responses by current District and percentage of total responses

	Total	Percentage
Cherwell	153	9.68%
Oxford City	611	38.67%
South Oxfordshire	236	14.94%
Vale of White Horse	294	18.61%
West Berkshire	115	7.28%
West Oxfordshire	120	7.59%
Other	51	3.23%

Key survey findings include:

- 69% agreed or strongly agreed with the statement: "Councils are most effective when they are smaller and closer to the people they serve, enabling them to respond and adapt more easily to local needs;" 17.1% disagreed or strongly disagreed
- 80% agreed or strongly agreed with the statement: "Urban and rural areas often require different approaches to housing, transport, education and skills, and other key council services;" 12.1% disagreed or strongly disagreed

- 75.1% agreed or strongly agreed with the statement: "Housing, transport, education and skills need different approaches between urban and rural areas;" 16.4% disagreed or strongly disagreed
- 68.% agreed or strongly agreed with the statement: "I want to see more housing built in the right places to meet local needs (including affordability, proximity to family/friends, and access to jobs);" 16.6% disagreed or strongly disagreed

The Council also asked residents whether councils should prioritise "good quality services and responding to local need" or "cost savings." The results showed a strong preference for "good quality services and responding to local need."

A total of 914 comments were collected in response to this open-ended question, representing 58% of the 1,581 overall survey responses.

A press release was issued on the survey results: Residents prefer smaller, more responsive councils, survey finds

Annual Residents Panel Survey 2025

Two additional questions were included in the 2025 survey specifically to inform the Council's LGR submission.

- The majority of residents (62%) agree that councils are most effective when they are smaller and closer to the people they serve, enabling them to respond and adapt more easily to local needs
- An even bigger majority (72%) agree that urban and rural areas often require different approaches to housing, transport, education and skills, and other key council services
- A substantial majority of 90% agree that the council should prioritise good quality services and responding to local need.
- Whilst levels of agreement (43%) and disagreement (40%) were fairly equal on the council prioritising cost savings.

October 2025: Oxford Housing and Growth – Business Stakeholder Survey

The City Council sought the views of local businesses and employers to help inform the shape of Local Government Reorganisation that best supports future planning for housing and economic growth in and around Oxford city. Insights from this short survey contributes to ongoing work to understand how Oxford can meet its housing needs while supporting business growth and sustainable development.

35 responses were received to the City Council survey, across the Health, Technology, Engineering, Arts, Entertainment and Recreation, Education, University, Property, Retail and Voluntary sectors.

3. Over 80% of respondents said being located in or near Oxford is very or extremely important to their business success.
4. Around 68% strongly agree that Oxford should go beyond government's housing delivery targets.

5. Almost 85% agree that affordable housing near Oxford is important for business growth.
6. 46% favour building additional homes close to the city, including suitable locations within the Green Belt. (23% would prefer development beyond the Green Belt)
7. Over half (54%) believe future development should balance new homes with employment space.

Summary findings from the Business Stakeholder survey:

Location Importance

How important is being located within or near Oxford to the success of your business? - Please explain why being located within or near Oxford is important (or not) to your business, and any benefits or challenges you experience.

- 30 responses received.

Being located within or near Oxford is generally considered highly important for most stakeholders, with significant benefits in client proximity, community engagement, academic and professional networking, and operational efficiency.

Challenges such as congestion, cost of living, and planning complexity are acknowledged but often seen as manageable trade-offs for the strategic advantages of an Oxford location.

Housing Delivery Target

To what extent do you agree that Oxford should go beyond the government's target for delivering new homes in and around the city?

- 26 responses received.

Stakeholders generally support additional housing in and around Oxford, with a strong emphasis on affordability, accessibility, and community integration. Many highlight the need to ensure housing supports the local workforce, including essential and lower-paid employees, while avoiding sprawl or unsustainable development.

Some stakeholders also stress that housing growth must be carefully managed to protect green spaces, historic areas, and the city's character, and be accompanied by supporting infrastructure such as transport, schools, and community facilities.

Importance of Affordable Housing for Business Growth

To what extent do you agree that the supply of affordable housing near Oxford is important for business growth?
- 21 responses received.

Stakeholders consistently highlight that affordable housing is essential for attracting and retaining a full spectrum of workers, supporting local businesses, and sustaining Oxford's broader economy. Without access to reasonably priced housing, recruitment and workforce stability are significantly constrained, which can impact productivity, service delivery, and the city's research and innovation ecosystem.

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Affordable housing is also seen as important for community cohesion, sustainable commuting, and supporting public services, such as schools, while helping create a diverse and vibrant city centre that sustains businesses and the wider economy.

Priorities for Housing Locations

Alongside sites within the city, where should we prioritise building the additional homes Oxford needs?

- 19 responses received.

Overall, stakeholders support a balanced approach: densifying the city, making use of brownfield and greyfield sites, carefully extending into areas with good transport links, and avoiding or minimally impacting Green Belt land and existing green spaces.

Priorities for Future Development

How should future development be prioritised?

- 17 responses received.

Stakeholders emphasise the need for a balanced, mixed-use approach that supports both housing and economic growth. While there is strong support for new homes, particularly to address affordability and workforce recruitment, many also stress the importance of preserving and providing commercial, office, and research space to sustain Oxford's economy, including the arts, leisure, and high-tech sectors.

Commercial Development and Jobs Near Oxford

What do you feel about delivering more commercial development and jobs close to the city of Oxford, in suitable locations in the Green Belt?

- 19 responses received.

Stakeholders support strategic commercial development near Oxford, particularly to support the knowledge economy and sustainable commuting, but stress that Green Belt land should generally be protected, brownfield sites prioritised, and housing provision integrated to support the workforce.

Council Size and Local Responsiveness

A majority of respondents (62%) agreed that councils are most effective when they are smaller and closer to the communities they serve. This reflects a clear preference for governance models that enable responsiveness and adaptability to local needs. Only 22% disagreed, indicating broad support for more localised decision-making. Some residents expressed reservations, potentially reflecting concerns about fragmentation, reduced economies of scale, or inconsistencies in service delivery across different areas.

Differentiated Approaches for Urban and Rural Areas

An even larger proportion (72%) agreed that urban and rural areas often require distinct approaches to housing, transport, education, skills, and other key services. This supports the strategic case for place-based policy design and delivery. A minority (12%) disagreed, suggesting some concerns about fairness or the risk of unequal service standards, particularly in areas that straddle urban-rural boundaries.

Service Quality vs. Cost Savings

When asked about service priorities, 90% of respondents expressed a strong preference for councils to prioritise good quality services and responsiveness to local need. In contrast, views on prioritising cost savings were more divided, with 43% in agreement and 40% in disagreement.

Stakeholder and Organisational Feedback

Engagement with key stakeholders provided valuable insights:

- University, Colleges and developers: Interested in the scale of growth proposed and opportunity to address Oxford's housing crisis, highlighted the need to maintain strong links across the knowledge spine and noted the context of Devolution placing responsibility for strategic transport and skills with an MSA.
- Business and Community Groups: Generally supportive of streamlined services, delivery of affordable housing, local accountability, and economic development opportunities.
- Healthwatch Oxfordshire: Emphasised the importance of safeguarding public health and social care integration, and ensuring local voice in health governance
- Parish and Town Councils: Expressed mixed views—some welcomed the opportunity for greater localism, while others sought clarity on powers and funding

Insights and Lessons Learned

The engagement process highlighted several key lessons:

- Early and inclusive engagement builds trust and improves proposals
- There is a strong appetite for localised governance that reflects community needs
- Clear communication about service delivery, cost savings, and democratic accountability is essential.
- Stakeholders value transparency and co-design in shaping future governance

Three unitary authorities engagement

Between June and August 2025, the three unitary authorities engagement programme achieved strong digital visibility and engagement across six platforms over the period. A total of 32 unique content pieces were shared across Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, LinkedIn and X, 11 Facebook events were created to support in-person activities.

The communications targeted the messages to Oxfordshire (763,218 residents) and West Berkshire (163,367 residents). This means everyone in our region saw our social media posts on average 2.8. times. A significant proportion of the views were on TikTok, where 74% of our audience is 18 to 34 years old.

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Key outcomes included:

- 2.6M+ impressions – broad reach and visibility
- 38.8K link clicks – strong interest in content
- 1,650 hours of video watched – high engagement with video formats
- 8.3K reactions, 2.7K comments, 1.5K shares – active user interaction
- 1.1K saves – content perceived as valuable by users

The communications successfully combined reach with meaningful engagement, particularly through video content and link-driven actions. These results suggest a well-targeted strategy that encouraged both awareness and interaction. Content output included:

- 32 unique content pieces shared across six platforms
- 11 Facebook events created for in-person activities
- Performance Highlights (4-month period):
- 2,613,111 impressions – total times content was displayed to users
- 8,358 likes/reactions – user engagement through likes and other reactions
- 2,771 comments – direct user responses and discussions
- 1,476 shares – content redistributed by users
- 1,100 saves – content bookmarked for later
- 38,874 link clicks – users clicking through to external content
- 1,650 hours watched – total video watch time across platforms (video content only)

TikTok and Instagram were especially effective in driving saves and shares, indicating strong audience resonance.

Key themes from verbatim feedback:
- Transport and Housing videos sparked the most discussion, with users expressing both support and concern
- Positive sentiment focused on solutions like the Cowley Branch Line to ease congestion
- Concerns included scepticism about housing developments respecting the Green Belt and fears of increased traffic
- Emerging narratives included:
  - Need genuinely affordable housing
  - Avoid additional housing leading to more congestion
  - LTNs are the core issue
  - Suggestions for tram lines and critiques of bus commuting costs.

Oxford City Council Member workshops

Four Member workshops were delivered as part of the Council's 3 Unitary Authority Local Government Reorganisation proposal. Each workshop focused on key themes, were led and facilitated by one of the Councils senior officers and were open to all Members.

- Housing delivery and economy
- Transport
- Social Services, communities and housing integration

- Governance and local representation.

The Council's core LGR team supported the workshops, and the discussions helped the Council to develop the overall proposals for a three-unitary arrangement across Oxfordshire and West Berkshire.

Oxfordshire Parish Council engagement

Two parish council engagement events have been held to consider each of the LGR proposals. The first organised by the Oxfordshire Association of Local Councils, with about 50 parish councillors attending. The second organised by Beckley Parish Council in the form of a public meeting, with many parish councils represented. Key issues raised include rural identity and concerns about villages becoming urban extensions, the scale of development, and the need for improved bus and rail services. There was a need for better engagement, increased resources and a clearer voice for parishes with new unitary councils – with a hope that they might be coopted onto proposed new Neighbourhood Committees.

Voluntary and Community Sector engagement

Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS) partners were engaged through an LGR briefing session organised by the umbrella body Oxfordshire Community and Voluntary Action and through participation in focus groups organised by Oxford City Council. The engagement confirmed that smaller, place-based councils would help build local connections between residents, groups and local authorities. There was strong support for a more place-based approach highlighted strong support for community-led, locally responsive services, alongside several key concerns and opportunities for improvement.

VCS organisations included those from working in cultural, careers, social care, environmental, mental health, housing older people, children and local community groups. A summary of feedback is set out below.

Community Strengths and Assets

- Strong support for hyperlocal, community-centered, and thematic engagement, with smaller VCS partners seen as agile, responsive, and central to prevention and wellbeing.
- Existing community activity and partnerships are valued, and building on these will improve prevention, resilience, and connections across Oxfordshire.
- Neighbourhood hubs and community centres are key touchpoints, particularly where the co-location of staff has already shown positive outcomes.

Collaborative Action and Governance

- Local partnerships and subgroups (e.g., nature partnerships, community associations) demonstrate the power of collaborative working. Sustaining and expanding these is a priority.
- Clear appetite for participatory governance models such as neighbourhood budgeting and community-led decision-making.

- Strong support for the three-unitary proposal as more responsive to local needs, with a focus on long-term outcomes rather than just cost savings.

Support for Vulnerable Residents and Communities

- Rising demand for services for SEND children, young carers, and families is placing pressure on small charities, who face funding gaps and capacity strains.
- Ongoing need for sustainable support and funding models for VCS, including reforms to commissioning and contract processes with a much more engaged and local approach, connecting residents to more local and bespoke support in their communities.

Nature, Culture, and Identity

- Enthusiasm for green and blue spaces as drivers of health and wellbeing, antisocial behaviour reduction, and community cohesion, with alignment to Local Nature Recovery strategies.
- Align environmental and cultural priorities across planning - embed nature recovery, green space protection, and cultural amenities in housing and transport growth.
- Protecting Oxfordshire's cultural identity and ensuring cultural amenities and activities are distributed across new housing developments is vital to community cohesion and reducing travel pressures.
- Align environmental and cultural priorities across planning - embed nature recovery, green space protection, and cultural amenities in housing and transport growth.

Services and Accessibility

- Broad support for person-centered, locally accessible services, with blended digital and face-to-face delivery.
- Concerns about gaps in basic local facilities like GP surgeries, swimming pools, and community centres.
- Transport and connectivity, especially in rural and outlying areas, is a major concern. Better links to Oxford are needed for access to jobs, education, and healthcare. Integration with housing and support for sustainable transport is essential.

Opportunities and Next Steps

- Strengthen and scale up local VCS partnerships, especially within prevention and wellbeing work.
- Explore participatory budgeting and neighbourhood governance to increase community autonomy.
- Align transport, housing, and environmental planning to ensure growth directly benefits local communities.
- Ensure clear protections for green spaces and transparent communication of plans.

- Build capacity in the Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise sector through revised funding processes that address gaps and better link investment to local growth.

Public Meeting on Local Government Reform – September 2025

Beckley and Stowood Parish Council hosted a public meeting in September 2025 to discuss proposals for Local Government Reform. Oxford City Council was invited to present, alongside representatives from other councils and local stakeholders.

The meeting provided an overview of the three proposed Unitary Authority models, outlining their respective implications and potential benefits for the community. Attendees had the opportunity to ask questions and engage in discussion.

Presentations were delivered by:

- The Leader of Oxford City Council (Three Unitary Authorities proposal)
- The Leader of Oxfordshire County Council (Single Unitary Authority proposal)
- The Leader of South Oxfordshire District Council (Two Unitary Authorities proposal)

Approximately 90 people attended, including residents, Parish Council representatives, and local activists.

Stakeholders expressed significant interest in the implications of Local Government Reorganisation, raising a range of questions and concerns. Key themes included financial clarity and sustainability, with queries about funding arrangements and long-term financial resilience.

Governance and representation were also prominent, particularly regarding the future role and capacity of councillors, the balance between efficiency and effective representation, and the preservation of local identity. The importance of maintaining local identity and ensuring accessibility to council services - including the ability to speak to someone in person in an office-based environment - was highlighted, particularly in the context of a potentially larger, or more remote unitary authority.

Environmental issues featured strongly, with calls for robust greenbelt protection and clarity on how environmental sustainability would be prioritised amid planning and housing pressures.

Partnership working was another area of focus, with questions about integration with key partners such as Thames Valley Police, the BOB Integrated Care Board, and South-Central Ambulance Service. The need for clear communication and engagement with Parish Councils was also highlighted.

Finally, concerns were raised about whether public views, such as opposition to congestion charges, are genuinely considered in decision-making, transport and connectivity, and 'will Parish Councils really be involved and listened to'.

Stakeholder Engagement Register

Stakeholder	Sector	Format
GP Partner - Clinical Director – Oxford	Health	Meeting

Boundary Commission for England	Public administration and governance	Meeting
3 Unitary Authority - Survey	Public	Survey
Key Oxford City Stakeholders	Cross-sector strategic collaboration - Oxford	Letter
Oxford Civic Society	Civic registered charity	Meeting
Oxford Residents Panel	Public	Survey
Oxford Growth Commission	Economic development and infrastructure	Meeting
Oxford Strategic Partnership: • Public Sector • Business Sector • Community Sector • Health Sector • Education Sector • Thames Valley Police • Voluntary Sector	Cross-sector strategic collaboration - Oxford	Meetings
Oxfordshire Association of Local Councils	Public administration and governance	In-person. (All Oxfordshire proposals represented)
Oxfordshire Community & Voluntary Action workshop - 23 VCSE organisations were represented	Third Sector	In-person. (All Oxfordshire proposals represented)
Oxfordshire Fire and Rescue Service	Public administration and governance	Meeting
Oxfordshire County Council	Public administration and governance	Meetings
Cherwell District Council	Public administration and governance	Meeting
South Oxfordshire District Council	Public administration and governance	Meetings
Vale of White Horse District Council	Public administration and governance	Meetings
West Oxfordshire Council	Public administration and governance	Meetings
West Berkshire County Council	Public administration and governance	Meeting
Abingdon (Vale of White Horse District Council)	Public - In the community	Drop-In Event
Banbury (Cherwell District Council)	Public - In the community	Drop-In Event
Berinsfield (South Oxfordshire District Council)	Public - In the community	Drop-In Event
Botley (South Oxfordshire District Council)	Public - In the community	Drop-In Event
Didcot (South Oxfordshire District Council)	Public - In the community	Drop-In Event
Kidlington (Cherwell District Council)	Public - In the community	Drop-In Event
Newbury (West Berkshire Council)	Public - In the community	Drop-In Event
Oxford (Oxford City Council)	Public - In the community	Drop-In Event
Wheatley (South Oxfordshire District Council)	Public - In the community	Drop-In Event
Witney (West Oxfordshire District Council)	Public - In the community	Drop-In Event
Beckley and Stowood Parish Council - Public & Parishes	Public - In the community	Public meeting
Oxford City Council - Corporate Policy Officers Group (internal)	Public administration and governance	Meetings
Oxford City Council – Employees	Public administration and governance	Meetings

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Oxford City Council & Oxford Direct Service - Employee Focus Groups	Public administration and governance	Focus Groups
Oxford City Council - Leadership Conversation	Public administration and governance	Meetings
Oxford City Council - Internal Officer groups	Public administration and governance	Workshops
Oxford City Council - Internal Framing Groups	Public administration and governance	Workshops
Oxford City Council - Leaders Group	Public administration and governance	Meetings
Oxford City Council - Group Leaders	Public administration and governance	Meetings
Oxford City Council - Elected Member sessions • Social Services, Communities, and Housing Integration • Transport • Governance and Local Representation • Housing and Economy	Public administration and governance	Workshops
Lee Dillon MP (MP for Newbury)	UK Parliament	Meeting
Calum Miller MP (MP for Bicester and Woodstock)	UK Parliament	Meeting
Charlie Maynard MP (MP for Witney)	UK Parliament	Meeting
Freddie Van Mierlo MP (MP for Henley and Thame)	UK Parliament	Meeting
Layal Moran MP (MP for Oxford West and Abingdon)	UK Parliament	Meeting
Olly Glover MP (MP for Didcot and Wantage)	UK Parliament	Meeting
Rt Hon Anneliese Dodds MP (MP for Oxford East)	UK Parliament	Meeting
Sean Woodcock MP (MP for Banbury)	UK Parliament	Meeting
Olivia Bailey MP (MP for Reading West and Mid-Berkshire)	UK Parliament	Meeting
Matt Rodda MP (MP for Reading Central)	UK Parliament	Discussion
Yuan Yang MP (MP for Earley and Woodley)	UK Parliament	Discussion
Thames Valley Police Crime Commissioner	Public administration and governance	Meeting
Thames Valley Police Chief Superintendent	Public administration and governance	Meeting
Unison and Unite	Public Service Unions	Meeting
Healthwatch Oxfordshire	Health	Written feedback
Buckinghamshire, Oxfordshire and West Berkshire Integrated Care Board	Health	Meeting
Secondary Education	Education	Meetings
Voluntary and Community Stakeholders - 3 sessions, with representation from 13 organisations.	Third Sector	On-line Drop-In Events
Oxfordshire County Council - Service Transformation for Adult Social Care	Teach-In Session	Briefing

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Oxfordshire County Council - Service Transformation for Children's Services & SEND (Teach-In session)	Teach-In Session	Briefing
Oxfordshire Fire and Rescue Service	Teach-In Session	Briefing
Conference of Colleges - University and landowning colleges	Higher Education	Meeting
Oxford Housing & Growth - Business Stakeholders	Oxford Business Stakeholders	Survey
Oxford Business Stakeholders	Oxford Business Stakeholders	Meetings
Oxford Brookes University (Vice-Chancellor, Oxford Brookes University)	Higher Education	Meeting
Oxford Bus Company	Public Transport	Meeting
Fast Cities Group: • Cambridge City Council • Milton Keynes Council • Norwich City Council • Oxford City Council • Peterborough City Council • Swindon Borough Council	Public administration and governance	Meetings
Oxford University Health - NHS Foundation Trust	Health	Meeting
Cathedral Cities Group: • Cambridge City Council • City of Lincoln Council • Exeter City Council • Gloucester City Council • Ipswich Borough Council • Norwich City Council • Oxford City Council	Public administration and governance	Meetings
District Councils Network	Public administration and governance	Meetings
Mayoral Strategic Authority - Summits	Public administration and governance	Meetings
Reading Borough Council	Public administration and governance	Meeting
Swindon Borough Council	Public administration and governance	Meeting

Strategic Partnerships

Defined as: A long-term, mutually beneficial relationship to achieve shared strategic goals. Typically, deep, collaborative, and aligned with the core missions of partners.

Oxford Growth Commission	Oxfordshire Children's Trust Board	Oxford Strategic Partnership
Oxfordshire Joint Leaders Committee	Prevention and Health Inequalities Forum	Oxford Safer Communities
Oxfordshire Place Base Partnership	Oxford Zero Carbon Partnership	One Public Estate

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Oxfordshire Health and Wellbeing Board	Oxfordshire Health Improvement Board	Fast Growth Cities
Homes England - Statement of Common Ground (Duty to align to meet unmet housing need)	Oxfordshire Resources & Waste Partnership	Oxford West End

Collaborative Partnerships

Defined as: A relationship between two or more stakeholders, that work together toward a shared goal or mutual benefit. Emphasising cooperation, shared resources, and joint decision-making.

University and innovation partnerships	Communities Joint Working - Oxfordshire	Homelessness Partnership
East West Main Line Partnership (Rail)	Community Champions Partnerships	Oxfordshire Skills Board
Oxford Strategic Rail Promoters Group	Community Health Partnerships	Economic Growth Steering Board
Oxfordshire Local Skills Advisory Board (CIMPSA)	Cultural Partnerships	Community Impact Zone (CIZ)
The Leys Health and Wellbeing Partnership	Interfaith Forum/Partnership	Age UK Oxford
Barton Health and Wellbeing Partnership	East Oxford Youth Partnership	Community First Oxfordshire
Wood Farm Health and Wellbeing Partnership	Leys Youth Partnership	Collaborative Housing
Rose Hill Health and Wellbeing Partnership	Children and Young People Partnership (City)	Aspire Oxford
Littlemore Health and Wellbeing Partnership	Littlemore Community Partnership	Oxford University Hospitals
Rose Hill Youth Partnership	Cultural Education Partnership	Oxford Brookes University
Countywide Food Network	Council of Sanctuary Local Authority Network	Advice Centre Forum
Adult Social Care (Oxfordshire County Council)	Oxfordshire Migration Partnership	Move South East
Children Services Oxfordshire	South East Strategic Partnership for Migration	BICEP

Northway Community Partnership	Marmalade Partnership Group	Talk of the Town
Retail Bursar Group	Cornmarket Street landlord forum	Broad Street Protocol

Operational Partnerships

Defined as: A business relationship where partners collaborate to improve or manage day-to-day operations. Focused on efficiency, execution, and performance in specific areas of business.

District Councils Network	Getting Oxfordshire online	Digital Inclusion Network
Local Government Association	Hearing Impairment Team - Abingdon	LiFT Implementation
Local Government Information Unit	Oxford Social Prescribing Network	Over 50+ Group
Oxford City Council of Sanctuary External Stakeholders group	Donnington Medical Partnership	Redevco
Refugee Led Research Hub	Enabling Registered Providers	English National Ballet
Asylum Partnership Meeting	Local Insight Working Group	Carers Oxfordshire
Oxford Windrush Working Group	Events Marketing Group	Tourism Group
	Landsec and Oxford City Council	

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Appendix E: Council Tax and Harmonisation

E.1 Council Tax

Council tax is integral to council finances for ensuring the financial sustainability of any new unitary council. Inevitably different Councils have different levels of council tax charge which is the result of annual incremental political decisions at the different councils over many years. Through the creation of unitary councils, bringing together areas which have historically different levels of council tax charge, result in the need to harmonise those council tax charges over time.

Harmonisation must take place by day 1 of year 9 from vesting day, although if you move too quickly some residents receive a high council tax increase whereas if you go too slow residents on the same council tax bands get charged different levels of council tax for a longer period. Ultimately the levels of council tax and speed of harmonisation will be a political decision for the Shadow Authorities. For the purposes of equity between Council taxpayers, it is preferable to have the shortest period of harmonisation possible. However, this must be taken in the context of affordability and the impact on Council Taxpayers of the annual increase. It therefore may be necessary to harmonise over a longer period than one year.

An additional nuance of the proposed Unitary models in Oxfordshire and West Berkshire is that there is a difference balance of service delivery between the district council and the parish council in different areas. For instance, the average parish Council band D charge in Oxford City is £21 but in the rest of Oxfordshire the average parish Council band D charge is £114. Differences in the provision of services between different areas must be adjusted using a mechanism of special expenses which is an adjustment between areas made in the council tax setting process.

E.2 Special Expenses

Special expenses are applied when a main precepting body i.e. a district or unitary Council, provides a service in a parish (or unparished area) which is provided in other parishes by a town or parish council. To avoid double taxation the cost of this service must be met by the council taxpayers of the town or parish where the service is being provided so a special expense is charged to the council taxpayers of that parish or area. It should be noted that special expenses are not additional spending over and above the budget set by the Council but a classification within the overall budget.

Legislation (Section 35 of the Local Government Finance Act 1992) specifies the items which are to be treated as special items for the purposes of calculating the Council Tax. These items include:

A precept relating to part only of the Council's area e.g. parish precepts;
The whole of the expenses (or only some) of those incurred by the Council in performing in a part of its area a function performed elsewhere in its area by a Parish Council; and
Any net expenses which arise out of the Council's possession of property held in trust for a part of its area.

It is item 2 in that list that needs to be considered in respect of the unitary proposals. The types of costs included in this item would normally include (not exclusively):

1. Cemetery provision

2. Community Centres
3. Allotment provision
4. Parks, Open Spaces and Recreation Grounds

E.3 Council Tax Harmonisation

Current Band D levels for each existing authority are:

Table 2: Current Band Ds

Billing Authority	2025/26 Overall Band D (excluding police) £
Oxford	2,252.70
South Oxfordshire	2,062.64
West Oxfordshire	2,040.78
Vale of the White Horse	2,073.09
Cherwell	2,069.90
West Berkshire	1,921.41
Highest Band D	2,252.70
Lowest Band D	1,921.41

As already identified, harmonisation of Council Tax in the shortest period possible within affordability and financial impact considerations is desirable in order to achieve equity across the new unitary authorities with all service users in a new council paying the same rate. In doing this, Councils will likely want to ensure that they maximise income in order to deal with financial pressures facing councils in both year one and every subsequent year. The new unitary authorities will also likely want to comply with the referendum limits. The choice of methods and timeframe for harmonisation will be a decision for the new unitary authorities; these options are provided therefore for indicative purposes and the results have not been included in the overall costs and savings figures. The harmonisation analysis has been undertaken using 2025/26 council tax figures since these are a known factor; any projection to estimated 2027/28 council tax levels for analysis purposes would have the same overall results since consistent percentages would be applied to get to the estimated figures. 2025/26 council tax figures also have the benefit of being recognisable and published figures and are consistent with the use of 2025/26 budget information for baseline calculations.

There are four options for Council Tax Harmonisation that have been assessed:

1. Harmonising to the Highest Band D with a 4.99% increase
2. Harmonising to the Highest Band D without a 4.99% increase
3. Harmonising to the Lowest Band D with a 4.99% increase
4. Harmonising to the Weighted Average Band D

E.3.1   Harmonising to the Highest band D with a 4.99% increase

Council tax referendum limits apply to the overall weighted average band D of an authority. Harmonising to the highest band D in each unitary area after applying the annual referendum limit

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would inevitably breach the referendum limit. This can be shown in the table 3 below which shows the overall calculated yields when a 4.99% increase is applied to the highest Band D:

Table 3: Harmonising to the Highest band D with a 4.99% increase

Unitary	Tax Base	Weighted Average Band D £	Weighted Average Band D Plus 4.99% Increase £	Highest Band D	Highest Band D Plus 4.99% Increase £	Council Tax Yield from Highest Band D £	Referendum Limit £
Greater Oxford	75,436.6	2,184.88	2,293.90	2,252.70	2,365.11	178,415,837	173,044,260
North Oxfordshire	99,142.9	2,055.58	2,158.16	2,069.90	2,173.19	215,456,227	213,966,023
Ridgeway	172,957.1	2,009.70	2,109.99	2,073.09	2,176.54	376,447,517	364,936,871

This option has issues for the following reasons:
A Council cannot breach the referendum limit without undertaking a referendum, the results of which would be uncertain

The councils will not be fully established when the Council Tax needs to be set and a referendum would likely be an unpopular move and a poor start to the relations between the new council and their stakeholders.

E.3.2 Harmonising to the Highest band D without a 4.99% increase

Council tax referendum limits apply to the overall average band D of an authority. Harmonising to the highest band D in each unitary area but without a 4.99% increase would allow for harmonisation over a shorter period or with less adverse impact on those lower council tax areas. This can be shown in the tables below which shows the overall calculated yields when the highest Band D is applied to all areas:

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Table 4: Harmonising to the Highest band D without a 4.99% increase – Greater Oxford

Current Council	2025/26 Overall Band D (excluding police) £	Tax Base	Council Tax raised from Area £	Band D (excluding police) After Harmonisation £	Increase on Band D £	Increase on Band D %	Council Tax raised from Area After Harmonisation £
	Greater Oxford						
Oxford *	2,252.70	47,637.8	107,313,672	2,252.70	0.00	0.00	107,313,672
South Oxfordshire	2,062.64	8,916.4	18,391,323	2,252.70	190.06	9.21	20,085,974
Vale of the White Horse	2,073.09	9,429.3	19,547,788	2,252.70	179.61	8.66	21,241,384
Cherwell	2,069.90	9,453.1	19,566,972	2,252.70	182.80	8.83	21,294,998
Total		75,436.6	164,819,755				169,936,029
Maximum Band D			2,252.70				
Council Tax Precept if a weighted average Council Tax increase of 4.99% was applied							173,044,261
Loss of Council Tax compared to applying a 4.99% rise							3,108,232

Excluding All Special Expenses

Table 5: Harmonising to the Highest band D without a 4.99% increase – North Oxfordshire

Current Council	2025/26 Overall Band D (excluding police) £	Tax Base	Council Tax raised from Area £	Band D (excluding police) After Harmonisation £	Increase on Band D £	Increase on Band D %	Council Tax raised from Area After Harmonisation £
	North Oxfordshire						
Cherwell	2,069.90	50,400.6	104,324,202	2,069.90	0.00	0.00	104,324,202
West Oxfordshire	2,040.78	48,742.3	99,472,372	2,069.90	29.12	1.43	100,891,749
Total		99,142.9	203,796,574				205,215,951
Maximum Band D			2,069.90				
Council Tax Precept if a weighted average Council Tax increase of 4.99% was applied							213,966,023
Loss of Council Tax compared to applying a 4.99% rise							8,750,072

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Table 6: Harmonising to the Highest band D without a 4.99% increase – Ridgeway

Current Council	2025/26 Overall Band D (excluding police) £	Tax Base	Council Tax raised from Area £	Band D (excluding police) After Harmonisation £	Increase on Band D £	Increase on Band D %	Council Tax raised from Area After Harmonisation £
			Ridgeway				
South Oxfordshire	2,062.64	54,723.5	112,874,880	2,073.09	10.45	0.51	113,446,741
Vale of White Horse	2,073.09	49,722.2	103,078,596	2,073.09	0.00	0.00	103,078,596
West Berkshire	1,921.41	68,511.4	131,638,451	2,073.09	151.68	7.89	142,030,257
Total		172,957.1	347,591,927.0				358,555,593.0
Maximum Band D			2,073.09				

Council Tax Precept if a weighted average Council Tax increase of 4.99% was applied	364,936,764
Loss of Council Tax compared to applying a 4.99% rise	6,381,171

Applying this option would result in a loss to all of the Councils compared to applying rises based on a weighted average. This may be considered an acceptable cost to the new unitary authorities in order to ease the cost burden on individuals and / or to speed up harmonisation. Any council tax setting which does not take the maximum increase to the Band D charge will have ongoing year on year effects and the reduced council tax yield would roll forward from year to year and would be exacerbated by the loss of future percentage increases on the "lost" Band D charge.

E.4   Harmonising to the Lowest Band D with a 4.99% increase

Harmonising to the lowest band D in each unitary area would result in a lower council tax yield than the maximum increase that each council could levy without breaching the referendum limit. This can be shown in the table below which shows the overall calculated loss when a 4.99% increase is applied to the lowest Band D and applied to the entire area:

Table 7: Harmonising to the Lowest Band D with a 4.99% increase

Unitary	Tax Base	Weighted Average Band D £	Weighted Average Band D Plus 4.99% Increase £	Lowest Band D £	Lowest Band D Plus 4.99% Increase £	Loss of Council Tax by harmonising to lowest Band D (after 4.99% increase) £
Greater Oxford	75,436.6	2,184.88	2,293.90	2,062.64	2,165.57	9,681,344
North Oxfordshire	99,142.9	2,055.58	2,158.16	2,040.78	2,142.61	1,540,902
Ridgeway	172,957.1	2,009.70	2,109.99	1,921.41	2,017.29	16,032,296

If this option were to be chosen, the following would need to be considered:
Councils generally are under increasing financial pressure and increasing demand for services and council tax is a key income stream for councils to deal with the costs of demands on their services
Any reduction in the Band D charge will have ongoing year on year effects and the reduced council tax yield would roll forward from year to year and would be exacerbated by the loss of future percentage increases on the "lost" Band D charge.

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E.5 Harmonising to the Weighted Average Band D

Council tax referendum limits apply to the overall average band D of an authority. Harmonising to the weighted average band D would move all Council taxpayers to the weighted average with some moving up and some moving down. One-year harmonisation calculations are as follows:

Table 8: Harmonising to the Weighted Average Band D – Greater Oxford

| Current Council | Greater Oxford | | | | | | |
	2025/26 Overall Band D (excluding police) £	Increase / (Decrease) to Weighted Average £	Increase / (Decrease) %	4.99% Increase on Weighted Average £	Total Increase £	Revised Council Tax £	Total Increase %
Oxford *	2,252.70	(67.82)	(3.01)	109.03	41.21	2,293.91	1.83
South Oxfordshire	2,062.64	122.24	5.93	109.03	231.27	2,293.91	11.21
Vale of the White Horse	2,073.09	111.79	5.39	109.03	220.82	2,293.91	10.65
Cherwell	2,069.90	114.98	5.55	109.03	224.01	2,293.91	10.82
Weighted Average = Total Council Tax Requirement divided by Tax base 2,184.88				Gap from largest to smallest 190.06			

* Excluding All Special Expenses

Table 9: Harmonising to the Weighted Average Band D – North Oxfordshire

| Current Council | North Oxfordshire | | | | | | |
	2025/26 Overall Band D (excluding police) £	Increase / (Decrease) to Weighted Average £	Increase / (Decrease) %	4.99% Increase on Weighted Average £	Total Increase £	Revised Council Tax £	Total Increase %
Cherwell	2,069.90	(14.32)	(0.69)	102.57	88.25	2,158.15	4.26
West Oxfordshire	2,040.78	14.80	0.73	102.57	117.37	2,158.15	5.75
Weighted Average = Total Council Tax Requirement divided by Tax base 2,055.58				Gap from largest to smallest 29.12			

Table 10: Harmonising to the Weighted Average Band D – Ridgeway

| Current Council | Ridgeway | | | | | | |
	2025/26 Overall Band D (excluding police) £	Increase / (Decrease) to Weighted Average £	Increase / (Decrease) %	4.99% Increase on Weighted Average £	Total Increase £	Revised Council Tax £	Total Increase %
South Oxfordshire	2,062.64	(52.94)	(2.57)	100.28	47.34	2,109.98	2.30
Vale of White Horse	2,073.09	(63.39)	(3.06)	100.28	36.89	2,109.98	1.78
West Berkshire	1,921.41	88.29	4.60	100.28	188.57	2,109.98	9.81
Weighted Average = Total Council Tax Requirement divided by Tax base 2,009.70				Gap from largest to smallest 151.68			

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Although it is preferable from an equity perspective to harmonise over one year, as can be seen from the tables above, it may be preferable to smooth the impact through an extended harmonisation period. This would reduce the year-on-year effect to individual council taxpayers. Potential phased harmonisation for Greater Oxford City Council could be as follows:

Table 11: Harmonising to the Weighted Average Band D – Greater Oxford 3 year Harmonisation

Greater Oxford	Over / (Under) the average £	Harmonisation effect over 3 years (per year) £
Oxford City	68	-23
South Oxfordshire Parishes	-122	41
Vale of White Horse Parishes	-112	37
Cherwell Parishes	-115	38
Maximum Variance	-122	41
Minimum Variance	68	-23

(N.B. a positive variance means the council tax would come down; a negative variance means that it needs to go up)

The difference between the highest and lowest Band D in the new North Oxfordshire and Ridgeway unitary authorities is not as large as that for Greater Oxford therefore the harmonisation could be undertaken over a shorter period:

Table 12: Harmonising to the Weighted Average Band D – Phased Harmonisation

	Years to Harmonise	Maximum Average Harmonisation upwards £	Maximum Average Harmonisation downward £
North Oxfordshire	1	-15.00	14.00
Ridgeway	2	-44.00	32.00

Unitary status and need for additional special expenses calculations
Council tax charging in Oxford City is different to that in the non-City areas being brought into the greater Oxford area. This is because the non-Oxford City areas rely more heavily on services being provided by the parishes. Due to this there is a relatively large difference between the district council tax of the City area and the new areas brought into Greater Oxford.

Based on the 2025/26 council tax levels, the average council tax for the new Greater Oxford area would be £2,184.88 excluding the parish charge and existing Oxford City Special Expenses.

However given the amount of the difference between the district charge from the City and that of the parished areas brought into the new unitary, along with the differences in the parish related band D, this is likely to be due to a disparity between the services provided by parishes in the Oxford City Area and those provided by parishes in the parished areas being brought into Greater Oxford. When there is a difference between areas for charging purposes there must be an adjustment called "special expenses" to remove double taxation. This would be in additional to the special expenses currently forming part of the council tax calculations for the current City Council.

A rough estimate of the effect of this would amend the Greater Oxford harmonisation position to the following:

Table 13: Harmonising to the Weighted Average Band D – Greater Oxford Special Expenses

Current Council	Greater Oxford (after Special Expenses Adjustment)						
	2025/26 Overall Band D (excluding police) £	Increase / (Decrease) to Weighted Average £	Increase / (Decrease) %	4.99% Increase on Weighted Average £	Total Increase £	Revised Council Tax £	Total Increase %
Oxford *	2,180.65	(41.27)	(1.89)	106.75	65.48	2,246.13	3.00
South Oxfordshire	2,062.64	76.74	3.72	106.75	183.49	2,246.13	8.90
Vale of the White Horse	2,073.09	66.29	3.20	106.75	173.04	2,246.13	8.35
Cherwell	2,069.90	69.48	3.36	106.75	176.23	2,246.13	8.51
Weighted Average = Total Council Tax Requirement divided by Tax base 2,139.38				Gap from largest to smallest 118.01			

* Excluding All Special Expenses

This would also have an effect on the phasing of harmonisation that could be applied. This can be shown as follows:

Table 14: Harmonising to the Weighted Average Band D – Greater Oxford Phased

Greater Oxford	Over / (Under) the average £	Harmonisation effect over 3 years (per year) £	Harmonisation effect over 2 years (per year) £
Oxford City	41	-14	-21
South Oxfordshire Parishes	-77	26	39
Vale of White Horse Parishes	-66	22	33
Cherwell Parishes	-69	23	35
Maximum Variance	-77	26	39
Minimum Variance	41	-14	-21

Appendix F: Oxfordshire Waste & Environmental Services Transformation Programme (WESP)

Please see attached separate paper

Appendix G: Detailed Target Operating Model Blueprints

G.1 Early Intervention and Prevention

G.1.1 Context and Constraints: Greater Oxford

Greater Oxford is a city region that contains deep diversity, both of communities and of experience. Home to some of the best academic institutions in the world, several wards (such as Jericho, Marston and North Oxford) rank as some of the least deprived in the country – with overall population health in areas such as regular physical activity and obesity being good.

However, other areas of the city region (such as Northfield Brook and Rose Hill) are amongst some of the most deprived areas in the country, with challenges around low household incomes, long-term unemployment and poor health outcomes being deep rooted. Many young people who grow up in Oxford do not see the immediate opportunities provided by the academic institutions and STEM fields as being relevant to them, risking further entrenching challenge within the home communities of the city. There is almost a 10-year life expectancy gap for men between those who live in the most and least affluent areas of the city.

According to external assessments[8], current statutory services at a county level do not have effective responses to people whose needs are complex but do not meet the statutory thresholds for support. With many support pathways being focused on the city, this drives a complexity of demand that the new unitary will need to effectively manage.

Additionally, cost of living challenges risks a wider range of people potentially requiring support. Oxford is one of the least affordable areas in the country to buy, with house prices at 13x the local salaries, and has some of the highest rents in the country – exacerbated by the local student population. This risks an expanded 'squeezed middle' facing housing and budgeting challenges – perhaps reflected in the fact that 28% of households presenting as homeless are in either full or part time employment.

However, there are strong foundations to build a preventative model upon. There are a wide range of local activists, including informal groups, community spaces, shops, businesses, faith groups, and voluntary organisations in all communities. These groups, relationships and spaces are critical in addressing social issues such as loneliness and inequality and play a vital role in supporting everyday prevention.

Alongside this there are complimentary offers from the existing local authorities and partners, including high-quality leisure offers available across the city region, offering residents tailored support around their physical wellbeing; significant grant funding to community groups, and community health and wellbeing workers in more deprived communities. Preventative work within homelessness has been nationally recognised for its positive outcomes, and community advice centres are already being funded within areas of the city that require additional support.

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[8] Oxfordshire CQC Assessment, 2025

G.1.2   Context and Constraints: Northern Oxfordshire

North Oxfordshire faces some of the opportunities and challenges that are typical of many rural areas, with dispersed communities across a large geographical footprint.

Market towns across the unitary face a range of pressures – from Banbury and Carterton having high levels of private rented sector tenures and comparative low levels of qualification across the population, to Chipping Norton's aging population and Witney's comparatively mixed self-reporting of good health. More rural areas face challenges around connectivity to social and physical infrastructure, with one GP surgery having over 40,000 registered patients. There are specific pressure on services due to domestic abuse and migration, which require tailored support to prevent residents from reaching crisis through effective outreach and partnership working.

There is a good local foundation upon which to build community-led solutions to these challenges. Existing community organisations provide both tailored support to specific communities and encourage community action in maintaining the local environment strengthening community relationships and pride in place; community spaces are located across both urban and rural areas and funding arrangements support VCSFE organisations to support their local communities.

G.1.3   Context and Constraints: Ridgeway

The Ridgeway footprint is one of many local strengths – health outcomes are largely positive for residents with over half reporting that they experience very good health, and deprivation levels across the footprint are lower than in the other two unitary authorities.

However, this broad picture of strength should not shy away from some potential risks for households in this geography. Nearly 1/3 of areas in Ridgeway are deprived because of distance from services, health infrastructure and affordable housing. Whilst some of this could be mitigated by personal car use (with around 88% of households in the area owning one or more vehicle) this may speak to communities who are distanced from public sector infrastructure.

With an older and ageing population compared to the other two unitary authorities, residents being enabled to remain at home for as long as possible will prevent a need for them to potentially move to more urban areas to access support – a challenge reflected in CQC reports for both Oxfordshire and Ridgeway. Attention should also be given to the younger population, particularly around mental wellbeing, to ensure residents are supported from their teenage years through to adulthood.

G.1.4   Recommended Approach

We recognise that many residents across the three unitary authorities can effectively support themselves, utilising community and family networks to develop their own resilience. A core principle of this approach is investment in the community sector, based on our belief that prevention is best done by communities, in communities, to enable a vibrant offer that enables residents to solve their own challenges, without requiring the support of the council or statutory services. Where residents do require a council intervention, our community partners will be equals in service delivery and support, with co-location of services where appropriate.

Effective early help blends three key support elements: community-based support, digital advice and guidance, and statutory services. Informal and grassroots networks play a vital role in everyday

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wellbeing, digital tools help residents access timely information, and statutory services provide formal help for complex needs. A coordinated, integrated approach will ensure that people get the right help at the right time from people they trust.

By fostering closer collaboration with health and voluntary sector partners, the councils will be more effective in coordinating care, alleviating demand on services, and enhancing overall well-being. Services will be designed to prioritise dignity, personal choice, and accessible community-based support, thereby strengthening local resilience.

Whilst there will be a universal services approach in each unitary area, each of the unitary authorities should have a specific focus to meet the specific needs of their unitary:

- In Greater Oxford this should be focus on building resilience within the working age population, particularly focused on ensuring access to stable employment through reskilling where appropriate, maintaining tenancies and quality housing and supporting residents to manage their mental wellbeing.
- In Northern Oxfordshire, a unitary wide focus on reducing health inequalities and ensuring that all residents experience a good quality of life for all residents. This should particularly be supported by outreach around homelessness prevention and domestic abuse.
- For Ridgeway, an emphasis on ageing well and supporting residents to stay independent into older age through supporting community connection and support and supporting sustainable financial management into older age.

An insights and design function within each organisation will bring together data analytics capabilities with strategy, commissioning and operational staff to develop a deep understanding of the risk factors that may tip an individual into crisis enabling effective direction of operational colleagues and enabling collaboration with residents and partners to design new approaches to meeting needs where gaps are identified.

Operational delivery will be enabled through the bringing together of teams into one pathway from across unitary and district services, who will be able to effectively provide signposting to residents who just need one holistic conversation, but who can also hold cases where someone may need some extra support that does not yet require a statutory care intervention.

Two Public Health authorities – one hosted by Ridgeway and one across Greater Oxford and Northern Oxfordshire to be hosted by one of these authorities. Each would have its own Director of Public Health and Deputy Director of Public Health and be able to focus particularly on the needs of its specific communities, in line with the priorities outlined above for each of the three unitary authorities. It is proposed to share the function across Greater Oxford and Northern Oxfordshire for efficiencies due to their current smaller population sizes. This would not present an increase in staffing costs as there are currently two Directors and Deputy Directors of Public Health across the area – one each in Oxfordshire and West Berkshire.

G.1.5 Achieving Outcomes, Unlocking Innovation

This model of early intervention and prevention will leverage existing community capacity, by avoiding the local authority duplicating existing effective networks but by ensuring they have the resources and autonomy to continue to meet the needs of residents as the area grows. The Council's role in supporting communities and connections with spaces where needed, co-location,

and relational working will support innovation with our communities. Commissioning will be with communities and residents will be involved in design and decision making. This will create and support a rich tapestry building social capital and social connection to create more resilient communities.

By more effectively using the wealth of data that district and unitary organisations hold about their residents, the new unitary authorities will be able to better understand the root causes of demand and use this to identify households before they fall into crisis. This could look like using council tax arrears information to proactively target money management advice, or bereavement notifications to understand risks of isolation with older adults.

Breaking down service siloes will also be achieved by using the opportunity of unitarisation to bring together service functions that traditionally are dispersed across the organisation to enable residents to have access to a holistic approach to meeting their needs. Staff will be given the information and tools they need to have whole person conversations, that can result in individuals being signposted or having a team of professionals bought together to support them for a short period of time.

A focus on localised delivery will also enable the effective use of community assets. Neighbourhood working is a central tenant of the new Family Hub schemes, as well as the NHS Neighbourhood Health Plan – with both having a focus on new 'hubs' located in local areas. These, alongside existing community hubs, libraries, leisure centres and wider public sector partners, could provide a confusing and building-centred rather than person-centred approach to innovation. Establishing a new way of delivering resident facing services also means thinking about what services we can bring together in a way that makes the most sense to those who use them and releasing those are not required to effectively meet acute needs elsewhere – such as in care or education.

Partnership, culture, and commissioning practices are key to building trust and delivering prevention. In bringing these teams together and developing neighbourhood teams we will start with a focus on prevention that recognising the importance of community relationships and shared culture, requiring a focus on changing the prevailing culture of silo working. Building a collaborative team culture—where staff, partners and residents work together—is key, supported by shared behaviours.

Being able to focus support at a hyper local level across the three unitary authorities' neighbourhoods will enable the effective meeting of diverse local needs, whilst having a core focus on the need for continuous learning together, improvement and flexibility to meet the changing needs of residents in neighbourhoods, as areas grow in population and change in demographic needs.

At its core, the prevention approach will enable working alongside communities, focusing on what is strong with people and therefore reducing the level of crisis that residents experience, and by extension, the long-term support they would need from the council. This service will work alongside communities and partners taking a systems leadership role to support more resilient and better-connected communities across the city.

G.2 Adult Social Care

G.2.1 Context and Constraints: Greater Oxford

Greater Oxford has a fundamentally different population of adults when compared to the rest of the Oxfordshire footprint. There is a smaller overall population of older adults, and a much higher proportion of working age adults – partially skewed by the presence of the university and the urban centre – meaning that adult social care support from prevention through to long-term care needs to meet these needs. There is also a need to ensure that the older population has access to timely and independence-focused support. Data suggests that older adults living in Greater Oxford are amongst the loneliest and isolated in the country; and there is a higher level of adults being admitted to hospital because of a fall[9].

Whilst the existing county-delivered social care service has been assessed as 'Good' by the Care Quality Commission (CQC), its areas of improvement are those which have the greatest impact on the city region. This includes ensuring there is clear communication with both residents and providers when individuals are discharged from hospital; supporting residents with complex needs – particularly related to mental health – within the local area; being able to deeply understand and reflect diverse experiences in social work practice and actively engaging with the VCSE.

Given the much higher levels of diversity within Greater Oxford (24.3% residents with an ethnicity other than White compared to 13.2% overall in Oxfordshire), the higher levels of mental health challenge than elsewhere in the county (with a slightly higher prevalence of suicide and admission to hospital due to mental health-related concerns) and a focus on a community-led approach to service delivery, the above speaks to Greater Oxford's need for unitarisation and their own approach to social care delivery.

There is already effective collaboration in place between district councils, social care and health, around both hospital discharge processes to avoid residents becoming long-term rough sleepers, and in the effective use of the nationally recognised Home Improvement Agency to enable people to remain independent at home for as long as possible.

G.2.2 Context and Constraints: Northern Oxfordshire

Northern Oxfordshire will be a unitary that, according to the county's modelling[10] will result in the highest level of demand by the end of the forecast period. Whilst this increase in demand is across both the older adult and working age population, Northern Oxfordshire currently has the highest prevalence of dementia diagnosis out of the three unitary authorities, with cases currently in Cherwell increasing over recent years. This speaks to a need for services to consider how they can enable people to stay safe and independent at home, whilst also considering long-term independence for their residents.

Consideration will also need to be given to balancing service delivery between urban and rural centres. Demand is concentrated around Banbury, Chipping Norton and Witney as market centres, but can also be found spread across the Caversfield, Ambrosden and Fringford areas[11].

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[9] Oxfordshire JSNA
[10] Newton modelling for CCN/Oxfordshire
[11] Oxfordshire JSNA

Oxfordshire's CQC inspection found disparate availability of care provision in different area, our understanding is that Northern Oxfordshire is an area that currently as a disproportionate number of care beds compared to need, and future market development should consider how this can be better utilised and the market developed both in terms of core and cluster service delivery, and to ensure it is able to sustainably meet need in the long term.

G.2.3 Context and Constraints: Ridgeway

Ridgeway on vesting day will inherit the largest proportion of adult social care demand, with a larger proportion of older adults. It should be noted that the area has a level of comparative affluence which may be hiding overall demand for services due to a higher number of self-funders. Whilst challenging to estimate, the ONS suggests that as many as 62% of residents in some areas of the new unitary will self-fund their care[12]. This requires the service to consider how it can support residents to make financial sustainable decisions about their long-term care, in addition to working with market providers to ensure the market remains affordable and equitable for those residents with a different level of income.

Around 22% of homes across Ridgeway are occupied by older adults and are considered underoccupied[13]. There is an opportunity for the area to develop a wider range of quality specialist housing options that can enable residents to access support as they age, whilst retaining independence and a feeling that they have a place called home. This would also enable the return of properties into the market for families.

As with Northern Oxfordshire, support services are typically concentrated around the urban centres and there is a need for the service to consider how to leverage rurality in developing hyper local, community rooted responses to meeting need – that move beyond the traditional forms of service and care delivery.

G.2.4 Recommended Approach

Each of the three unitary authorities should establish their own sovereign Adult Social Care service, run by their own Director of Adult Social Care. This arrangement should seek to continue the effective joint working that exists across the footprint with the local ICB (Buckinghamshire, Oxfordshire and Berkshire West), but an individually focused service will enable the development and delivery of services that meet the specific needs of each area, driven by a deep understand of local strengths, assets and opportunities.

Partnership working between the 3 unitary authorities will be retained to address cross boundary challenges, such as retaining the cross-footprint Adult Safeguarding Board, and responding to demand pressures, such as hospital discharges through the winter months and cross-boundary provision.

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[12] Care homes & estimating the self-funding population, England, ONS (22/23)
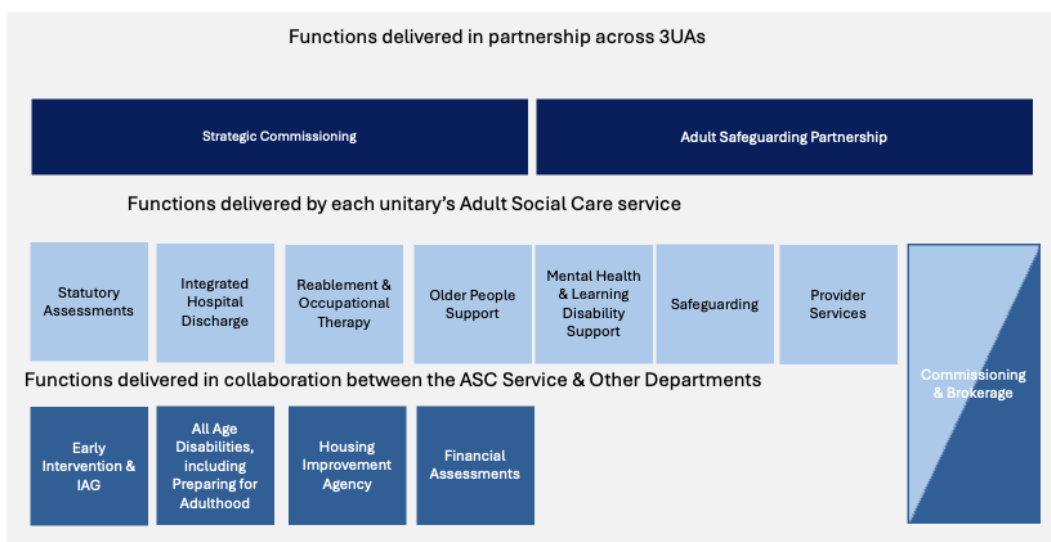[13] Overcrowding and under-occupancy by household characteristics, ONS

Fig F.1: Functions in the new Adult Social Care departments

G.2.5 Achieving Outcomes, Unlocking Innovation

The entry point for many residents into Adult Social Care will not be directly into the service, but via the prevention pathway which will enable residents to be effectively connected to opportunities within the community without the need for a statutory assessment. This new single route to support will be enhanced by tools such as chatbots, which will enable digitally connected residents to self-serve on issues such as benefits and small technology. Social care staff will provide input into multi-agency meetings as appropriate but will only become responsible for an individual when it is deemed that they require a Care Act assessment. There will remain a route directly to the service for those residents who are in crisis, or for partners who have a safeguarding concern.

Short-term, enabling support will be an option for all residents – including those who are working age, shifting a default away from a package of support to the tools that a person may need to live an independent life.[14] In Greater Oxford, this could include greater focus on expanding relationships with local colleges in developing the supported internship programme and collaborating with local businesses to enable residents into long-term employment. Meanwhile, in Ridgeway this may include supporting residents to use equipment and technology to enable their independence within their own homes.

Existing strong collaboration between partners on the Out of Hospital Care pathway in Greater Oxford, and Healthy Bicester in North Oxfordshire, can be used as an exemplar for designing solutions to meet the needs of other residents experiencing complexity, particularly around mental health. The new unitary authorities will be well positioned to not only better understand the needs of their residents, but to use this information to work in collaboration with them to design support services.

Leveraging the experience that the districts have in developing housing solutions to meet resident needs will also enable accommodation which is fit for residents to live and age well within. There is an opportunity for the unitary authorities to be trailblazers in their approach to developing accommodation for adults with learning disabilities and mental health needs to age well within,

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[14] According to nationally available data, more working age adults in Oxfordshire receive long-term support after reablement compared to the majority of their peers

alongside its older population. Delivering future-proofed, affordable homes will not only enable greater independence and improved outcomes for residents but will enable a shift away from high-cost residential care placements currently used across the footprint.

G.3 Children's Services

G.3.1 Context and constraints: Greater Oxford

Greater Oxford's geography presents a distinct set of drivers leading to children and young people entering the care system compared to rural areas. The Unitary is more diverse, densely populated, has a unique set of social dynamics, and higher levels of deprivation. These factors combined create particular safeguarding issues and family and child-level vulnerabilities. Economic precarity (Greater Oxford has the highest number of households in temporary accommodation out of the three unitary authorities) in urban cities often translates into parents facing higher levels of mental health and substance misuse issues, leading to increased incidents of neglect and domestic abuse for children and young people. This phenomenon is seen across pockets of deprivation in Oxford City as Barton represents the highest combined number of children in need and child protection plans (56) across any MSOA area in the three proposed unitary authorities.

Whilst the existing county-delivered social care service has been assessed as 'Good' by Ofsted in its latest inspection, several areas of improvement remain that are crucial to preventing care entries, keeping children and young people safe and alleviating budget pressures. These include the need to bolster foster carer recruitment to reduce rising placements expenditure, timeliness of actions for children who have escalated to pre-proceedings and better transitional safeguarding arrangements between children's and adult social care services to prevent exploitation of care leavers. Educational attainment outcomes for children in care also require improvement.

A sovereign children's service will enable all three unitary authorities to individually and collectively address identified improvement areas. This will include localised transitional safeguarding policies and enhanced integration between social care, and the early intervention and prevention pathway which will provide a coordinated approach to supporting vulnerable young people transition safely into adulthood. Collaboration with the VCSE sector will be central to service delivery.

G.3.2 Context and Constraints: Northern Oxfordshire

Northern Oxfordshire has the second highest number of children in need and child protection cases, the latter being 37% higher than Greater Oxford but 19% lower than Ridgeway, however the overall population (265,000) is far lower than Ridgeway (430,000). These statistics are driven by a multitude of factors including the higher levels of child poverty in Northern Oxfordshire (10.5% living in absolute poverty) which is nearly on par with Greater Oxford (11%), with deep pockets of deprivation including Banbury.

Service delivery will need to focus on enhancing and equipping locality teams based in high areas of need with the right expertise to tackle the challenges which arise in large rural geographical footprints, including child criminal exploitation. Proactive outreach and engagement with households will also be critical to identifying what can be a 'hidden' cohort within rural geographies and addressing household vulnerabilities early. The role of education as a safeguarding partner within multi-agency child protection teams (MACPTs) will be critical in early

identification of potential risk or harm to children and young people, i.e. children identified due to persistent absence. MACPTs will also be critical in implementing mechanisms to deliver wrap around support to children and families from partners including mental health, substance abuse and domestic abuse services.

G.3.3 Context and Constraints: Ridgeway

Ridgeway will inherit the highest demand for Children's Services across all thresholds including Child in Need (CIN) and Child Protection (CP) cases – the total case load of child protection cases inherited by Ridgeway on vesting day will be 49% higher than that of Greater Oxford. Ridgeway also have twice as many early help cases compared Greater Oxford and 29% more than Northern Oxfordshire. These figures are indicative of the size and scale of Ridgeway but also the level of socio-economic inequality across the area with a third of areas in Ridgeway being deprived, this contributes to household instability and negatively impacts parental resilience.
This will require earlier intervention, and holistic support offers for families and multi-agency child protection teams to carefully manage and reduce risks, underpinned by clear operational thresholds.

Ridgeway also has approximately 17% more children and young (CYP) placed in residential settings, 62% more CYP in IFA placements compared to Greater Oxford and 22% more than Northern Oxfordshire – accounting for approximately 42% of overall placement expenditure across the three unitary authorities. This will require a revised strategy in relation to sufficiency planning at a three-unitary level, investment into in-house foster capacity and capability and an operational focus on providing the right types of support packages and interventions. These factors combined will help to reduce children's needs and enable transition into lower cost placements with the overarching ambition of achieving permanence.

G.3.4 Recommended Approach

Each of the three unitary authorities should establish their own sovereign Children's Social Care Service, run by their own Director of Children's Social Care and senior management team to heighten service accountability and oversight. Each Unitary will recruit additional specialist staff as part of implementing the Family First Partnership Programme. The authority will continue to maintain core county-level strategic partnerships and work together on critical areas to maintain quality, efficiency and market stability; Greater Oxford will also consider joint commissioning in areas where there are workforce shortages to ensure consistent service delivery across all three unitary authorities.
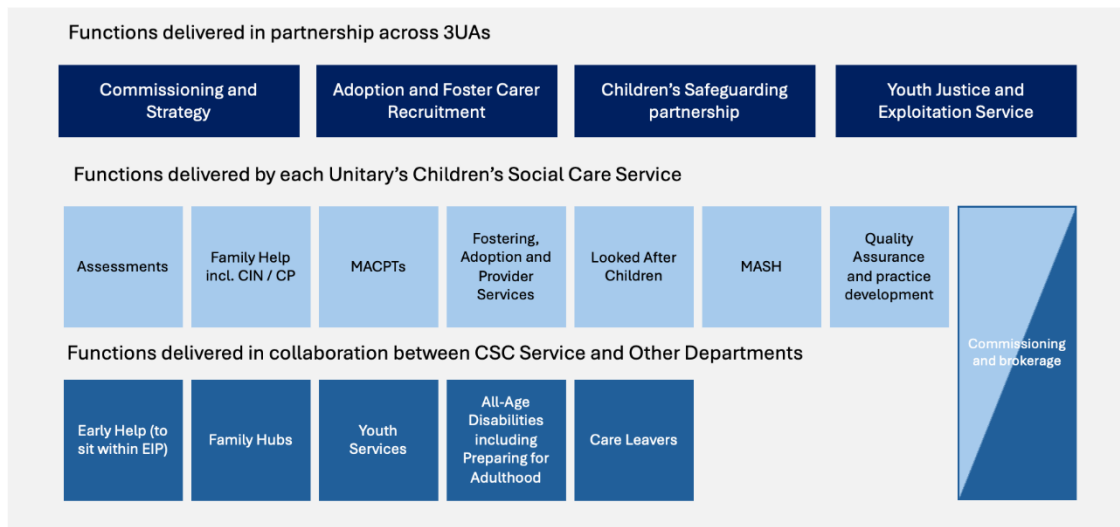
Fig F.2: Functions of the future CSC model

G.3.5 Achieving Outcomes, Unlocking innovation

The referral source into the Children's Social Care service will vary based on the referring safeguarding partner or individual. However, the Early Intervention and Prevention (EI&P) pathway will triage referrals (through multi-agency meetings where required) to ensure they reach the appropriate threshold and social care team; direct referral routes will remain open for cases where there are serious safeguarding concerns.

It is anticipated that the EI&P function will lead to more households being identified early to access universal and early help services to prevent escalation to statutory support services. This will be achieved through other functions including money and debt management and advice and employment and skills support, proactively identifying and addressing family circumstances that can contribute to its breakdown. This approach tackles the root causes in families to maximise opportunities to address core risks and prevent care entries. If needs cannot be met by the early help function, the appropriate assessment will be undertaken to ensure the child is provided with the support required for them to achieve and maintain a reasonable level of health and development.

The early help offer will adopt the Family First Partnership Programme ethos of making early support everybody's business – this will involve a county-wide, multi-agency commitment to provide social, health and educational support as needs emerge. Work will be family-led, and practitioners will be trained in restorative practice to build trusted relationships with families. All three unitary authorities will adopt a joint practice framework to ensure consistency in service delivery across the footprint.

Greater Oxford will harness its expertise in developing housing solutions to meet the varied needs of cohorts who are currently or have been in care to improve their life outcomes. This will encompass exploration of accommodation options (based on a thorough local needs assessment) including respite care centres to support families to manage needs of children with disabilities.

G.4 SEND and Education

G.4.1 Context and Constraints: Greater Oxford

The three unitary authorities proposal aims to address the differing needs of all areas and populations which will be analysed in more detail to determine the exact type of provision required to meet needs based on hyper-local insights at the implementation stage. The core drivers of cost for SEND services in Oxfordshire are aligned to those recognised nationally – a rapid rise in home to school transport and expensive privately sourced placements. In particular, and often out of county, independent non-maintained special school (INMSS) placements. The average annual cost of an INMSS placement per pupil with an EHCP reached £119,340 by 2024/25 and home to school transport annual expenditure now exceeds the total cost of maintained special schools.

This has created a financially unsustainable position for Oxfordshire with a projected £100m high needs blocks deficit by March 2026. This requires more local provision closer to home for children and young people with SEND and earlier identification and mobilisation of the right types of support. The three unitary authorities proposal provides Oxfordshire with an opportunity to rapidly achieve this ambition through enhanced integration between key functions including housing, planning, education and transport. Each unitary will also have control of funding from the dedicated schools grant to design and deliver provision and make operational changes based on local insights.

The improvement areas identified by Ofsted in 2023 would be best addressed through the 3UA model, these include: insufficient special schools, quality and timeliness of EHC(P) assessments, waiting times for neurodevelopmental assessments, strategic oversight of alternative provision and early intervention and agencies within the local area partnership. Three sovereign services would enable robust operational and strategic oversight, more local integration and localised decision making - creating the ability for unitary authorities to be responsive to local needs. Each unitary will have budgetary responsibilities to make improvements across areas of high expenditure to release monies that can be invested in resource bases and creating more inclusive settings for children and young people.

Greater Oxford represents the lowest spend across all placement types accounting for 24% of all placement expenditure in 2024/25. The unitary also scores lowest on the number of children and young people severely and persistently absent across 2024/25. Improvement initiatives should focus on reducing the total number of INMSS placements (141) which are only 25% lower than Northern Oxfordshire and boosting educational outcomes. Oxford has a significant proportion of its areas in the most deprived 30% in England, 20% of the most deprived areas are also amongst the 10% most deprived for education, skills and training. Some of these areas are located within Greater Oxford requiring a focus on early identification of SEND needs and a robust Early Years offer.

G.4.2 Context and Constraints: Northern Oxfordshire

Northern Oxfordshire represents 31% of all SEND placements across the three Unitarities and accounts for 30% of the overall SEND placement expenditure, (6% higher than Greater Oxford but 16% lower than Ridgeway). 39% of the unitary authority's overall placement expenditure is apportioned to INMSS placements. Northern Oxfordshire accounts for the second highest overall

percentage of children and young people who are severely absent (29%). Nonetheless, it is worth noting that 54% of all SEND placements across the footprint are accommodated within mainstream settings, marginally higher than Greater Oxford and Ridgeway.

This suggests inclusive settings and approaches are embedded in the system which can be further enhanced through new initiatives focused on mainstream inclusion and preventative work. Northern Oxfordshire has deep pockets of deprivation across many areas including Didcot and Banbury – given the prevalence of children with SEND in low-income households, Northern Oxfordshire can explore expansion of SEND hubs or other appropriate provision in areas of highest need. Innovative strategies to tackle persistent absence can be adopted based on root causes including emotionally based school avoidance pathways and transport solutions.

G.4.3 Context and Constraints: Ridgeway

Ridgeway has the highest annual expenditure on SEND Placements across INMSS, MSS, Mainstream and other provision, accounting for 47% of total spend on INMSS placements. Ridgeway also has the highest number of annual exclusions (32) which is exponentially higher than Greater Oxford (8) and Northern Oxfordshire (9). The number of children and young people severely absent is also 38% higher than Northern Oxfordshire and 48% more than figures in Greater Oxford.

This indicates that that the current education system needs to focus on establishing inclusive settings that meet the needs of children and young people; Ridgeway also has the lowest number of mainstream school capacity (290 placements) which is less than half of available capacity in Greater Oxford (690) and the Northern Oxfordshire (642). Ridgeway's rural geography has meant it has contributed to rising transport related costs for children with SEND.

G.4.4 Recommended Approach

Each of the three unitary authorities should establish their own sovereign SEND and Education service run by their own Children's Social Care Director and Senior Management team to develop a local response whilst continuing collaboration across the county footprint on critical areas, including commissioning of specialist support and mobilisation of virtual hubs.
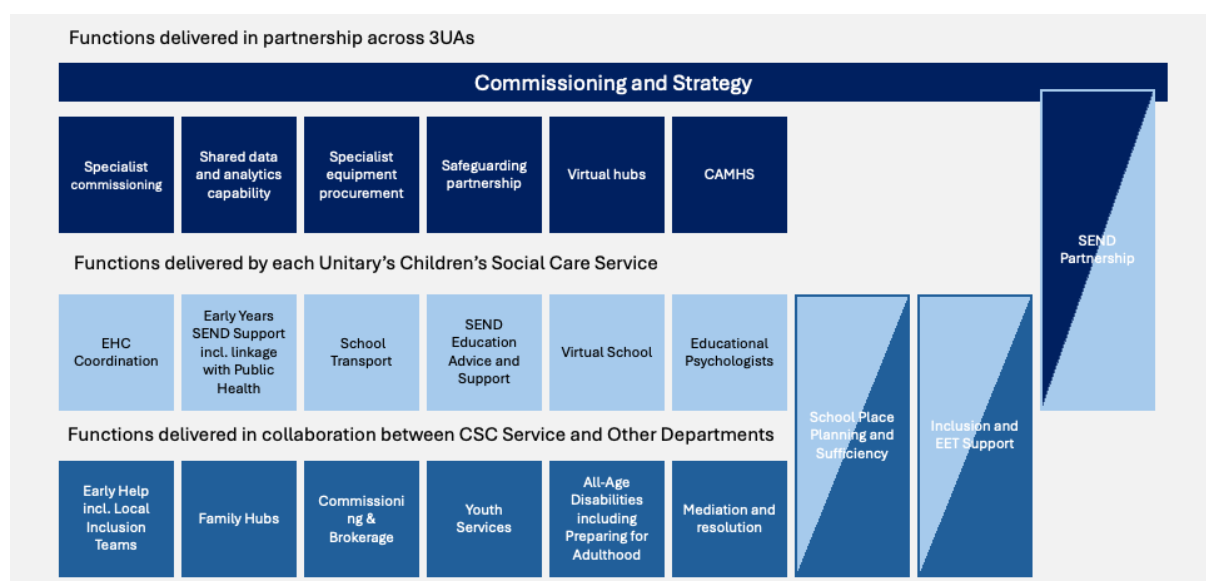

Fig F.3: Functions of the future SEND model

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G.4.5 Achieving Outcomes, Unlocking Innovation

Similar to the Children's Social Care model, children and young people will be referred through various sources including parents and multi-agency partners (i.e. GPs, Speech and Language Therapists and SENCOs). Families will benefit from the Early Intervention and Prevention function which will help parents to access all universal and non-statuary level support as they initiate the assessment processes for EHC(P)s. This will help to maintain family resilience, for example through providing financial and employment support or signposting parents to local parent carer forums to be part of their peer networks. The local offer and processes will be made accessible to ensure parents can benefit from all types of support including SEND short breaks.

EHC coordinators will be critical to establishing trusted relationships with parents to advise and support them through the EHCP assessment process and ensure it is completed in a timely and high-quality manner. Plans will be reviewed regularly to meet the evolving needs of children and young people as they enter key transition periods. The Teams Around Schools (TAS) model will enable multi-disciplinary teams to integrate support services into the school environment to identify and intervene early through a family-centred approach. This will reduce exclusions, improve attendance and outcomes for children with SEND. Dedicated Inclusion Support Teams comprised of specialist staff to aid schools in supporting children with more complex needs and behaviours will also be explored.

Transitions and achieving independence are critical periods and milestones for children and young people with SEND, requiring detailed planning and early collaboration with other services including Adult Social Care which will comprise of an All-Age Disability service to provide continuous person-centred and multi-agency support.

The service will also utilise emerging artificial intelligence solutions to boost workforce productivity, helping staff to complete administrative tasks including assessments at a faster pace to focus their resource on direct work with children and families.

G.5 Enabling Services

G.5.1 Context and Constraints: Greater Oxford

Greater Oxford is predominantly the city and urban extensions, with large outlying settlements at Wheatly and Berinsfield, and a number of rural villages in the greenbelt. The proposal also envisages significant commercial and housing development, which will require additional enabling services support.

The city population is younger and more diverse than the surrounding areas, and areas of deprivation exist within Oxford and Berinsfield. This raises challenges for customer support, delivering for complex needs in these areas while ensuring the needs of the older rural population are also met. The combination of service touch-points, call centre and digital-self-service will be designed to meet these differing needs.

This authority will have significant assets, both in social housing and comparatively high holdings in commercial assets. These require support services, including legal, planning and maintenance services, but are a source of revenue and collateral.

Oxford City Council has a policy of in-sourcing services to its two wholly-owned Latco companies, delivering housing and facilities management. These companies return a dividend to the council, and it is expected that these will transfer into the new authority, with potential to expand the scale of their operations.

As a newly formed unitary council, Greater Oxford will need to establish legal and professional services at a scale to support specialist recruitment, staff retention and delivery of statutory and regulatory services.

G.5.2 Context and Constraints: Northern Oxfordshire

Northern Oxfordshire is a largely rural unitary area served by a number of market towns, including growing urban settlements around Banbury and Bicester and Heyford Park, as well as a planned new urban settlement at Salt Cross.

As set out in the Demographic Distinctiveness section of the proposal, there are some stark demographic contrasts. Banbury has areas of significant deprivation, while the rural western area which is more wealthy but also aging.

In terms of service delivery, this requires a focus on delivering for complex needs in urban areas, whilst being able to deliver a wide range of trusted services across a dispersed rural population. Physical delivery of services across a very rural geography is challenging, and requires a mix of targeted support for service access alongside digital self-serve and call-based options.

As a new unitary authority, Norther Oxfordshire will need to establish professional support services at a scale to support specialist recruitment, staff retention and delivery of statutory and regulatory services.

Under current arrangements West Oxfordshire is a shareholder in two Latcos, and it is expected that this shareholding will transition to the new authority.

ICT contracts, data assurance and service availability will be critical to delivering a wide range of services across a dispersed geography.

G.5.3 Context and Constraints: Ridgeway

This area brings together existing unitary services from West Berkshire with district services from South Oxfordshire and Vale of the White Horse. It is anticipated that the majority of unitary structures and service support will be built out from the existing model for West Berkshire, with relevant staff from South, Vale and Oxfordshire County Council moving into roles in the new authority.

This is a large and rural area, with a small number of busy market towns. The Science Vale is a growth area for the knowledge economy and includes two enterprise zones which provide business rate revenue to the local council.

This authority will be formed of an existing unitary council and two district councils. West Berkshire's unitary structure will provide the framework to expand and the range of statutory and

regulatory services and support service transformation. Professional support services will need to expand in line with delivering across an expanded geography.

Physical delivery of services across a very rural geography is challenging, and requires a mix of targeted support for service access alongside digital self-serve and call-based options.

G.5.4 Recommended Approach

Service	Service Model	Model Detail
Finance	In-house delivery per unitary	Finance will consolidate district-led services (e.g. revenues and benefits) to unlock scale economies. The model aims to establish financially sustainable councils through strategic planning, improved accountancy, and leveraging buying power. Efficiencies will be reinvested to boost service quality.
Democratic Services	Mix of shared elements & in-house delivery	Each unitary will operate a Leader and Cabinet model supported by a centralised Democratic Services team and dedicated scrutiny arms. A new constitution, electoral systems, and committee structures will be established. For shared services and partnerships that run across the LGR area, rationalisation and joint working will ensure consistency of support.
HR and OD	In-house delivery per unitary	A centralised HR service will lead cultural integration, talent management, and organisational development. It will embed high-performance cultures, ensure legal compliance, and support flexible, values-based working. Economies of scale will be achieved without compromising responsiveness.
ICT and Digital	In-house delivery per unitary	ICT will underpin a unified digital workplace via a shared Microsoft 365 tenant. It will consolidate infrastructure, harmonise systems, and enhance cyber security. The phased rollout will align with contract expiries and support transformation through automation and data innovation.
Transformation & PMO	In-house delivery per unitary	Two PMOs (Development and Operational) will oversee the transition programme for at least two years. A core team will be supported by seconded specialists. The PMO will provide governance, drive change, and ensure coherent delivery across all workstreams.
Legal	In-house delivery per unitary	Each unitary will provide its own legal services to support effective and compliant delivery.
Audit	In-house delivery per unitary	Each unitary will maintain an internal audit plan, charter, and risk strategy. External auditors will be appointed to oversee account closure. Audit committees will provide governance.
Procurement	In-house delivery per unitary	A modern, integrated procurement unit will reduce contract duplication and streamline commissioning. Shared frameworks and a single contract register will improve efficiency and enable market development.
Strategy & Policy	In-house delivery per unitary	This function will coordinate strategic planning, statutory business plans, and policy development. It will support leadership teams, ensure compliance, and enable strategic coherence across unitary authorities. Automation will drive future cost savings.

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Data & Insight	In-house delivery per unitary	The data & insight teams will expand to manage richer, integrated data across new geographies. It will support evidence-based decision-making, strategic partnerships, and performance monitoring. Investment in tools and skills will be essential.
Customer Services	In-house delivery per unitary	A single digital layer will enable joined-up contact centres and application processing. Community-based touchpoints and digital-first design will improve access and responsiveness, while delivering efficiency gains.
Communications	In-house delivery per unitary	Communications teams will be TUPE'd and streamlined, with 25% efficiency savings expected. Internal comms will embed new cultures. Digital-by-design approaches, including AI and video, will enhance accessibility and support further savings.

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Appendix H: Implementation RAID Log

This high-level Risk, Assumptions, Issues, and Dependencies (RAID) log has been developed alongside the target operating model design and draws on previous transformation best practice and guidance from other areas who have undertaken LGR. It provides a consolidated view of key transition challenges and considerations, grouped under our four guiding principles for local government reorganisation:

- Community & people centred design
- System innovation & transformation
- Financial sustainability
- Governance & control

Each entry in the log is structured to support clear understanding and prioritisation:

- Type – Identifies whether the item is a *Risk*, *Assumption*, *Issue*, or *Dependency*.
- Description – Summarises the concern or dependency and outlines its potential implications.
- Rating – Indicates the level of priority (*High*, *Medium*, *Low*) based on urgency and strategic importance. This is not a measure of impact likelihood, but rather a guide for focus and resource allocation.
- Mitigation – Suggests actions or strategies that could reduce negative impacts or support successful delivery.

This RAID log is intended to support programme governance, enable proactive risk management, and ensure alignment with our strategic principles throughout the transition process.

Community & People Centred Design

Type	Description	Rating	Mitigation
Risk	Loss of institutional knowledge due to staff turnover caused by change	Medium	Prioritise retention of key officers and knowledge transfer mechanisms
Risk	Some managers may lack capability or capacity to lead transition	Medium	Bring in additional transition capacity where needed and provide support to those leading transition
Risk	Formation of new workforce groups may erode strong organisational cultures	Medium	Build new organisational identity and values-based culture
Risk	Engaging multiple unions may result in inconsistent approaches	Medium	Develop a coordinated union engagement strategy
Assumption	Unions and workforce reps will engage constructively	Medium	Maintain open communication and early involvement

System Innovation & Transformation

Type	Description	Rating	Mitigation
Risk	Payroll errors during system migration	High	Implement robust testing and validation of payroll systems
Risk	Complexities in splitting shared staff and services	High	Develop clear workforce allocation protocols and legal frameworks

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Risk	HR teams may lack capacity for transformation	High	Increase HR resourcing and prioritise transformation support
Risk	Multiple employment terms complicate harmonisation	Medium	Establish harmonisation working group and legal review
Risk	Unsupported systems may need replacing	Medium	Map systems and contract end dates; plan phased replacement
Risk	Data migration may result in inaccuracies or breaches	High	Conduct data cleansing and mapping exercises
Risk	New social care systems may not be ready by vesting day	Medium	Prioritise safe and legal service continuity; monitor provider readiness
Risk	Barriers to multi-agency data sharing	Medium	Develop data-sharing agreements and protocols
Dependency	Payroll and workforce migration depends on timely access to data	High	Secure early access and validate data integrity
Dependency	EI&P success depends on culture, legislation, and financial support	High	Align leadership support and legislative compliance

Financial Sustainability

Type	Description	Rating	Mitigation
Risk	Financial pressures may discourage investment in EI&P	Medium	Embed prevention in operating model and use digital tools for efficiency
Assumption	Public Health and ICT leads will be engaged	Medium	Confirm availability and integrate into planning early
Dependency	Harmonisation of terms depends on HR coordination	Medium	Establish cross-council coordination group(s)

Governance & Control

Type	Description	Rating	Mitigation
Risk	Employment law changes may lead to non-compliance	Medium	Monitor legislation and coordinate implementation across councils
Risk	Planning policy changes may cause market uncertainty	Low	Monitor developments and engage with planning teams
Risk	Electoral boundary changes require additional work	Medium	Plan consultation and resource allocation early
Dependency	Electoral boundary changes depend on Commission approval	Medium	Maintain dialogue with Boundary Commission and prepare contingencies
Assumption	Government decisions will be announced in time	Medium	Maintain ongoing engagement with central government
Assumption	HR and transition teams will have authority and capacity to lead change	Medium	Confirm governance structures and empower teams

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Oxfordshire Local Government Reorganisation

Economic Growth Report

October 2025

Contents

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Executive summary

Oxford is globally and economically significant

- Oxford is dominated by **high-tech, R&D, higher education industries** which are particularly sensitive to the benefits of agglomeration.

- Home to the **top-tier University of Oxford**, ranked among the top five universities worldwide (over £3bn in research income in FY23/24).

- The university has produced more than **205 spin-outs** since 2011, around 16% of the UK total.

- **The city has strong FDI momentum;** Oxford consistently ranks among the UK's top cities for FDI (ranked 6th in 2024).
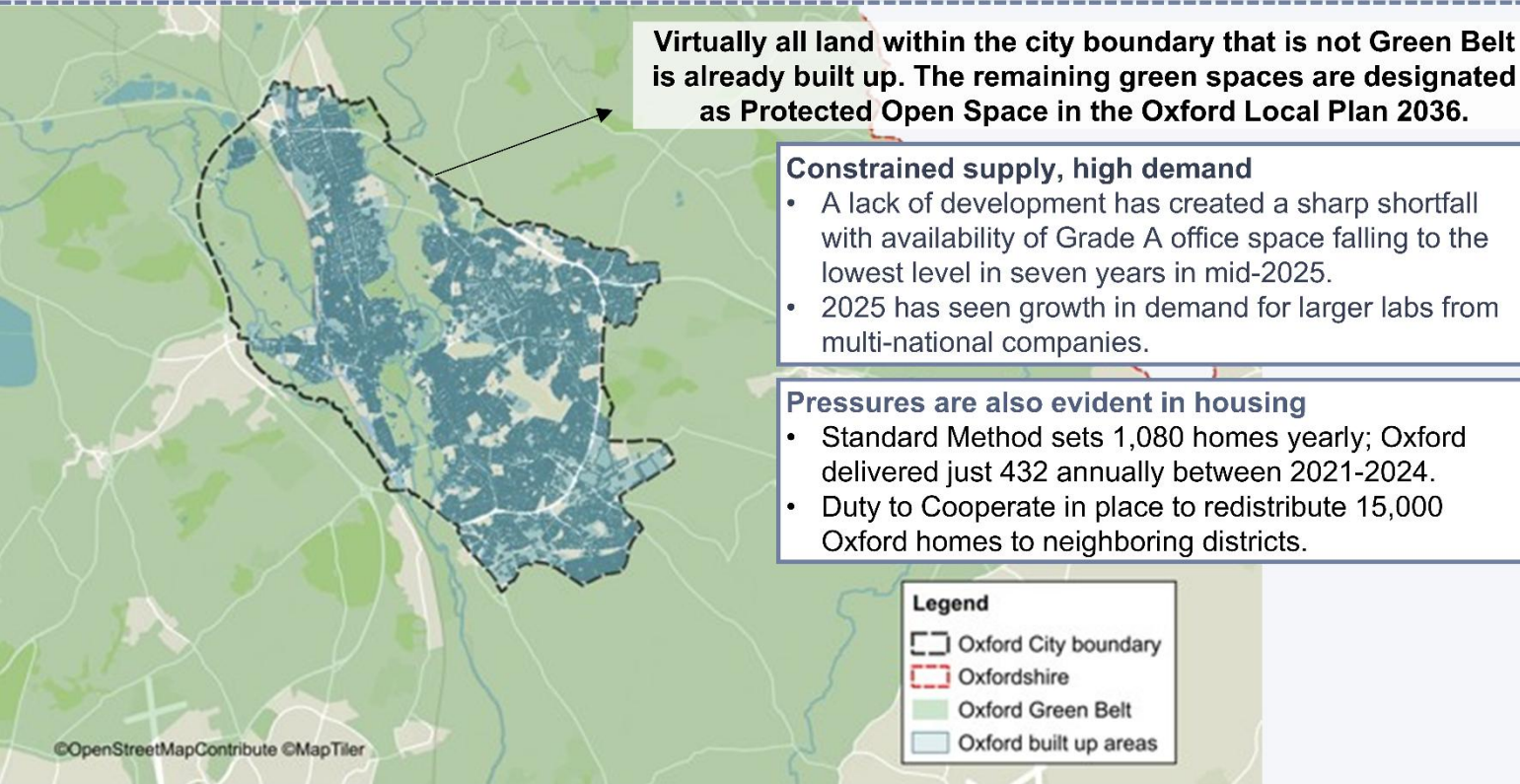
128,000 jobs

5,000 businesses

~£8.5bn GVA per year
(~35% of Oxfordshire total)

Oxford's land and boundary constraints are preventing growth

Virtually all land within the city boundary that is not Green Belt is already built up. The remaining green spaces are designated as Protected Open Space in the Oxford Local Plan 2036.

Constrained supply, high demand
- A lack of development has created a sharp shortfall with availability of Grade A office space falling to the lowest level in seven years in mid-2025.
- 2025 has seen growth in demand for larger labs from multi-national companies.

Pressures are also evident in housing
- Standard Method sets 1,080 homes yearly; Oxford delivered just 432 annually between 2021-2024.
- Duty to Cooperate in place to redistribute 15,000 Oxford homes to neighboring districts.

Legend
- ⬚ Oxford City boundary
- ⬚ Oxfordshire
- ⬚ Oxford Green Belt
- ⬚ Oxford built up areas

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The evidence is clear: the edge-of-Oxford City is where businesses want to locate

With the city-centre constrained, the next best alternative is edge-of-city sites. High-value firms have consistent locational patterns – proximity to Oxford's research base but also space to grow, which only edge-of-city sites can provide.

Core locational preferences of high-value firms include:

1. **Substantial plots of land** with space to grow*

2. Proximity to **world-class research** institutions

3. Access to **world class talent**

4. **Amenities** that support productivity and retention

5. High-quality **infrastructure and utilities**

6. Excellent **public transport connectivity**

7. **Critical mass** and **community**

Many leading companies have already chosen locations just on or outside the current city boundary:

Tokamak Energy

Oxford NANOPORE Technologies

Adaptix

*life sciences firms in particular

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For many sectors, Oxford is the only viable cluster that they could locate in within the UK. While other locations in Oxfordshire exist for some businesses (e.g. Harwell), many occupiers prefer edge-of-city Oxford.

A 3UA model is the solution, expanding the boundary through a Greater Oxford (GO) authority directly addresses this constraint while unlocking land in the right places
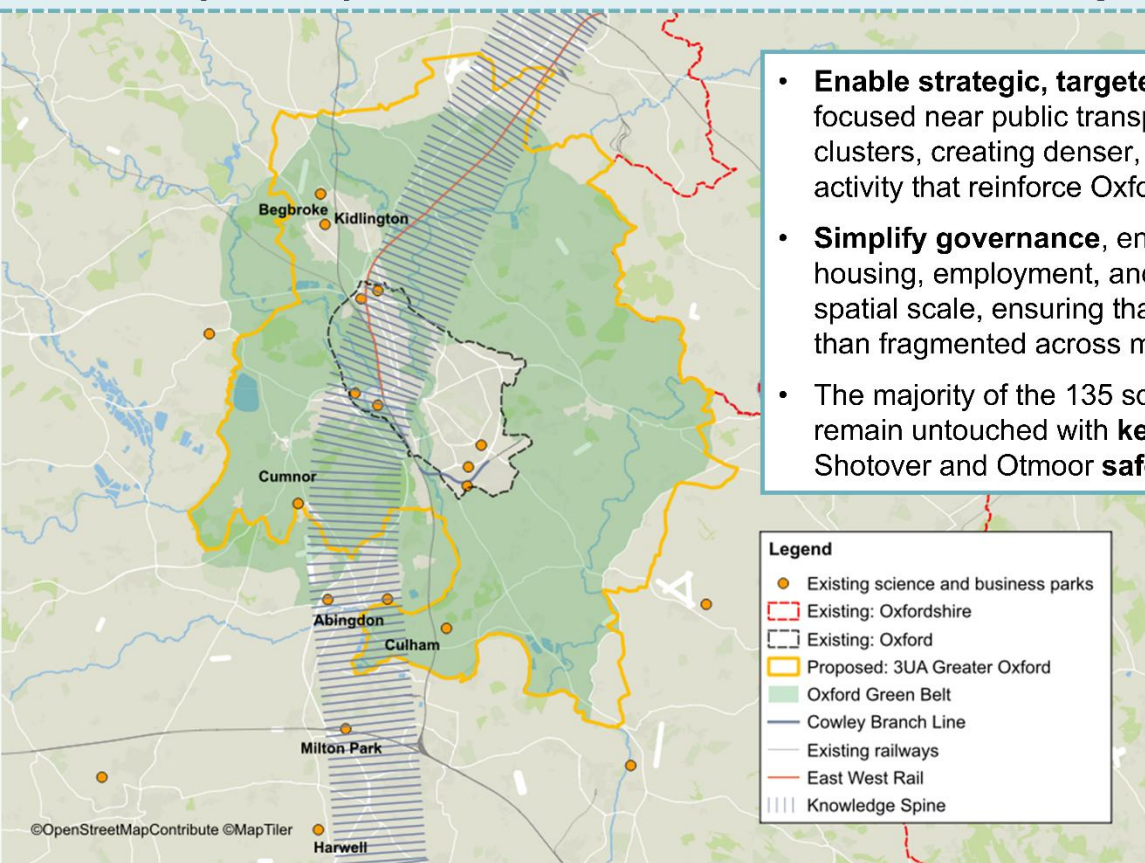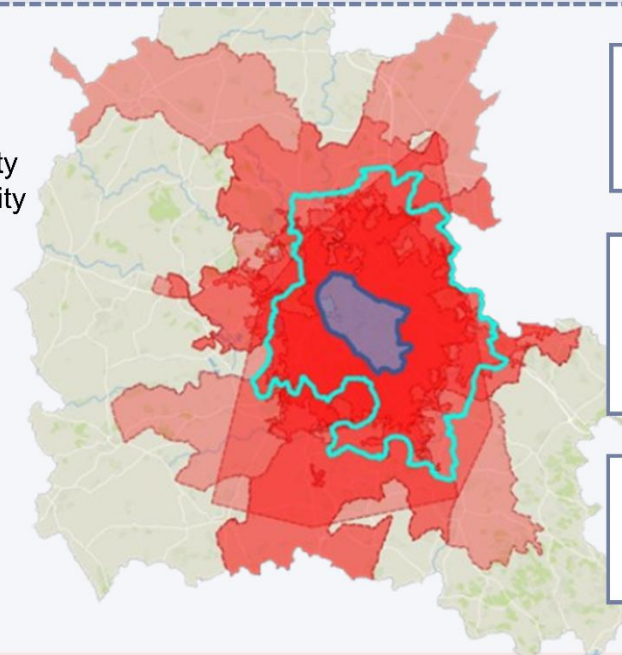

- **Enable strategic, targeted Green Belt release** focused near public transport and existing employment clusters, creating denser, more efficient patterns of activity that reinforce Oxford's global competitiveness.

- **Simplify governance**, enabling integrated planning of housing, employment, and infrastructure at the right spatial scale, ensuring that growth is coordinated rather than fragmented across multiple districts.

- The majority of the 135 square miles Green Belt would remain untouched with **key ecological assets** such as Shotover and Otmoor **safeguarded.**

Legend
- Existing science and business parks
- Existing: Oxfordshire
- Existing: Oxford
- Proposed: 3UA Greater Oxford
- Oxford Green Belt
- Cowley Branch Line
- Existing railways
- East West Rail
- Knowledge Spine

*Not only does GO make sense, but the **3UA Northern Oxfordshire and Ridgeway UAs are also well justified,** as the proposal enables each UA to focus on their **distinct economic strengths.***

## GO better aligns with the city's functional economy

Indicators overlayed in map:
- 30-min drive time
- 45-minute cycle
- 50 + commuter to Oxford City
- 100+ commuter to Oxford City
- Grouping of key Oxford business parks

Legend:
- Oxford City (current administrative boundary)
- Greater Oxford (proposed)
- Oxfordshire
- Oxford's true economic footprint extends far beyond the city boundary

Taken together, these map layers reveal a distinct concentration of activity within the proposed GO area.

The density of commuting patterns, employment hubs, and innovation clusters clearly demonstrates how economic networks extend across current administrative boundaries.

Governance and planning should reflect this functional geography rather than the more limited city boundary.
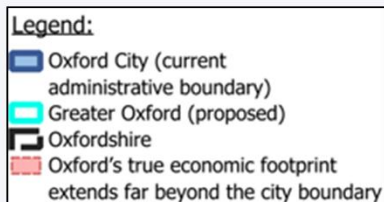
The 3UA model enables stronger region-wide growth than 2UA and 1UA proposals

Annual employment forecasts (compound annual growth rates):

3UA: 1.3%	2UA: 1.1%	1UA: 1.0%
• **GO**: ~1.5% by unlocking R&D through green belt release and strategic sites, maximising agglomeration benefits.	• **Oxford and Shires:** 1.1% as diluted focus by combining urban and rural priorities, making green belt release harder.	• **A single county-wide UA** grows slowest (~1.0%) as competing priorities hinder bold, place-specific strategies.
• **Northern Oxfordshire**: 1.3% via mid-tech, tourism and agriculture.	• **Ridgeway:** moderates from 3UA to 1.1% as it must absorb Oxford commuter housing while pursuing Science Vale and Didcot expansion.	• Growth is steady but incremental; 2UA performs slightly better with clearer priorities and stronger place branding.
• **Ridgeway**: 1.2% through coordinated growth at Harwell, Milton and Didcot.		

This growth would accelerate housing delivery, helping retain talent in the area while easing affordability pressures

The wider GO boundary not only enables higher economic growth but also allows Oxford to meet constrained and increased housing needs, easing pressure on surrounding districts to accommodate Oxford's unmet demand.

Oxford faces a severe affordability crisis; average house prices exceed 11× average earnings.

Under-delivery of housing makes it hard to retain staff in key sectors (NHS, academia, tech).

~40,000 mixed-tenure homes could be delivered through GO over 15 years.

This would help ease affordability pressures, retain skilled workers and ease pressure on surrounding districts.

Job and housing growth are aligned, with housing estimates from each proposal's job growth analysis demonstrating that forecast homes are achievable and realistic when compared with existing targets and standards.

The 3UA delivers additional, more productive growth compared to the other proposals

Not only does the 3UA proposal deliver the largest GVA uplift, being **£4.7bn** higher per year than the 2UA option by 2050 – but it also **concentrates jobs closer to Oxford's core, increasing density and productivity.** This results in an agglomeration benefit per worker being **£930** higher in 2050 under the 3UA proposal than under the 2UA proposal.

	3UA	2UA	1UA*
Baseline (2023)			
Employment (2023)	505,100	505,100	505,100
Annual GVA (2023) (£bn)	£38.4	£38.4	£38.4
Growth (2023-2050)			
Employment growth (2023-2050)	218,000	180,000	153,000
Forecast impacts (2050)			
Annual direct GVA (2050) (£bn)	£64.1	£59.3	£56.8
Annual GVA from agglomeration (2050) (£bn)	£0.83	£0.12	£0.00
Annual total GVA (2050) (£bn)	**£64.9**	**£59.5**	**£56.8**
Agglomeration benefit per worker (2050, relative to 2023)	£1,083	£155	£0.00
NPV over 27-year period (2023-2050), *total additional from 2023*			
Direct GVA (£bn)	£163.5	£141.2	£125.7
GVA from agglomeration (£bn)	£5.3	£0.8	£0.0
Total GVA NPV (£bn)	**£168.8**	**£142.0**	**£125.7**
NPV over 27-year period (2023-2050), *relative to reference case*			
Direct GVA relative to reference case (£bn)	£37.8	£15.5	*Reference case*
GVA from agglomeration relative to reference case (£bn)	£5.3	£0.8	*Reference case*
Total GVA NPV relative to reference case (£bn)	**£43.1**	**£16.3**	***Reference case***

*West Berkshire is added to the 1UA option with historic rates of employment growth continuing to 2050 to allow for direct comparison with the 3UA and 2UA options

By adopting the 3UA proposal, the county will move from constraint to capacity, driven by clear governance, faster delivery, higher productivity and inclusive growth.

2. Introduction

2.1 Local Government Reorganisation (LGR) is a key part of the Government's current programme for reform, alongside the expansion of devolved powers through Mayoral Strategic Authorities. Volterra has been commissioned by Oxford City Council (OCC) to analyse the economic benefits of the different options for local government reorganisation. This report assesses the potential impacts of the Greater Oxford (GO) proposal and compares them to alternative options for the future governance of Oxfordshire.
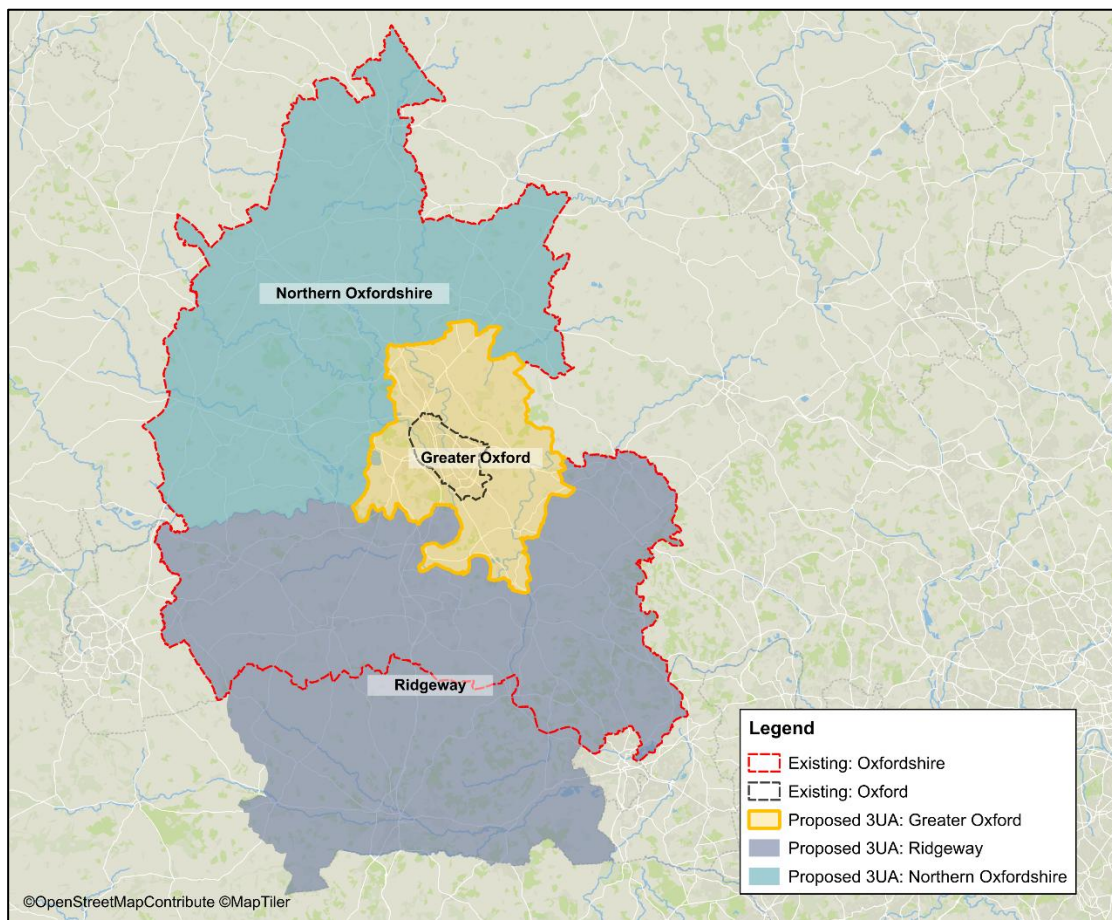
Context

2.2 On 16 December 2024, the Government published a white paper, setting out its ambitions for a national programme of devolution and local government reform.[1] The aim is to simplify governance, improve efficiency, and strengthen local leadership by creating larger, more capable unitary authorities. This would replace the remaining two-tier arrangements in areas such as Oxfordshire, where responsibilities are currently split between district and county councils. The reforms are intended to streamline decision-making, enhance accountability, reduce duplication, and deliver better value for money, while supporting economic growth and more responsive public services.

2.3 The Government has invited councils in Oxfordshire to submit proposals for LGR by 28 November 2025. It will then decide on the preferred unitary structure for the county, with the new council(s) expected to be formed in 2028, in line with the Government's indicative timeline.

Proposals under consideration

2.4 In Oxfordshire, three structural options are under consideration:

1. **Three Unitary Authorities (3UA):** proposed by Oxford City Council (see Figure 1).
   This would comprise:
   - A *GO Council* – covering Oxford and its surrounding area;
   - A *Northern Oxfordshire Council* – covering the north and west of the county; and
   - A *Ridgeway Council* – covering much of South Oxfordshire, Vale of White Horse, and West Berkshire.

2. **Two Unitary Authorities (2UA):** proposed by the other four Oxfordshire district councils (Cherwell, Vale of White Horse, South Oxfordshire, and West Oxfordshire) together with West Berkshire Council. This would involve:
   - *Oxford and Shires Council* – covering Cherwell, Oxford City, and West Oxfordshire; and
   - *Ridgeway Council* – covering South Oxfordshire, Vale of White Horse, and West Berkshire.

3. **One Unitary Authority (1UA):** proposed by Oxfordshire County Council.
   - This would see a single authority covering the current county council area, replacing all five existing district councils (excludes West Berkshire).

2.5 **Figure 1** sets out the proposed boundaries for the 3UA proposal.

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[1] MHCLG, 2024. English Devolution White Paper

Figure 1 – 3UA proposal

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Legend
- Existing: Oxfordshire
- Existing: Oxford
- Proposed 3UA: Greater Oxford
- Proposed 3UA: Ridgeway
- Proposed 3UA: Northern Oxfordshire

Purpose of this report

2.6   The purpose of this report is to provide a clear, evidence-based comparison of the three proposals for Local Government Reorganisation in Oxfordshire. It focuses on the potential impacts of the GO proposal, assessing how it is likely to perform relative to the alternative 2UA and 1UA options.

3. Why Greater Oxford?

3.1 Boundary change is not an end in itself. The GO proposal matters because it shifts where growth happens. By aligning planning, housing and transport for Oxford's functional economic area, GO enables targeted land release close to the city's core and along public transport corridors. This facilitates a higher rate of jobs growth, raising effective density both through two channels – both more jobs but also the number of jobs accessible to existing clusters within short, reliable travel times. This increased effective density in turn drives productivity, wages and fiscal yield, while supporting inclusive access to jobs and services. Sections 4–6 quantify these channels.

Why cities drive growth

3.2 In modern economies, cities account for a disproportionate share of jobs, innovation and output. They concentrate knowledge-intensive activity and act as gateways to global markets, making them central to national productivity and competitiveness.

3.3 Cities are powerful drivers of economic growth because they concentrate people, businesses, and institutions in close proximity. This spatial concentration generates agglomeration effects, the productivity advantages that occur when economic activity clusters.[2] A strong evidence base shows that agglomeration leads to higher productivity, wages, innovation, and resilience, making cities the engines of national growth.[3] The section below, '**Why Oxford is globally and economically important**', demonstrates that Oxford is a key driver of the national economy in terms of many of these dimensions.

3.4 Agglomeration works through three interrelated channels:[4]

Sharing: Firms benefit from shared infrastructure and services, achieving economies of scale and reducing operational costs.

Learning: Frequent interaction accelerates and enables ideas and innovations to spread rapidly among firms and institutions. In Oxford's case, this is concentrated along the "Knowledge Spine," linking research, science parks, and key employment hubs (see **Figure 3**).[5]

Matching: Dense labour markets make it easier for employers to find the right skills and for workers to find suitable, high-quality jobs. These specialised labour markets attract and retain highly skilled workers essential for innovation-driven sectors.[6,7]

The evidence on productivity uplift

3.5 The empirical literature finds a systematic, city-wide link between density and productivity: when access to jobs improves, average productivity rises across the whole workforce, not just among new arrivals. Effects are strongest in knowledge-intensive services – a sector mix in which Oxford is particularly specialised. Empirical studies demonstrate that:

- A 10% increase in cluster size is associated with a 0.67% increase the number of patents produced by a scientist in a year, reflecting a productivity boost across all inventors in the cluster, not just new arrivals.[8]

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[2] Centre for Cities, 2023. The impact of agglomeration on the economy

[3] European Central Bank, 2024. Time-varying agglomeration economies and aggregate wage growth

[4] Department of Geography and Environment, London School of Economics, 2016. Micro-foundations of urban agglomeration economies

[5] Small Business Economics. 2025. Hidden champions and knowledge spillovers: innovation-enhancing agglomeration effects and niche technology specificity

[6] Department for Transport, 2025. TAG Unit A2.4 Appraisal of Productivity Impacts

[7] Innovation Caucus. 2022. Understanding Cluster Growth Potential

[8] National Bureau of Economic Research, 2023. Place-based productivity and costs in science

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- A doubling of city size increases productivity by approximately 4.4% on average.[9]
- In knowledge based sectors, the effect is stronger: for example, in business services, productivity can rise up to 8.3% when a city size doubles.[10]

3.6   The latter two findings relate to aggregate citywide productivity, meaning the gains are measured across the whole workforce in the city (all workers for the 4.4% and knowledge based workers for the 8.3%), not just among additional workers.

3.7   Additional employment sites benefit most from agglomeration effects when they are located close to the city's core employment areas or near existing employment clusters. The productivity advantages of agglomeration also depend on both physical and effective distance, meaning that more geographically distant sites can benefit if supported by strong transport connectivity. Therefore, additional edge-of-city employment sites that are adjacent to existing employment hubs or have fast, reliable links to the city's core can greatly capture these benefits.

3.8   The diminishing effects of distance on agglomeration are particularly pronounced in service and knowledge sectors, where innovation and growth rely on frequent face-to-face interaction and knowledge spillovers. By contrast, manufacturing is less reliant on such proximity and therefore experiences weaker productivity gains from clustering.[11]

Why Oxford is globally and economically important

3.9   Oxford has a global reputation for high-value, knowledge-intensive activity, underpinned by world-class research institutions and a deep talent pool. Its innovation ecosystem generates spin-outs, scale-ups and globally competitive firms that anchor supply chains across the sub-region.

3.10   Oxford City is an economic hub, generating an estimated £8.5 billion GVA per year and supporting over 128,000 jobs across high-tech, research, professional services, and public administration sectors.[12,13] The city hosts approximately 5,000 businesses and contributes roughly £1.15 billion in income tax annually, reflecting its skilled workforce and high wages.[14,15]

3.11   Its reputation stems from the exceptional reputation of the University of Oxford, regularly ranked among the top five universities worldwide and recognised as one of the world's "super brands" on reputation ranking.[16] The university's vast research income, over £3 billion in FY 2023–24, including nearly £779 million from grants and contracts, underpins an ecosystem of world-leading talent, innovation, and intellectual capital.

3.12   The university has produced more than 205 spin-outs since 2011, around 16% of the UK total, with firms such as Oxford Nanopore and Immunocore exemplifying its world-leading cluster.[17] Oxford-based spinouts frequently make international headlines: an article on OrganOx, for example, was recently in the Financial Times for achieving a record-breaking $1.5 billion acquisition, showcasing the city's strength in translating university-based research into global commercial success.[18]

3.13   This dynamic economic environment is further elevated by Oxford's sustained appeal to international investors. Oxford consistently ranks among the UK's top cities for foreign direct investment, ranked sixth nationally for inward FDI (behind just Inner London, London, Outer London, City of Edinburgh and Greater

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[9] Centre for Cities, 2023. The impact of agglomeration on the economy

[10] Centre for Cities, 2023. The impact of agglomeration on the economy

[11] DfT, 2025. TAG Unit A2.4 Appraisal of Productivity Impacts

[12] ONS, 2023. Table 3: Regional gross value added (balanced) by industry: local authorities by ITL1 region

[13] BRES, 2023. Oxford Employment

[14] OCC, 2025. Economic statistics

[15] OCC, 2018. Oxford Economic Profile

[16] Times Higher Education World University Rankings

[17] Advent Research, 2025. Life Sciences in Oxfordshire: Spin-Offs, Innovation and Investment

[18] Financial Times, 2025. Oxford university spinout OrganOx sold to Japanese group Terumo for $1.5bn

Manchester).[19] Recent high-profile commitments illustrate this momentum: in September 2025, Larry Ellison confirmed a £118 million AI-vaccine research grant and a £1 billion-plus campus investment, while GSK committed £50 million to a new cancer prevention research programme, both underscoring investor confidence in Oxford's capabilities and ambition.[20]

3.14   As set out above, Oxford's economy is dominated by high-tech, research and development, and higher education industries particularly sensitive to the benefits of agglomeration. These sectors gain disproportionately from clustering and density, giving Oxford a greater potential uplift from agglomeration than other parts of Oxfordshire with less knowledge-intensive specialisms.

Oxford's constraints are holding it back

3.15   Oxford's economy is already globally significant, but growth is constrained by administrative boundaries and limited land supply near the core.

3.16   The tightly drawn boundary and surrounding Green Belt severely limit capacity for new jobs, homes and infrastructure in the most accessible locations. As a result, demand is displaced to less connected sites in neighbouring districts, diluting agglomeration benefits.

3.17   **Figure 2** shows the built-up extent of Oxford and the Green Belt. Most non-Green Belt land within the boundary is already developed; remaining green spaces are protected for recreation, amenity and ecology through Local Plan policy. This leaves very limited scope for growth at the city's heart under the status quo.[21]

Figure 2 – Built up areas within Oxford City and Green Belt overlay

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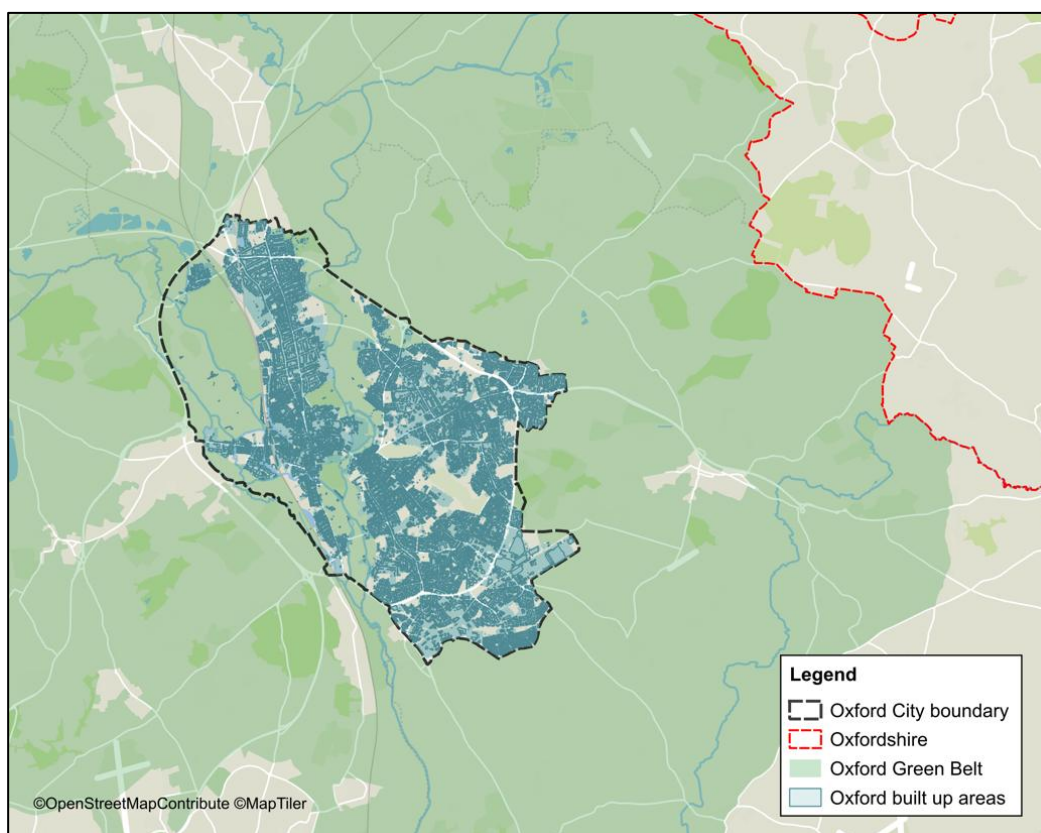
[19] Thames Valley Chamber of Commerce, 2024. Oxford Maintains Top 10 Position For Most Attractive Location for FDI

[20] University of Oxford, 2025. Oxford launches major new AI vaccine research programme with the Ellison Institute of Technology

[21] Oxford City Council, 2019. Oxford Local Plan 2036 - Adoption of the Plan

3.18   Oxford's growth sectors in particular, are constrained by land supply. In the first half of 2025, Bidwells reports that office prime rents have reached a new high (£63 psf) and occupiers show a clear preference for high-quality Grade A space to attract and retain staff. However, a lack of development has created a sharp shortfall with availability falling to just 119,600 sq ft in mid-2025, the lowest level in seven years.[22]

3.19   In terms of labs, Bidwells reports demand for larger labs from multi-national pharma companies and research institutes increased, in part because Oxford now has a ready supply of Grade A space for the first time since the pandemic.[23] This indicates a that a temporary increase in availability has resulted in this increase in demand.

3.20   Similar pressures are evident in housing. The NPPF sets out statutory Standard Method (SM) housing targets for local authorities based on their existing stock and the affordability of housing within the local authority.[24] The Standard Method (SM) determines a need of 1,080 dwellings per annum in Oxford City, however, only 432 homes were added per year on average in Oxford between 2021 and 2024, which is significantly less than the new target demonstrating a realistic capacity of less than half of identified need. This is explicit recognition of Oxford's constrained boundary.[25]

3.21   Policy history further underlines this point. Between 2016 and 2018, under the Duty to Cooperate, the Oxfordshire Growth Board agreed to redistribute around 15,000 homes of Oxford's unmet need to neighbouring districts. This figure was embedded in the 2016 Strategic Housing Market Assessment (SHMA) and subsequently carried through into the Local Plans for Cherwell, Vale of White Horse, South Oxfordshire, and West Oxfordshire.[26,27,28] It was acknowledged in the Partial Review of the Cherwell Local Plan, that there is a pressing need to provide homes to meet the needs of Oxford that cannot be met within the boundaries of the city.[29]

3.22   These housing constraints exacerbate a well-documented jobs to housing imbalance. ONS data show Oxford has around 1.2 jobs per working-age resident, compared to 0.7–0.9 in the four surrounding Oxfordshire districts.[30] This imbalance generates significant in-commuting pressure.

3.23   The combined effect is a mismatch between economic demand and land supply. It limits business growth, exacerbates affordability pressures, and creates planning tensions with surrounding authorities.

Oxford is where businesses want to locate

3.24   High-value firms have consistent locational patterns – they need proximity to Oxford's research base but also space to grow, which only edge-of-city sites can provide.

3.25   While requirements vary by firm, global and high-growth companies in life sciences, advanced manufacturing and deep tech show consistent patterns in their locational needs.

3.26   **Core locational preferences include:**

●   **Substantial plots of land with space to grow:** Labs and R&D buildings are lower-density and "space-hungry," so occupiers look for sites that can take larger floorplates, specialist servicing and phased expansion; evidence consistently finds edge-of-urban locations offer the greatest scale and flexibility for these uses.[31]

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[22] Bidwells, 2025. Oxford Offices and Labs report

[23] Bidwells, 2025. Offices & Labs Databook Oxford - August 2025

[24] Ministry of Housing, Communities, and Local Government (MHCLG), 2024. National Planning Policy Framework

[25] BBC tracker, 2025. Some councils ordered to increase home building by 400%, new BBC tracker shows

[26] Oxfordshire County Council, 2016. Working together on county's housing needs

[27] South Oxfordshire District Council, 2016. Authority Monitoring Report

[28] Cherwell District Council, 2016. Cherwell Local Plan 2011 – 2031(Part 1) Partial Review - Oxford's Unmet Housing Need

[29] Cherwell District Council, 2020. Cherwell Local Plan 2011 – 2031 Partial Review - Oxford's Unmet Housing Need

[30] ONS, 2023. Job density per district

[31] Iceni, 2024. Greater Cambridge Growth Sectors Study: Life science and ICT locational, land and accommodation needs

- **Proximity to world-class research institutions:** High-growth firms benefit from close links to universities, hospitals and anchor companies to accelerate collaboration, tech transfer and recruitment. Innovation-district research sets out the importance co-location with anchor institutions; sector studies also note many smaller firms prefer to be located with institutions or research centres.[32]
- **Access to skilled talent:** Deep pools of specialised labour, and pipelines from higher education, are central. Policy and market evidence repeatedly place talent at the heart of cluster competitiveness and site choice for deep-tech sectors.[33]
- **Amenities that support productivity and retention:** The preferred model is an integrated, place-based campus that bundles quality premises with everyday amenities (cafés, gyms, green space) and spaces for interaction and collaboration.[34]
- **High-quality infrastructure and utilities:** Modern labs typically require robust power, HVAC/clean-air systems and security, needs that are easier to deliver at campus scale; life-science buildings demand more specialised infrastructure than standard offices.[35]
- **Excellent public transport connectivity:** Firms value rapid, reliable public transport and wider network access; innovation-district guidance highlights public transport-accessibility as a defining feature, and sector studies list sustainable/public transport links among key locational priorities.[36]
- **Critical mass and community:** Successful locations cultivate a concentrated labour pool, peer networks and shared facilities that enable spillovers and collaboration, especially important for start-ups and scale-ups. [37]

3.27   As city-centre space becomes more constrained, high value firms are increasingly opting for edge-of-city locations that provide the scale, flexibility and connectivity they require. For example, Cambridge's planning evidence (a close comparator market to Oxford) sets out that life science and tech occupiers "have historically been located on edge-of-centre campuses and out-of-town science parks," with edge-of-urban sites preferred for space and flexibility; urban centres remain popular but are "inherently space-limited."[38]

3.28   The market is also shifting towards integrated, public transport-served campuses that combine fitted labs, grow-on space and everyday amenities. Around Oxford, this is evident in the growing number of nearby science and business parks (the location of these science and business parks are set out in **Figure 3**).[39,40,41]

3.29   Oxford offers an unusually complete innovation ecosystem of research excellence, deep talent, specialist real estate, and global firms, an environment that other UK regions cannot match. This is evidenced by businesses comparing Oxford with global clusters like Boston or Silicon Valley, rather than with other UK cities.[42]

3.30   This preference from high value firms to be located around Oxford is visible in firm behaviour: many leading companies have already chosen locations just outside the current city boundary (but within GO) to stay close to the research base and workforce while securing space and specification. The table below sets out three examples.

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[32] Brookings, 2014. The Rise of Innovation Districts: A New Geography of Innovation in America

[33] GOV.UK, 2025. UK Quantum Skills Taskforce report

[34] Iceni, 2024. Greater Cambridge Growth Sectors Study: Life science and ICT locational, land and accommodation needs

[35] Savills, 2024. Life Science: Trends & Outlook

[36] Iceni, 2024. Greater Cambridge Growth Sectors Study: Life science and ICT locational, land and accommodation needs

[37] Brookings, 2014. The Rise of Innovation Districts: A New Geography of Innovation in America

[38] Iceni, 2024. Greater Cambridge Growth Sectors Study: Life science and ICT locational, land and accommodation needs

[39] Oxford Calling, 2025. Science and business parks

[40] Knight Frank. Uk Life Sciences and Innovation: Labs Explained

[41] CBRE, 2025. Global Life Sciences Atlas

[42] Lambert Smith Hampton, 2020. Oxbridge Are in Focus – The Knowledge Corridor

Table 1 – Companies that have established themselves within the GO boundary and either just inside (in the case of Nanopore) or outside of Oxford City

Tokamak Energy

Fusion energy company Tokamak Energy, a spin-out from the UK Atomic Energy Authority at Culham, Oxfordshire, has remained anchored locally, constructing its next-generation ST80-HTS prototype reactor on the Culham Campus.[43]

"Constructing the facility at Culham provides access to leading science and engineering capabilities, including [UKAEA's] knowledge and experience in designing and operating the record-breaking JET tokamak."
— *Tokamak Energy*

Oxford NANOPORE Technologies

Oxford Nanopore is one of the UK's most successful deep-tech firms, developing world-leading DNA and RNA sequencing technology now used in more than 120 countries. The company is headquartered at the Oxford Science Park, a location chosen for its proximity to the University of Oxford and the city's globally recognised life sciences cluster. Being based just four miles from the university gives Oxford Nanopore unrivalled access to cutting-edge academic research, highly skilled graduates, and a dense ecosystem of biotech and med-tech firms.[44]

This combination of connectivity, talent, and infrastructure has helped Oxford Nanopore grow from a university spin-out into a FTSE-listed firm with a global footprint, while retaining deep roots in Oxford's innovation ecosystem.

Adaptix

Adaptix Ltd is a pioneering medical imaging company developing next-generation 3D X-ray technology that promises to transform diagnostic practice. Its portable imaging systems aim to deliver high-quality scans at the point of care, reducing the need for large, fixed equipment and improving accessibility for patients.

Founded in 2014 and initially based at Harwell, Adaptix relocated to Begbroke Science Park to support its expansion to over 50 staff, including more than a dozen PhD-level researchers. The move provides the company with a unique competitive advantage: proximity to the University of Oxford, giving direct access to world-class expertise in materials science, engineering, and medical research, as well as specialist laboratory and prototyping facilities. Begbroke's tailored innovation ecosystem, combined with practical services such as its dedicated shuttle link to Oxford, has enabled Adaptix to scale significantly while remaining embedded within the region's globally recognised life sciences cluster.

3.39   For many sectors, Oxford is uniquely complete in the UK for vaccines and immunology and nationally distinctive in genomics, quantum computing, fusion energy. For example, it is home to the country's only fully integrated vaccine and immunology cluster, uniting world-leading institutions such as the University of Oxford, the Jenner Institute, the Oxford Vaccine Group, and the Clinical Biomanufacturing Facility. Together they provide a complete, end-to-end pipeline spanning discovery, development, clinical trials, and manufacturing. No other UK location offers this complete concentration of expertise and infrastructure.[45] This unique ecosystem enabled Oxford to deliver the world's first COVID-19 vaccine trial within just four months of the virus being identified.[46] Other key sectors with clusters in and around Oxford include genomics, quantum computing, fusion energy and AI-enabled diagnostics.[47,48]

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[43] Culham Campus, 2023. Tokamak Energy's new advanced fusion prototype to be built at UKAEA's Culham Campus

[44] Oxford Nanopore Technologies, 2025. To enable the analysis of anything, by anyone, anywhere

[45] Clinical BioManufacturing Facility, 2025. Manufacturing a Covid-19 Vaccine

[46] UK Research and Innovation, 2025. The story behind the Oxford-AstraZeneca COVID-19 vaccine success

[47] Oxford Technology Park, 2025. IonQ announces agreement to acquire Oxford Ionics, accelerating path to pioneering breakthroughs in Quantum Computing

[48] University of Oxford, 2018. Oxford secures £17.5 million to lead national AI healthcare programmes

3.40   The edge of the city is where Oxford can most effectively provide both proximity (to universities, hospitals, major employers and talent) and capacity (larger plots, lower-density lab formats, and future expansion). Market behaviour and pipelines at the edge of the city show high unmet demand demonstrating that additional, public transport-connected edge-of-city sites are the most effective way to capture additional high value investment.

3.41   In addition to edge of the city sites, there are other locations within Oxfordshire where firms may choose to establish themselves, driven by specific factors such as access to established business parks and employment hubs like Harwell (and others outlined in Figure 3). However, the locational preferences outlined above largely reflect the priorities of many high-tech, global firms, for whom proximity to the city centre and strong transport links are essential.

3.42   As such, while different firms and industries have varying locational requirements, there is a clear and pressing demand for edge of the city locations. Without the provision of such spaces, there is a risk that many firms could look to locate elsewhere in the world, rather than moving to other parts of Oxfordshire, where they may not be able to fulfil their specific needs.

The case for Greater Oxford

3.43   Oxford's global reputation, innovation ecosystem and firm demand point to huge potential for growth. Yet the city's tightly drawn boundary and surrounding Green Belt leave little space for new jobs or homes. This mismatch between demand and supply pushes activity into less connected locations, weakens agglomeration benefits, and risks deterring investment.

3.44   Expanding the boundary through a GO authority would directly address this constraint. It would unlock land in the right places – near employment clusters and supported by public transport – allowing firms to expand close to the knowledge core while residents gain access to affordable homes and jobs. In doing so, GO aligns business needs with Oxford's functional economic geography and creates the conditions for sustained, inclusive growth.

3.45   Expanding the boundary of Oxford through GO would meet the requirements of businesses set out above. It would create economic centres adjacent to the city, served by public transport infrastructure which reduces the likelihood people would need to commute by car, increases the space utilised for development rather than car parking, and limits the growth in road traffic. The anticipated Cowley Branch Line reopening for passenger services is a further driver of connection and growth between housing, skills and business location. The proximity for knowledge exchange, supply chains and supporting services creates an innovation ecosystem that can accelerate inclusive economic growth.

3.46   A GO unitary would also simplify governance. At present, development on the city's edge requires navigating multiple councils, causing delay and uncertainty. Consolidating planning, housing and transport in a single authority would provide clarity for investors and enable more strategic, joined-up decisions about where and how Oxford grows.

3.47   Expanding Oxford's boundary would also unlock space for growth within the high-productivity zone, enabling:

- Concentration of growth around existing employment hubs;
- Denser, more efficient patterns of activity, reducing travel distances and infrastructure costs; and
- Formation of new clusters, reinforcing Oxford's global competitiveness.

3.48 A GO authority would also bring wider strategic benefits. It will:

Allow integrated planning of housing, employment, and infrastructure at the right spatial scale, ensuring that growth is coordinated rather than fragmented across multiple districts.

Enable the strategic release of Green Belt land. Even with provision for around 40,000 new homes, the vast majority of Oxford's 135 square miles of Green Belt would remain untouched. Key ecological assets such as Shotover and Otmoor would continue to be safeguarded under statutory protection.[49]

Incorporate Oxford and its surrounding communities into a coherent economic geography, recognising functional ties through commuting, research networks, and leisure. This is covered in more detail in the 'A coherent economic geography' section below.

Better ensure Oxford's priorities are both represented and delivered. It would provide a powerful voice at the Mayoral Strategic Authority table, while also providing the local capacity to align housing, skills, and economic development with major infrastructure investments such as East–West Rail. This combination of influence and delivery would help Oxford translate its global strengths into sustained, inclusive growth.

3.49 The map below sets out current science and business parks, and the Oxford Green Belt boundary. This highlights the potential for strategically located, high impact developments near existing key employment site on the outskirts of Oxford City's current boundary.

Figure 3 – Proposed GO boundary with identified sites, Oxford Green Belt, exiting and proposed railways and the Oxfordshire knowledge spine

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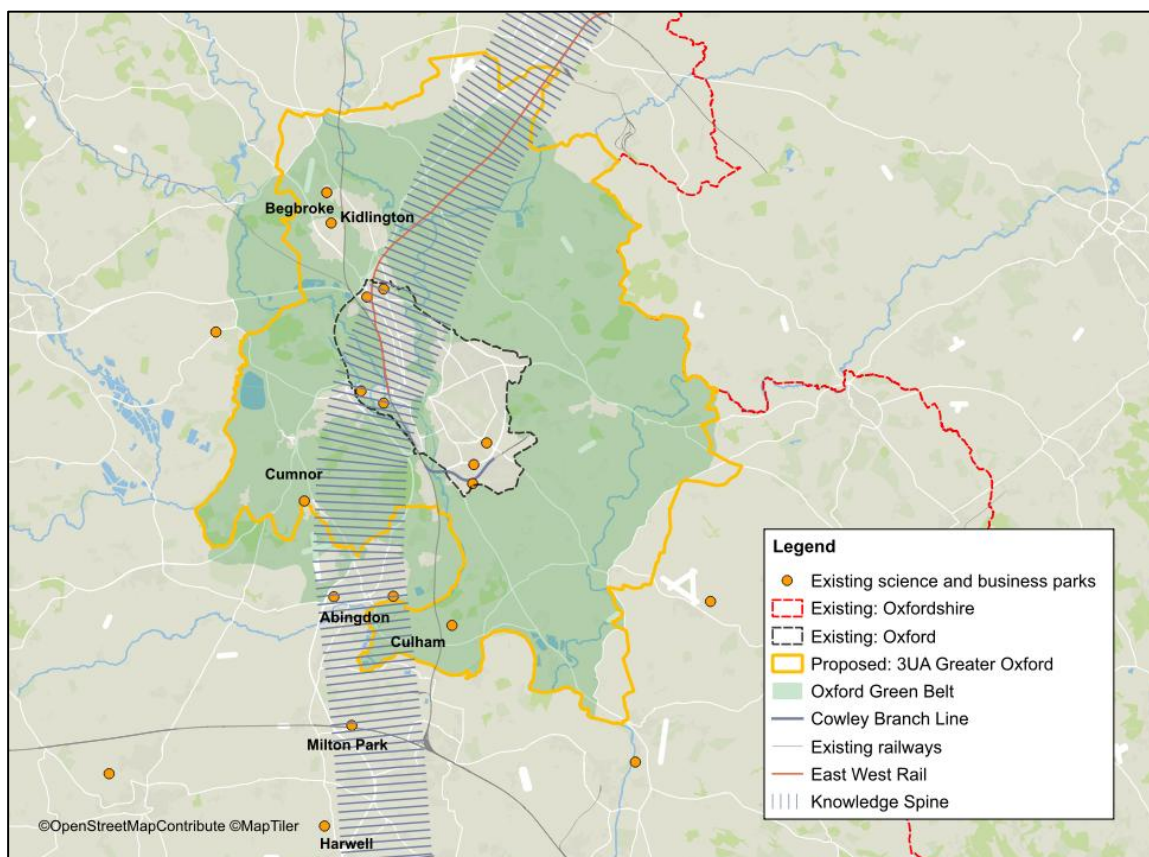
[49] Natural England, 2025. Designed Sites View

What Greater Oxford unlocks

3.50   By uniting Oxford's functional economic area into a single authority, GO would:

- Release significant additional commercial, office and R&D space, with many likely to be located near key employment sites to maximise agglomeration opportunities
- Accelerate housing delivery, including affordable and social homes, easing pressures on recruitment and retention in key sectors.
- Generate new (not displaced) growth by capturing investment that would otherwise go to competing UK or international clusters.

3.51   The scale of the opportunity is clear. A report produced by the Oxford-Cambridge Supercluster Board in 2024 highlighted that unlocking potential growth across Oxford the region could make it the 'crown jewel' of European science and innovation and could benefit the UK by as much as £50 billion per year by 2030.[50]

3.52   GO would also help to tackle Oxford's affordability crisis. Oxford faces one of the most severe housing affordability challenges in the UK, with average house prices more than eleven times average earnings.[51] Under-supply undermines the ability of employers to retain staff, particularly in the NHS and key sectors such as academia and tech.[52] The University of Oxford has recognised the challenge, proposing 2,000 homes for postdoctoral researchers to ease rent pressures.[53]

3.53   The growth potential of the 3UA options including GO and the alternative LGR options is considered in a later section of this report.

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[50] Oxford-Cambridge Supercluster Board, 2024

[51] ONS, 2025. Housing affordability in England and Wales: 2024

[52] Oxfordshire Country Council, 2024. Agenda item: Oxford University Hospitals NHSFT People Plan

[53] Oxford City Council, 2017. University Housing Needs

4. A coherent economic geography

Framing Oxford's economic geography

4.1   A Functional Economic Market Area (FEMA) describes the real geography of daily life. This area illustrates where people live, work, shop, and access services. These areas rarely align with administrative boundaries.

4.2   Defining a FEMA is not an exact science. Rather than fix a single line, we identify a 'best-fit' area using a small set of complementary indicators at fine spatial scales (e.g. commuting flows, journey times, service and housing market linkages).[54]

4.3   Volterra's methodology draws on multiple datasets to capture the most important economic linkages, enabling us to describe Oxford's functional geography. For this study, indicators are mapped to demonstrate that the city's economic and social reach extends beyond the current administrative boundary. The resulting evidence shows that the proposed GO boundary would be a better fit with the true scale of the city's economy and service catchments. Taken together, they point to a GO that better matches the city's true economic and service catchments than existing arrangements.

Identifying Oxford City's coherent economic geography

30-minute drive time

4.4   A 30-minute contour mirrors typical UK commuting behaviour and is widely used in accessibility analysis. The DfT reports an average commuting time of around 29 minutes in Great Britain, therefore mapping a 30-minute drive time captures the 'everyday sphere' of most workers and aligns with DfT Journey Time Statistics for assessing access to employment.[55]

45-minute cycle

4.5   Oxford has unusually high active travel commuting (17.2% cycling in Oxford compared to 6.7% across Oxfordshire and 3.1% nationally), so a broader cycling catchment is appropriate.[56] This is consistent with Kicak Cycling and Walking Infrastructure technical guidance to plan strategic, longer corridors between key origins and destinations.[57] This window fairly represents realistic upper-bound commute cycles in a cycling city like Oxford.

50 + commuters to Oxford City

4.6   Census data on where people travel for work helps us see which areas have a real daily connection to Oxford. By focusing on places that send at least 50 workers into the city, we cut out very small, irregular flows and highlight those with a genuine link.[58] Given the size of a typical local area (5,000–15,000 residents), this threshold usually means at least 1% of the workforce is tied to Oxford.[59] [60] This provides a clear, evidence-based way of showing the city's wider pull on surrounding communities.

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[54] Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, 2024. Planning practice guidance: Plan-making

[55] DfT, 2024. Transport Statistics Great Britain: 2023 Domestic Travel

[56] OCC, 2022. Travel to work in Oxford Census 2021

[57] DfT, 2017. Planning local cycling and walking networks

[58] ONS, 2023. Origin-destination data explorer: Census 2021

[59] UK Data Service, 2021. An introduction to 2021 Census geography datasets

[60] NB: Middle layer super output areas usually comprise between 5,000 to 15,000 residents.

100+ commuters to Oxford City

4.7   Looking at places with at least 100 commuters gives us a way to identify the strongest links to Oxford City typically 2% to 3% of a local area's workforce.[61] This higher threshold makes it possible to distinguish between areas with moderate connections and those with especially strong commuting ties. By mapping these flows, we can clearly show the corridors where Oxford's influence is most concentrated, reinforcing the case for recognising a wider 'Greater Oxford' economic area.

Grouping of key Oxford business parks

4.8   Oxford's major business and science parks form the backbone of its high-value economy, but they do not all play the same role. Parks such as Milton Park and Culham to the south are heavily integrated into the Science Vale Cluster, an area that has been deliberately planned and branded as a complementary hub of science and technology activity, sitting just beyond Oxford's boundary but linked closely through supply chains and commuting flows. By contrast, parks like Begbroke to the north of Oxford (just outside the city boundary) are more directly connected to the city's own research base and institutions, particularly the University of Oxford.[62] Mapping these parks together demonstrates the breadth of Oxford's innovation ecosystem, while also showing how parts of it, particularly to the south, extend into a distinct but connected science value cluster.

Density heatmap of commercial office properties

4.9   Clusters are commonly understood as concentrations of related firms and institutions within a defined geography.[63] Such concentrations shape competitiveness by raising the productivity of firms, supporting innovation, and encouraging the creation of new businesses. Patterns of clustering can be observed through the density and distribution of commercial premises.

Synthesising Oxford City's coherent economic geography

4.10   The overlay of commuting flows, travel times, and the distribution of major employment nodes provides a powerful visualisation of Oxford's wider economic footprint. Taken together, these map layers reveal a distinct concentration of activity within the proposed GO area. The density of commuting patterns, employment hubs, and innovation clusters clearly demonstrates how economic networks extend across current administrative boundaries, underlining the argument that governance and planning should reflect this functional geography rather than the more limited city boundary.

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[61] UK Data Service, 2021. An introduction to 2021 Census geography datasets

[62] OxLEP. No date. The Oxfordshire Innovation Ecosystem

[63] Porter, 1998. Clusters and the new economics of competition

Oxford's coherent economic geography – all maps

30-minute drive time radius from Oxford City
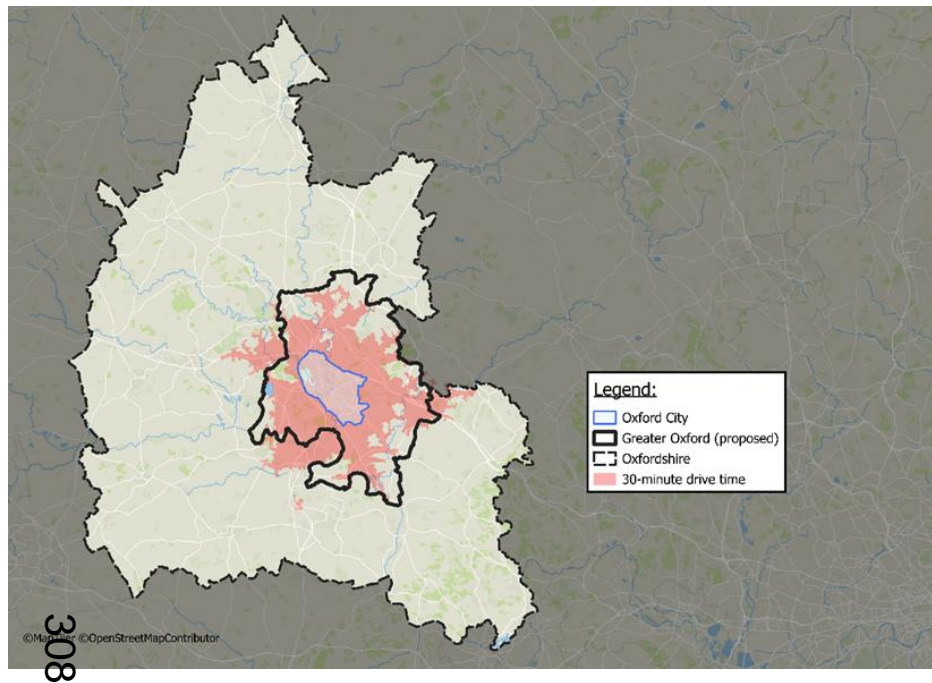
45-minute cycle time radius from Oxford City
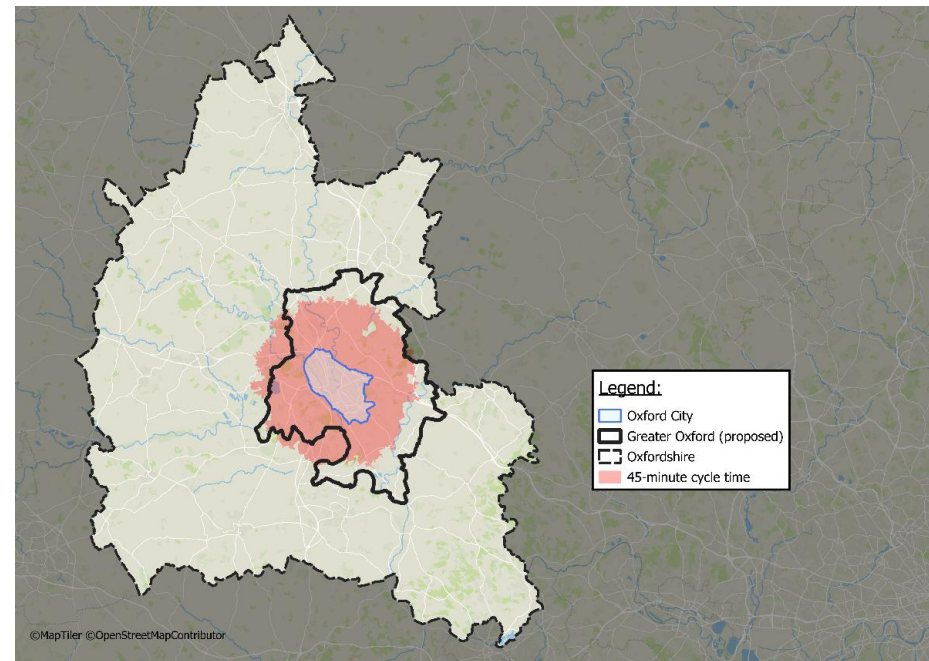
Areas with 50+ commuters to Oxford City
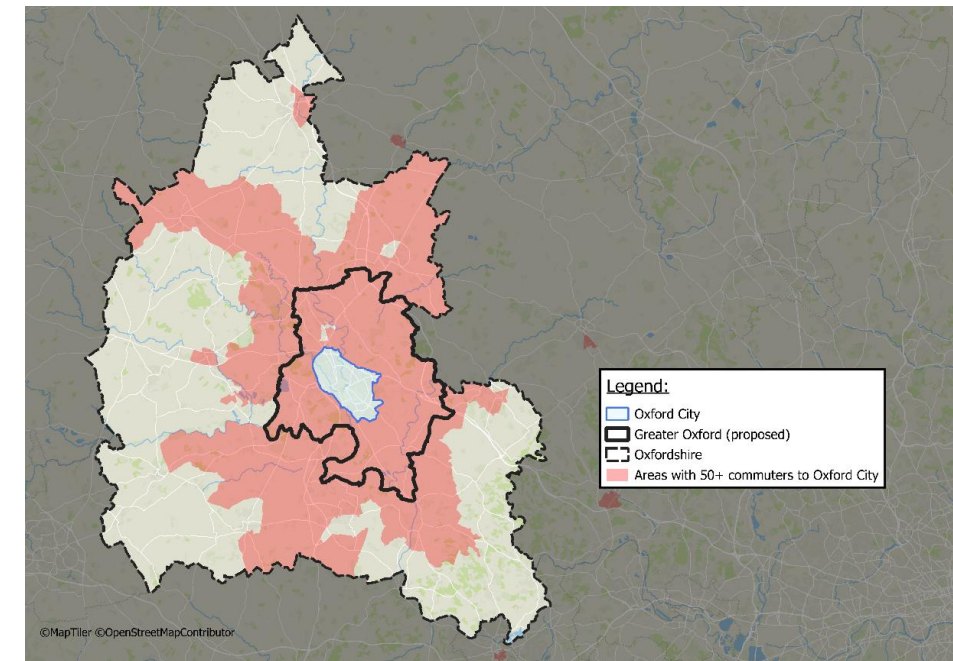
Areas with 100+ commuters to Oxford City
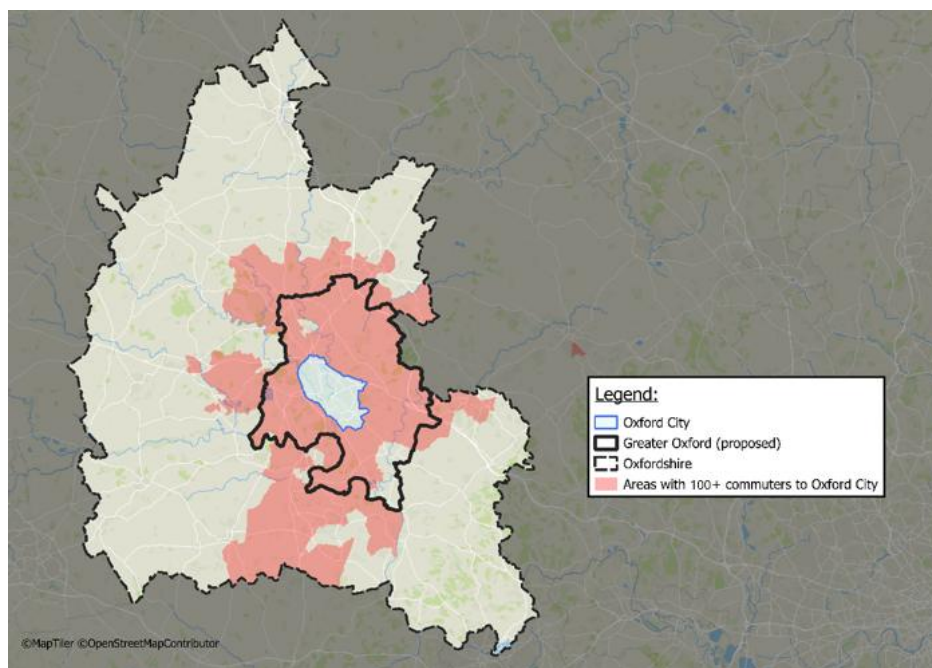
Grouping of key business parks in and outside Oxford City
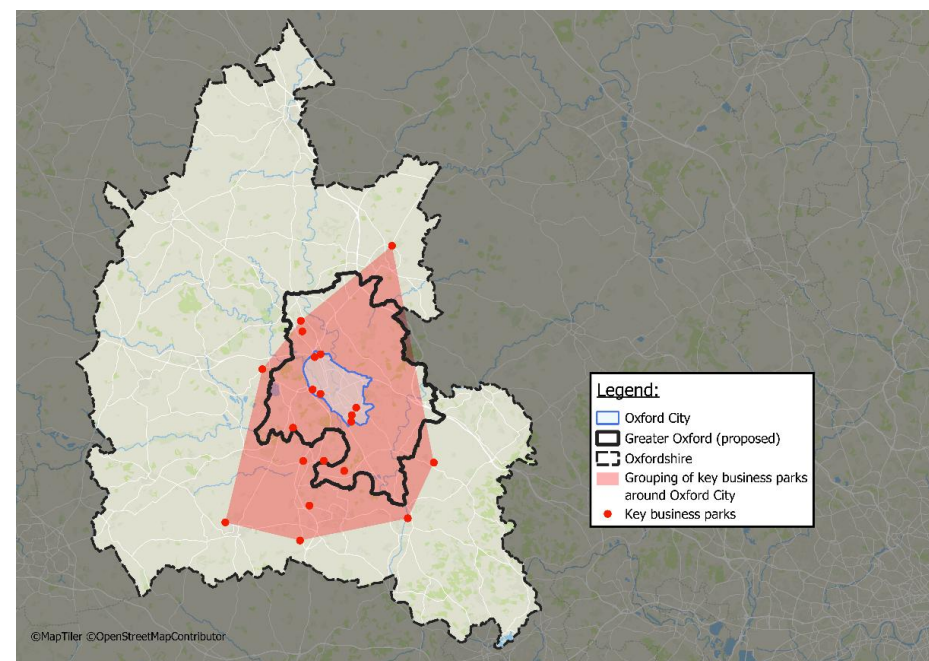
Density heatmap of commercial office properties
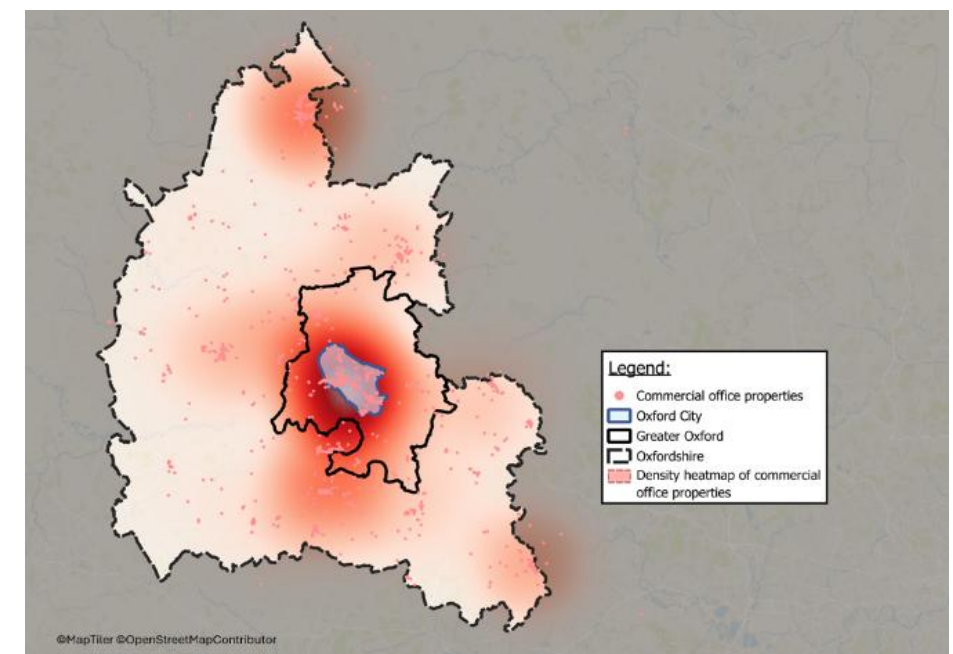
Commuting, travel times and business clusters show that Greater Oxford aligns with how the economy actually works

Overlaying commuting patterns, travel times and business clusters shows that the proposed Greater Oxford boundary aligns with how the economy functions in reality

Legend:
- Oxford City (current administrative boundary)
- Greater Oxford (proposed)
- Oxfordshire
- Oxford's true economic footprint extends far beyond the city boundary

©MapTiler ©OpenStreetMapContributor

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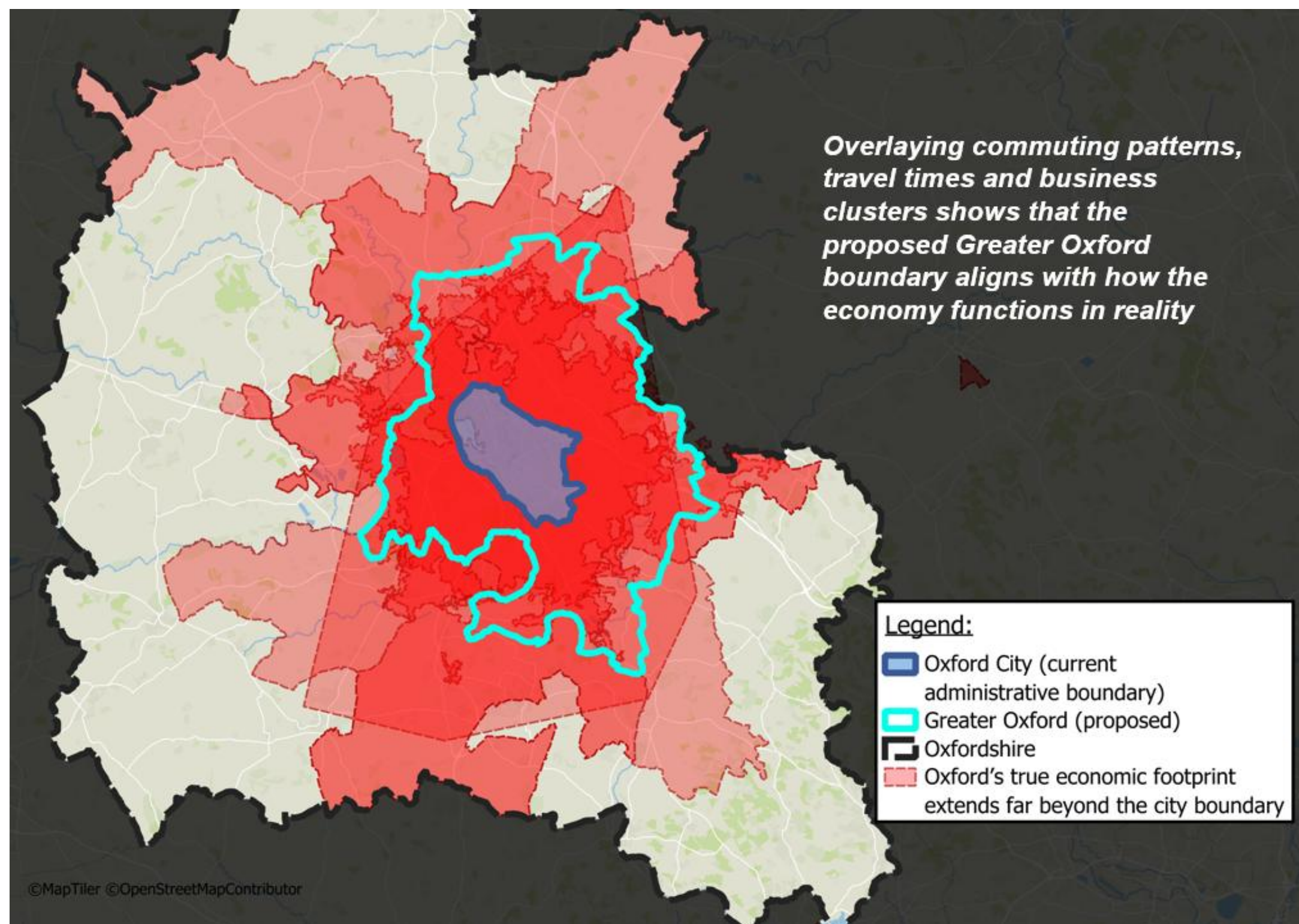
5. Employment growth potential under different options

5.1 This section considers the employment growth potential of each LGR option. Forecast growth rates are informed by a wide range of evidence, including historic economic performance, growth forecasts from other studies under comparable scenarios, and bottom-up analysis of development potential. Qualitative judgement has also been applied where appropriate to reflect factors likely to change as a result of boundary adjustments, such as shifts in strategic focus, governance priorities, the ability to unlock key development sites and the likelihood of green belt release. The key rationales for each growth rate are transparently presented in this section.

5.2 This section sets out likely employment growth rates for each proposal, including the evidence and justification underpinning them. It then outlines the potential associated housing need, including the methodology used and resulting alignment with the SM housing targets for each area and other relevant targets (the Interim Plan Update to MHCLG and the Oxfordshire Housing & Growth Deal).

5.3 **Figure 4** shows a summary of each proposal's employment growth forecasts.

Figure 4 – Summary of forecast annual employment growth rates under the three options

3UA ≈1.3%   2UA ≈1.1%   1UA ≈1.0%
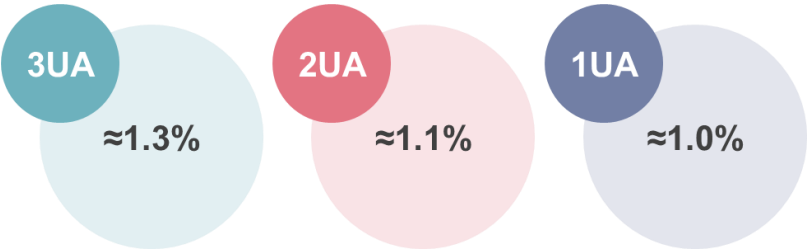
Employment growth forecasts

3UA

5.4 The 3UA model delivers the highest county-wide average employment growth at around **1.3% per year**. Each authority focuses on its distinct economic strengths: GO achieves ≈1.5% by unlocking R&D capacity through selective green belt release and strategic sites such as Culham, maximising agglomeration benefits; Northern Oxfordshire reaches 1.3% through mid-tech, tourism, and agricultural opportunities; and Ridgeway achieves 1.2% via coordinated expansion of Harwell, Milton and Didcot. **Table 2** summarises the evidence and justifications for these forecasts.

Table 2 – 3UA employment growth forecast

1. Greater Oxford	≈ 1.5%

Evidence for growth rate:

- Employment forecasts under current constraints indicate growth of around 0.6%–1.2% per year, showing the baseline trajectory if Oxford's capacity challenges remain.[64,65,66]
- Historic employment growth performance demonstrates Oxford's ability to deliver much stronger growth: average annual growth of ~1.3% between 2009 and 2019, with peaks of up to 4.7% during 2013–2016 when favourable conditions aligned.[67]
- **Bottom-up analysis of identified sites from previous 5th Studio work indicates that ~1.1%– 1.3% is achievable.[68]**
- **There is further upside potential if the Ox-Cam super-cluster investments materialise, which could support growth of 2.3% compound annual growth rate (CAGR), as set out as the transformational scenario in the Public First study. However, this has been excluded from the central case to keep the ~1.5% forecast realistic and evidence-based.[69,70]**

Justification:

- *Strategic Green Belt release*:
  - Oxford's green belt covers almost 135 square miles, providing substantial scope for carefully managed development without undermining its primary function. While it is estimated that the Green Belt could theoretically accommodate up to 3 million homes, the delivery of around 40,000 new homes would affect only a very small proportion of this land.[71] The vast majority of the Green Belt would remain intact, and key ecological assets such as Shotover and Otmoor, both protected through statutory environmental designations, would continue to be safeguarded.[72]
  - Previous analysis (work undertaken by 5th Studio) identified a number of strategically located sites immediately outside the city boundary which are well suited for Green Belt release. These sites are capable of accommodating large development plots that cannot be delivered within Oxford's historic urban form.
  - Green Belt release in these locations would therefore enable the delivery of major new employment sites of a scale and type likely not achievable under the alternative 1UA or 2UA scenarios, doing so in a way that balances both housing growth and environmental protection. This would represent a step-change in Oxford's growth trajectory, creating the space required to attract and retain globally competitive firms and reinforcing Oxford's position as an internationally significant economic hub.
- *Agglomeration and clustering benefits:* As set out in the **Why Greater Oxford? section** above, new sites allow firms to cluster more closely, intensifying spillovers, collaboration, and

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[64] Oxfordshire Growth Board, 2021. Oxfordshire Growth Needs Assessment

[65] Oxford City Council, 2022. Oxford City Employment Land Needs Assessment

[66] Cherwell District and Oxford City Councils, 2022. Housing and Economic Needs Assessment

[67] Business Register and Employment Survey (BRES), 2024. Historic employment estimates

[68] The levels of economic growth associated with the 'additional growth' identified sites is calculated using the following assumptions:
- For each site, 50% of the land is developable and 50% of that land is likely to come forward as development.
- These sites are delivered with a ratio of 1.07 jobs per home (the implied rate from the "transformational scenario" in the OGNA).
- The developable land is developed on a basis of 80 dwellings per hectare and 241 jobs per hectare.
- Final growth for the area is calculated based on existing growth + additional growth + growth due to the Cowley Branch Line (8,000 jobs).

[69] Public First, 2024. Oxford - Cambridge Scenario Modelling

[70] Because the additional 450,000 jobs are projected across the entire OxCam Arc, we have estimated Oxford City's share by calculating its proportion of total employment across the relevant local authorities (Milton Keynes, Oxford, Vale of White Horse, Cambridge, and South Cambridgeshire)

[71] Oxford City Council, 2025. Greater Oxford: One council. Local decisions. A better place to live.

[72] Natural England, 2025. Designated Sites View.

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innovation. Instead of growth being dispersed, it would be concentrated around existing high-value employment centres, creating productivity uplift.[73]

- *Occupier preferences*: As set out above, high-tech and research firms strongly prefer locations near Oxford's academic and talent base. They favour edge-of-Oxford campus sites with space and access to skilled labour.
- *Unlocking constrained potential*: Oxford's spinouts and high-growth firms are currently struggling to scale within constrained land supply.[74] Providing space through land release enables these firms to expand locally, keeping them within the county and catalysing a step-change in growth.

The central ~1.5% forecast is grounded in Oxford's historic performance, strengthened by site-level analysis, and made achievable through selective release of land that removes key growth constraints.

2. Northern Oxfordshire Council	≈ 1.3%

Evidence for growth rate:

- Forecast employment growth rates:
  - West Oxfordshire, from West Oxfordshire Annual Monitoring Report (2020): 1.6% per year.[75]
  - Cherwell, from Cherwell Employment Needs Assessment (2024): 1.1% per year.[76]
- Taking a weighted blend of these produces a central estimate of ~1.3%.

Justification:

- *Local growth hubs:* Growth is driven by market-town economies with distinct specialisms (rather than just spillover from Oxford):
  - Bicester has strengths in automotive and logistics. Bicester Motion, spanning a 444-acre estate, has emerged as a major centre for future mobility innovation and global automotive excellence. It hosts over 50 specialist businesses spanning classic car preservation to advanced mobility technologies.[77]
  - Banbury is a market town in Cherwell district with a diverse economy focused on manufacturing, logistics, distribution, and services. Recent development includes new state-of-the-art logistics facilities, such as the Frontier Park industrial development.[78]
  - Salt Cross Garden Village proposes around 2,200 new homes and a major science and technology park. Plans include a substantial 40 ha science and tech park adjacent to a park-and-ride facility, supporting jobs and business growth.[79]
- *Additional economic assets*:
  - Witney and Carterton (supported by RAF Brize Norton) add further employment capacity. Witney is the largest economic centre in West Oxfordshire, with strong distribution-related activity and lower-than-average unemployment.[80]
  - Upper Heyford (Heyford Park) is being developed as a mixed-use settlement with thousands of new homes, employment space, community facilities, and commercial infrastructure. Employment at the village centre currently supports over 1,200 jobs, with potential to add around 1,500 more by 2031.[81]

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[73] Peak Economics and Møreforsking, 2023. Agglomeration and transport appraisal: new developments and research directions

[74] Savills, 2020. Competing requirements for land

[75] Based on an increase of 10,600 jobs between 2018 and 2031 in West Ox annual monitoring report. The May 2025 Draft Preferred Policy Options Paper sets out that AECOM is drafting an ENA

[76] Growth of 20,100 jobs from the Interim update Note - Cherwell Employment Needs Assessment update that informed the employment land need in the proposed local plan: Cherwell Local Plan Review, using BRES 2021 total Cherwell employment as the base

[77] Oxford Calling, 2024. Spotlight on Bicester: Bicester in the Driving Seat

[78] Ralph Davis. Ralph Davis Unveils New Banbury Facility: A Strategic Step Forward

[79] West Oxfordshire District Council, 2025. Salt Cross information page

[80] Lichfields, 2025. Carterton-Witney-Oxford Rail Corridor Economic Appraisal

[81] Bidwells, 2025. The Village Centre At Heyford Park, Heyford Park, Camp Road, Upper Heyford, Bicester, Oxfordshire, OX25 5HD

- *Economic composition*: The area is characterised by a strong mid-tech sector, supported by agriculture and tourism, ensuring steady and resilient growth even without Oxford's global cluster effects.[82,83]
- *Strategic independence:* Growth in Northern Oxfordshire is forecast to be lower than GO due to absence of Oxford's unique global cluster. However, GO's self-contained expansion removes overspill pressure, allowing Northern Oxfordshire to strategically invest in its own market-town and industrial strengths.

Combining robust local evidence sources provides a consistent growth forecast of ~1.3%. This figure positions Northern Oxfordshire slightly below GO's 1.5% forecast, reflecting a stable yet locally-driven growth path.

3. Ridgeway Council	≈ 1.2%

Evidence for growth rate:

- Forecast employment growth rates:
  - South Oxfordshire, from South and Vale ELNA, 2024: 0.4% per year[84]
  - Vale of White Horse, from South and Vale ELNA, 2024: 0.7% per year[85]
  - West Berkshire, from West Berkshire Employment Land Review, 2020: 0.7% per year[86]
- However, a unified authority supports coordinated Science Vale strategy at Harwell and Milton and there is growth potential at Didcot, so growth potential is higher than it has been historically, with a lower ceiling than Oxford-centric GO scenario.

Justification:

- *Science Vale cluster*: Harwell Campus and Milton Park form the backbone of the Ridgeway economy, with further expansion already planned.
  - The Harwell Science and Innovation Campus spans 700 acres, hosts over 240 public and private organisations, and employs over 6,000 people across areas such as space, clean energy, life sciences, and quantum computing.[87]
  - Moderna is establishing an Innovation and Technology Centre (MITC) within Harwell's Health Tech cluster, bringing mRNA R&D and manufacturing capability.[88]
  - Located within Science Vale UK, Milton Park is the largest single ownership innovation community in the UK, over 250 organisations in sectors including life sciences, energy, space, and supporting technologies.[89]
- *Didcot Garden Town:* Major housing and employment growth will cement Didcot's role as a hub for science-sector jobs, adding scale to the cluster. Didcot Garden Town is projected to deliver ~15,000 homes and ~20,000 jobs by 2031, raising growth above historic levels.[90]
- *Other growth sources*: Wallingford, Wantage/Grove, and Newbury add further market-town and service-driven growth, ensuring economic diversity. Part of Vodafone headquarters in West Berkshire also set to be partially turned into a science park.[91]
- *Strategic coordination:* A unified authority supports coordinated Science Vale strategy at Harwell and Milton, and there is growth potential at Didcot, so growth potential is higher than historic level. A single authority enables more effective planning across these growth centres. Nonetheless, the lack of Oxford's world-class university cluster and its associated agglomeration

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[82] Experience Oxfordshire, 2024. Economic Impact of Tourism – Headline Figures- Cherwell

[83] West Oxfordshire District Council, 2023. The Economic Impact of West Oxfordshire's Visitor Economy

[84] Based on whole economy forecast job growth from 2021-2041. Table 8-2 from South and Vale ELNA 2024, using BRES 2021 total South Oxfordshire employment as the base. Potential alternative based on the office and industrial growth that informed employment land need is 0.6% per annum.

[85] Based on whole economy forecast job growth from 2021-2041. Table 8-2 from South and Vale ELNA 2024 using BRES 2021 total Vale of White Horse employment as the base. Potential alternative based on the office and industrial growth that informed employment land need is 0.9% per annum.

[86] Based on whole economy Experian forecast job growth from 2020-2030 from the West Berkshire Employment Land Review

[87] Harwell, 2024. Harwell Campus Named The UK's Most Successful Science Campus

[88] Merit, 2024. Moderna Selects Harwell Science Campus To Develop Innovation and Technology Centre in the UK

[89] Milton Park, 2025. Website

[90] Aecom, 2021. Didcot Garden Town Housing Infrastructure Fund Programme

[91] BBC, 2025. Part of Vodafone site to become science park

> effects means Ridgeway is capped at ~1.2% growth rather than reaching Greater Oxford's ~1.5%.
>
> **A central growth forecast of ~1.2% reflects a step-up from historic performance due to Science Vale and Didcot, while acknowledging that growth remains below Greater Oxford's due to lower levels of agglomeration and global reach.**

Table 3 – 3UA absolute growth in employment, with the annual increase being the average over the period to 2042

Geography	2023 employment	Annual growth rate	Annual increase
Greater Oxford	183,400	1.5%	3,150
Northern Oxfordshire	112,400	1.3%	1,600
Ridgeway	209,400	1.2%	2,850
Total 3UA	**505,100**	**1.3%**	**7,600**

2UA

5.5   The 2UA model is forecast to deliver county-wide employment growth of around 1.1% per annum. The Oxford and Shires UA's combination of Oxford's urban priorities with more rural districts slightly dilutes its planning focus and creates challenges for delivering green belt sites, which can be politically sensitive. Ridgeway's growth also moderates to 1.1% (down from 1.2% in the 3UA model) as, under this governance, it must accommodate additional housing for Oxford commuters alongside pursuing its Science Vale and Didcot-led growth strategy. **Table 4** sets out the evidence, data sources, and justifications underpinning each forecast scenario.

Table 4 – 2UA employment growth forecast

1. Oxford and Shires Council	≈ 1.1%

Evidence for growth rate:

- Forecast employment growth rates:
  - West Oxfordshire, from West Oxfordshire Annual Monitoring Report (2020): 1.6% per year.[92]
  - Cherwell, from Cherwell Employment Needs Assessment (2024): 1.1% per year.[93]
  - Oxford City, from The Oxford City ELNA Interim Report (2025): 1.0% per year[94]
- A weighted average of these district-level figures produces ~1.1% per year.
- This is also consistent with Oxfordshire's past long-term average of ~1.0% per year.

Justification:

- There are clear growth opportunities particularly around Oxford and Bicester/Banbury, as set out in 3UA the Northern Oxfordshire justification above.
- However there is also:
  - *Fragmentation of priorities:* Combining Oxford's high-growth, innovation-driven economy with more rural districts spreads governance attention across divergent needs, reducing Oxford's economic momentum. Research on local government fragmentation highlights that fragmented systems, especially those combining different urban and rural needs, may struggle with coherent economic strategy and can negatively impact growth momentum.[95]

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[92] Based on an increase of 10,600 jobs between 2018 and 2031 in West Ox annual monitoring report. The May 2025 Draft Preferred Policy Options Paper sets out that AECOM is drafting an ENA

[93] Growth of 20,100 jobs from the Interim update Note - Cherwell Employment Needs Assessment update that informed the employment land need in the proposed local plan: Cherwell Local Plan Review, using BRES 2021 total Cherwell employment as the base

[94] Rapleys, 2025. Oxford City – Employment Land Needs Assessment Interim report: Appendix B, Job numbers Change 2024-42

[95] Northern Illinois University, 2019. Local Government Fragmentation: What Do We Know?

> o *Coordination barriers:* Delivering politically sensitive green belt sites becomes more challenging in a larger, mixed authority. As a result, no comprehensive review or release is assumed under this scenario.[96]
> o *Fewer economic clusters:* In a mixed authority that combines Oxford with surrounding more rural districts, governance would be required to balance divergent priorities. This disperses attention and resources, making it harder to sustain a focused economic strategy. As a result, opportunities to develop concentrated, high-performing clusters are diluted, and the benefits of agglomeration are weakened.
>
> **A blended growth forecast of around 1.1% is supported by local evidence but constrained by the governance model. While some consolidation of councils would deliver efficiencies, the absence of a clear strategic focus holds back stronger performance. Growth would be steady but below the 3UA GO scenario. The Oxford and Shire Council is expected to underperform slightly compared with Northern Oxfordshire under the 3UA option.**

2. Ridgeway Council	**≈ 1.1%**

Evidence for growth rate:

- Forecast is slightly reduced compared with ~1.2% in the 3UA Ridgeway Council model.
- This reflects the additional requirement for Ridgeway to accommodate commuter housing from Oxford, diverting resources away from Science Vale-led expansion.

Justification:

- *Retained strengths:* As set out in the 3UA Ridgeway Council justification, Science Vale and Didcot remain growth drivers, but resources are more stretched as Ridgeway will need to absorb some of Oxford's commuter housing demand, diverting capacity away from investment in Science Vale–led sectors and diluting the region's innovation-focused growth potential.
- *Diluted economic mission:* A governance model that balances Oxford's overspill with local development needs hinders a clear focus on transformative, high-value science and innovation outcomes, unlike the strategic clarity a dedicated Oxford unitary could deliver.
- *Greenbelt release constraint:* No assumption of comprehensive green belt review or release further limits capacity for high-value economic activity.

Growth moderates to ~1.1%, reflecting a split between innovation-led expansion and supporting commuter housing pressures.

Table 5 – 2UA absolute growth in employment, with the annual increase being the average over the period to 2042

Geography	2023 employment	Annual growth rate	Annual increase
Oxford and Shires	264,700	1.1%	3,350
Ridgeway	240,400	1.1%	3,000
Total 2UA	**505,100**	**1.1%**	**6,350**

1UA

5.6   The single county-wide UA is forecast to perform the slowest at around 1.0% per year, as competing urban, suburban, and rural priorities make it harder to pursue bold, place-specific strategies. This is likely to result in steady but incremental growth rather than transformative change. There is little difference between 2UA and 1UA in terms of growth potential. However, 2UA is expected to grow slightly faster, supported by more coherent priorities, stronger place branding, and a more explicitly pro-growth stance adopted by West Berkshire. **Table 6** explains this in more detail.

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[96] CPRE, 2025. "Greater Oxford" Proposal Threatens the Green Belt and Ignores the Bigger Picture

Table 6 – 1UA employment growth forecast

1. Oxfordshire Council	≈ 1.0%

Evidence for growth rate:

- Aggregated historical employment growth of the five districts amounts to ~1.0% growth per year.
- Historic county growth between 2010 and 2022 was ~17%, equating to ~1.1% annually.[97]
- The forecast of ~1.0% reflects incremental growth but falling short of the higher potential associated with more focused, multi-unitary models.

Justification:

- *Broad scope*: A single county-wide authority must balance Oxford's role as a global innovation hub with the needs of its rural districts and market towns. This wide scope inevitably spreads resources and investment more thinly, diluting the focus required to maximise Oxford's high-value cluster opportunities. Research on local government consolidation highlights how broad governance mandates can reduce policy clarity and weaken growth impacts.[98]
- *Conservative land-use approach*: Rural interests may limit green belt releases, diluting emphasis on high-value Oxford-centric developments and Science Vale. Political realities suggest that rural interests would likely resist significant green belt release. As set out above, CPRE Oxfordshire have already raised concerns that broader unitary structures risk Green Belt erosion and undermine planning integrity.[99] Without this, Oxford's most productive growth opportunities cannot be unlocked.
- *Lack of clear economic mission*: Unlike a dedicated GO or Ridgeway authority, a single county-wide unitary lacks a strong, singular champion for Oxford's global science and innovation mission. Without this, transformational initiatives risk being deprioritised in favour of consensus-driven compromises.
- *Stable but unambitious*: Growth is steady but incremental, with lower private-sector confidence due to diluted vision. A more ambitious single unitary could deliver stronger growth if backed by political consensus and strategic land-use/infrastructure investment, however this is not considered a realistic central case.

A ~1.0% annual growth rate reflects both Oxfordshire's historic performance and current planned trajectories, but does not capture the step-change potential that could arise from governance reform or strategic Green Belt release.

There is little difference between 2UA and 1UA in terms of growth potential. However, 2UA is expected to grow slightly faster, supported by more coherent priorities, stronger place branding, and a more explicitly pro-growth stance adopted by West Berkshire.

Table 7 – 1UA absolute growth in employment, with the annual increase being the average over the period to 2042

Geography	2023 employment	Annual growth rate	Annual increase
Total 1UA	**399,500**	**1.0%**	**4,150**
+ West Berkshire	*105,600*	*1.0%*	*1,100*
Total 1UA (+ West Berkshire)	**505,100**	**1.0%**	**5,250**

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[97] Oxfordshire County Council, 2025. Appendix 2 Option 1 A New Council - Our Oxfordshire

[98] Northern Illinois University, 2019. Local Government Fragmentation: What Do We Know?

[99] CPRE, 2025. "Greater Oxford" Proposal Threatens the Green Belt and Ignores the Bigger Picture

Housing implications

5.7 To ensure the employment growth forecasts are realistically deliverable, this section considers the housing need generated by the projected job growth. Aligning homes with jobs is essential: without sufficient housing, labour shortages and longer commuting patterns could constrain economic performance. The approach follows best practice set out in the Planning Practice Guidance and uses established employment need assessment methodology to translate job growth into housing requirements. The process is as follows:

1. **Change in economically active residents to meet job forecasts** – taking the projected job growth for each geography, and adjusting for:
   - **Commuting patterns** – apply commuting ratios to estimate how many of these workers would live in the same district.
   - **Double jobbing** – convert total jobs into the number of workers.
   - **Unemployment adjustment** – account for local unemployment rates.
2. **Population** – covert the change in economically active residents to population, based on the ratio of the total population per economically active resident.
3. **Homes** – convert the population into the number of homes required, based on household size.
4. **Home vacancy rate** – adjust to allow for a proportion of unoccupied homes.
5. **Homes-to-jobs ratio** – calculate the relationship between employment growth and housing.

5.8 Where possible, we based our calculations on the assumptions and inputs specific to each unitary authority within each proposal. This ensures that the resulting ratios are as accurate as possible and are not distorted by county-wide averages. The detailed assumptions for each geography are set out in **Appendix A**.

5.9 The table below presents results for two scenarios:

- **Scenario 1** reflects current commuting patterns, with some assumptions incorporated for the Greater Oxford scenario and existing patterns applied to all other geographies.
- **Scenario 2** assumes a 1:1 commuting ratio, representing a hypothetical situation in which each council delivers all housing needed to meet its employment growth within its own boundary. This scenario recognises that Oxford's current, tightly drawn boundary constrains its capacity to deliver sufficient land for growth, resulting in unmet need being exported to neighbouring unitary authorities. Under an expanded GO boundary, significant additional sites could be brought forward, enabling the city to meet its full housing need and allowing neighbouring authorities to retain full control over their own development and housing provision. While achieving a 1:1 ratio in practice is unlikely even with the expanded boundary, this provides an illustrative example of the potential scale of change.

Table 8 – Homes-to-jobs ratios and resulting annual homes

Geography	Scenario 1: taking into account current commuting ratios		Scenario 2: assuming a commuting ratio of 1:1	
	Ratio	Associated annual homes	Ratio	Associated annual homes
Greater Oxford	0.5	1,750	0.7	2,300
Northern Oxfordshire	0.8	1,300	0.8	1,150
Ridgeway	0.8	2,250	0.7	2,200
Total 3UA		**5,300**		**5,650**
Oxford and Shires	0.7	2,250	0.7	2,500
Ridgway	0.8	2,450	0.8	2,400
Total 2UA		**4,700**		**4,900**
1UA - Oxfordshire	0.7	**3,000**	0.7	**3,050**

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Comparison to the Standard Method and other targets

5.10 This section compares the housing estimates derived from jobs growth with the Standard Method (SM) annual housing need figures and other relevant targets (the Interim Plan Update to MHCLG and the Oxfordshire Housing & Growth Deal). The purpose is to assess whether the housing numbers from the jobs growth approach align with what is planned and deliverable.

5.11 This helps to confirm that economic and housing growth are aligned, and the economic growth does not imply a level of growth above that GO, or any other area, can realistically deliver. It also ensures that minimal unmet housing need from higher growth scenarios would be passed on to other areas beyond the capacity-tested baseline.

Comparison to the SM

5.12 The table below compares the job-based housing numbers set out above with the SM housing targets. For the 3UA proposal, where boundaries have changed, the SM housing target has been reapportioned based on the population distribution in the new geographies.

Table 9 – Comparison of job-based homes figures to SM housing need (annual, dwellings per year)

Geography	Scenario 1: taking into account commuting ratios			Scenario 2: assuming a commuting ratio of 1:1		
	Annual homes from jobs	SM annual homes	*Difference*	Annual homes from jobs	SM annual homes	*Difference*
Greater Oxford	1,750	1,800	*-50*	2,300	1,800	*+500*
Northern Oxfordshire	1,300	1,700	*-400*	1,150	1,700	*-550*
Ridgeway	2,250	2,800	*-550*	2,200	2,800	*-600*
Total 3UA	**5,300**	**6,300**	**-1,000**	**5,650**	**6,300**	**-650**
Oxford and Shires	2,250	3,100	*-850*	2,500	3,100	*-600*
Ridgeway	2,450	3,200	*-750*	2,400	3,200	*-800*
Total 2UA	**4,700**	**6,300**	**-1,600**	**4,900**	**6,300**	**-1,400**
1UA - Oxfordshire	**3,000**	**5,250**	**-2,250**	**3,050**	**5,250**	**-2,200**

5.13 Across all geographies except Scenario 2 3UA GO, the housing estimates derived from jobs growth are below the SM figures. This suggests the plan would meet at least the SM baseline, unless exceptional circumstances justify a lower figure.

5.14 In the 3UA GO 1:1 commuting scenario, the jobs-based method estimates 500 homes above the SM. This uplift above SM can be justified in principle where it:

    i. remains within deliverable capacity;
    ii. is tied to the economic strategy (R&D-led growth near the universities/hospitals), and;
    iii. is supported by infrastructure phasing (e.g. Cowley Line).

5.15 We therefore treat the higher GO figure as deliverable, but will not adopt a requirement above SM unless the evidence for exceptional circumstances and infrastructure is secured.

5.16   Scenario 1 is considered the more realistic outcome, although a bit on the lower side, while Scenario 2 represents an illustrative maximum. As set out in **Appendix A,** Scenario 1 assumes that there is a net inflow of commuters into GO, albeit lower than the current Oxford City net inflow. A perfect 1:1 commuting ratio is unlikely, so monitoring and management mechanisms will be used to ensure sufficient housing supply is maintained.

5.17   Across all options we apply a capacity guardrail: the adopted baseline requirement will not exceed deliverable capacity, and any upside beyond SM is treated as contingent on site and infrastructure delivery. A monitor-and-manage clause could be applied to trigger a review if observed jobs growth sustainably out-turns the baseline (e.g., >10% for three consecutive years).

5.18   It is both logical and reassuring that the jobs-derived method produces lower housing need figures on the whole than the SM. This is because the SM takes account of wider factors – such as historic unmet need, affordability pressures, demographic change (including an ageing population), and migration trends – which this more simple homes-to-jobs approach does not capture.

Comparison to other targets

OCC 3UA plan

5.19   It is estimated that under the 3UA proposal, around 40,000 homes could be delivered within GO over 15 years. The basis for this estimate is the homes associated with additional sites identified in the 5th Studio work undertaken earlier this year. Over 15 years, this equates to 2,650 homes per year. The table below compares the two scenarios of job-based home growth against this figure.

Table 10 – Comparison of job-based homes figures to additional homes set out by the OCC 3UA plan

Greater Oxford	Scenario 1: taking into account commuting ratios			Scenario 2: assuming a commuting ratio of 1:1		
	Annual homes from jobs	OCC 3UA plan	*Difference*	Annual homes from jobs	OCC 3UA plan	*Difference*
1 year	1,750	2,650	*-900*	2,300	2,650	*-350*
15 years	26,250	40,000	*-13,750*	34,500	40,000	*-5,500*

5.20   The results suggest that the proposed jobs growth is likely to be deliverable in practice.

Oxfordshire Housing & Growth Deal

5.21   Although slightly dated another relevant target is the delivery of 100,000 homes between 2011 and 2031, as set out in the Oxfordshire Housing & Growth Deal. 100,000 homes over 20 years equates to 5,000 additional homes per year. The table below compares the two scenarios of job-based home growth against this figure. This is a historic, Oxfordshire-only commitment (i.e. excludes West Berkshire) and covers a different period; we therefore use it for context only.

Table 11 – Comparison of job-based homes figures to additional homes set out in Oxfordshire Growth Board

Geography	Scenario 1: taking into account commuting ratios			Scenario 2: assuming a commuting ratio of 1:1		
	Annual homes from jobs	Growth Board	*Difference*	Annual homes from jobs	Growth Board	*Difference*
3UA	5,300	5,000	*+300*	5,650	5,000	*+650*
2UA	4,700	5,000	*-300*	4,900	5,000	*-100*
1UA	3,000	5,000	*-2,000*	3,050	5,000	*-1,950*

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5.22   The jobs-based housing estimates are broadly comparable to the Growth Board's county-wide target. For the 3UA proposal, the estimates are higher, which is expected as both cover a larger area than the county boundary by including West Berkshire. West Berkshire accounts for around 600 homes under scenario 1 and 650 homes under scenario 2. Adjusting for this would bring the 3UA proposal either below (scenario 1) or in line (scenario 2) with the target. This uplift is reasonable, as the 5,000-per-annum target does not account for the additional housing capacity that could be unlocked through green belt release within the extended GO boundary.

5.23   For the 2UA and 1UA proposals, the jobs-based totals are below this target, reinforcing that these proposals would not require these areas to deliver more homes than can realistically be achieved.

Public First Study: transformational scenario

5.24   The Oxford Transformational scenario assumes 2.3% annual growth, as set out in the 2024 Public First Study. This is based on creating an additional 450,000 jobs across the Oxford–Cambridge Arc over 25 years.

5.25   The table below compares the housing demand generated under two job-based growth scenarios. The 2.3% growth rate results in significantly higher associated housing demand, which is likely to be undeliverable in practice.

Table 12 – Comparing annual homes derived from jobs growth of 1.5% to 2.3%

Geography	Scenario 1: taking into account commuting ratios			Scenario 2: assuming a commuting ratio of 1:1		
	1.5% growth	2.3% growth	*Difference*	1.5% growth	2.3% growth	*Difference*
Greater Oxford	1,750	3,800	*-2,050*	2,300	3,800	*-1,500*

6.   Additionality, agglomeration and productivity uplift

6.1   This section sets out how the growth potential described above translates into additional economic value for Greater Oxford. It covers both the direct GVA associated with extra jobs and the further productivity gains that arise when more of those jobs are concentrated in and around Oxford. The analysis compares outcomes across the 3UA, 2UA and 1UA models and builds on the evidence presented earlier on how density raises productivity in knowledge intensive places (**paragraph 3.5**).

Approach

6.2   Projected jobs are converted into direct GVA based on the following methodology:

- **2023 baseline:** For each geography within each proposal, GVA per head is fixed at the 2023 level as the starting point for the projections.
- **2024-2050 projection:**
  - **1UA proposal:**
    - GVA per head is assumed to grow each year at the historic national rate of real GVA per head growth over the period 2000–2023. This provides a benchmark against which the higher-growth scenarios can be assessed.
  - **2UA and 3UA proposals:**
    - For existing jobs, GVA per head also grows at the historic national rate. This reflects a deliberately conservative assumption that the productivity of current employment is unlikely to be significantly enhanced by structural change.
    - For new jobs, GVA per head grows at an elevated rate relative to the 1UA proposal in each geography. This uplift captures the expectation that new jobs anticipated under these proposal will be more productive and is calibrated to align with the ratios used to justify the employment growth assumptions.

6.3   This approach ensures that the projected relationship between employment growth and GVA growth remains consistent with historic patterns of economic performance. It also reflects the nature of job growth anticipated under the proposals, for example the expansion of lab space and related high-value sectors, as outlined in the employment growth section above. The resulting impacts for each proposal are presented in the table below.

6.4   An agglomeration multiplier is then applied to direct GVA that reflects how concentrated employment is relative to a fixed benchmark. The multiplier is derived from a relative density index using core and non-core shares and travel time decay weights, combined with an elasticity drawn from the literature. Agglomeration effects are measured incrementally against the base year, and the cumulative benefits up to 2050 are then discounted back to today at 3.5%.

6.5   Full steps, parameters and sensitivity tests are set out in the **Technical Appendix.**

Results

6.6   The results of the methodology set out in the Technical Appendix are set out in **Table 13**.

Table 13 – Additionality, agglomeration and productivity outputs across the three options

	3UA	2UA	1UA*
	Baseline (2023)		
Employment (2023)	505,100	505,100	505,100
Annual GVA (2023) (£bn)	£38.4	£38.4	£38.4
	Growth (2023-2050)		
Employment growth (2023-2050)	218,000	180,000	153,000
	Forecast impacts (2050)		
Annual direct GVA (2050) (£bn)	£64.1	£59.3	£56.8
Annual GVA from agglomeration (2050) (£bn)	£0.83	£0.12	£0.00
Annual total GVA (2050) (£bn)	**£64.9**	**£59.5**	**£56.8**
Agglomeration benefit per worker (2050, relative to 2023)	£1,083	£155	£0.00
	NPV over 27-year period (2023-2050), *total additional from 2023*		
Direct GVA (£bn)	£163.5	£141.2	£125.7
GVA from agglomeration (£bn)	£5.3	£0.8	£0.0
Total GVA NPV (£bn)	**£168.8**	**£142.0**	**£125.7**
	NPV over 27-year period (2023-2050), *relative to reference case*		
Direct GVA relative to reference case (£bn)	£37.8	£15.5	*Reference case*
GVA from agglomeration relative to reference case (£bn)	£5.3	£0.8	*Reference case*
Total GVA NPV relative to reference case (£bn)	**£43.1**	**£16.3**	***Reference case***
	Employment and GVA % (growth 2023-2050)		
Employment CAGR *(AAGR)*[100]	**1.3%** *(1.6%)*	**1.1%** *(1.3%)*	**1.0%** *(1.1%)*
GVA CAGR *(AAGR)*	**1.9%** *(2.6%)*	**1.6%** *(2.0%)*	**1.5%** *(1.8%)*

**West Berkshire is added to the 1UA option with historic rates of employment growth continuing to 2050 to allow for direct comparison with the 3UA and 2UA options

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[100] CAGR: Compound annual growth rate, AAGR: Average annual growth rate

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What this means

Overview

6.7 By 2050, the 3UA proposal supports approximately 38,000 more jobs than the 2UA proposal and 65,000 more than the 1UA proposal, on a like-for-like geographic basis. Translating employment into economic output, annual GVA in the 3UA proposal rises from £38.4 billion in 2023 to £64.1 billion in 2050. This represents a CAGR of 1.9% over the period, equivalent to an AAGR of 2.6%. These growth rates are higher than those expected under either the 1UA or 2UA proposals, however they are still realistic based on a historical comparison. For example, from 2000-2023, real GVA in Oxfordshire grew by a CAGR of 1.3% and an average AAGR of 1.5%.

6.8 Proximity adds further value. Beyond scale, 3UA places a larger share of jobs where agglomeration works hardest, close to Oxford's research base and innovation spine. The density effect is modest each year but accumulates: by 2050 it is worth around £1,080 per worker, and on a discounted basis to 2050 the agglomeration component alone is £5.3 billion for 3UA. This uplift is calculated relative to a fixed 1UA 2023 benchmark and uses a conservative elasticity to avoid overstating spillovers.

Growth constrained by land supply and housing capacity

6.9 The 3UA forecasts of 1.5% employment growth and 1.9% real GVA growth are constrained not by a lack of demand, but by the limited availability of land for development. Oxford's capacity for expansion is determined by the need to balance economic growth with housing delivery. Even with the release of some Green Belt land, this would not be sufficient to meet the full scale of demand. As set out in **paragraph 5.25** of the housing implications section, an annual employment growth rate of 2.3% would generate housing demand that is likely to be undeliverable in practice.

6.10 Oxford's historic town centre further restricts opportunities for further development despite strong market demand. Taken together, these factors mean that the city's growth trajectory is defined less by economic potential than by the practical limitations of land supply and housing capacity.

6.11 In addition, realising this growth envisaged under 3UA will depend on timely investment in enabling infrastructure to unlock sites and capacity, as signalled by the recent Cowley Branch Line announcement.[101]

Oxfordshire's role with the Thames Valley

6.12 Metro Dynamics has recently set out an ambition for the Thames Valley Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA) to achieve 2.3% real GVA growth, reflecting a return to pre-Covid levels. This is derived from the CAGR achieved across the MSA between 2013 and 2018. Oxfordshire's historically lower employment growth rate of around 1% has constrained the wider region's overall performance. Under the 3UA model, Oxfordshire could deliver 1.9% real GVA growth, which would make a meaningful contribution towards the Thames Valley's 2.3% growth objective.

6.13 Oxfordshire is unlikely to be able to exceed this level of growth given the land and housing balance constraints described above. By contrast, the 1UA and 2UA models, which represent lower growth scenarios, would therefore have a more modest impact on wider regional performance.

Why the gains are additional

6.14 The measured uplift is not simply activity moved around within the county. It arises from higher effective density relative to a fixed baseline, from better alignment with the location preferences of high value and mobile firms, and from reduced delivery friction across planning, land, transport, housing, and skills that enables timely capacity close to Oxford. Without that capacity and coordination, a portion of investment would leak to other UK or international clusters or arrive later and smaller.

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[101] Oxford City Council, 2025. Reopening the Cowley Branch Line for passengers

Fiscal implications

6.15   Applying the historic relationship that roughly 30 to 40 per cent of GVA accrues as public receipts provides an order of magnitude view of the Exchequer impact. On this basis, by 2050 annual tax receipts are approximately £1.6 – £2.2 billion higher under 3UA than 2UA, and approximately £2.4 – £3.2 billion higher than 1UA.

Overall value

6.16   On a discounted basis to 2050, the combined benefits of jobs driven GVA and proximity under 3UA total around £169 billion, around £27 billion above 2UA, making 3UA the strongest platform for higher value growth, sooner, and in the places where it counts.

7. Inclusive growth

OCC's track record

7.1 Oxford City Council has a strong record on inclusive growth. For example:

- The Economic Strategy 2022–32 sets "a new standard for economic inclusion".
- The Council established and promotes the Oxford Living Wage (£13.16/hour in 2025/26) with an employer accreditation scheme.
- It co-leads the Oxfordshire Inclusive Economy Partnership (OIEP), which launched an Inclusive Economy Charter to embed social value across employers.
- OCC was an early adopter of the OIEP Charter and has delivered 35 of 39 pledges, including actions on apprenticeships, inclusive recruitment and local procurement.[102]

7.2 Draft Policy E3 (Oxford Local Plan 2042) requires major developments to submit a Community Employment & Procurement Plan (CEPP) showing how they will support an inclusive local economy and deliver social value.

7.3 Expected CEPP commitments include:

- a. Secure local construction jobs.
- b. Provide construction apprenticeships/training for local residents.
- c. Engage schools and colleges.
- d. Secure local jobs in the operational/end-user phase.
- e. Procure locally for ongoing supply chains.
- f. Pay the Oxford Living Wage to all employees (except apprentices).
- g. Use contractors that commit to the Oxford Living Wage / appropriate social clauses.
- h. Source construction materials locally where feasible.
- i. Provide affordable workspace.

Enhancing inclusivity through scale and governance

7.4 The 3UA proposal is projected to deliver greater economic growth than the 2UA or 1UA models. A larger economy means more residents benefit in absolute terms, as increased activity generates additional jobs, skills development opportunities, and investment across the region.

7.5 As an illustrative example, the Oxfordshire CEP target of 5% of construction jobs as apprenticeships implies that, by 2050, the annual number of apprenticeships supported by each proposal would be:

- **3UA**: 3,170
- **2UA**: 2,935
- **1UA**: 2,183[103]

7.6 In addition, GO would enable delivery of mixed-tenure housing in well-connected locations, supported by improved public transport linking villages and employment clusters. This integration of housing and transport would create a more balanced and inclusive growth model, expanding economic capacity while also improving affordability, accessibility, and quality of life.

7.7 Planned growth at the city's edge, under a single authority, can be particularly inclusive. Coordinating transport, housing, and labour-market strategies ensures high-value clusters remain accessible to a wide pool of workers. As new science and technology jobs emerge, they stimulate demand for a broad range of supporting roles in services, supply chains, and construction. With GO, this growth would be managed to

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[102] https://www.oiep.org.uk/

[103] It is worth noting that the 1UA geography does not include West Berkshire, whereas the others (2UA and 3UA) do. If apprenticeships from West Berkshire were included, the total would amount to 2,785, still significantly less than the 3UA proposal.

spread opportunity across different skill levels and communities, maximising the benefits of Oxford's global economic strengths.

Delivering more affordable housing

7.8   The additional housing delivered under GO would include a significant proportion of council and affordable homes, in line with Oxford's Local Plan 2036 requirement that developments of over ten dwellings provide 40% social housing and 10% other affordable housing. Based on the projected 1,750–2,650 additional homes per year under the GO scenario (**Table 10**), this equates to around 700–1,060 new social homes and 175–265 affordable homes annually.

7.9   This scale of provision would make a material impact on Oxford's acute affordability challenges, where average house prices are more than 11 times local salaries. It would also directly support the 3,500 plus households currently on the City Council's waiting list, who face average waits of over five years.[104] Over just a few years, the delivery of thousands of council homes would help reduce poverty and transform lives.

Expanding access to community facilities

7.10   At present, only city residents can access the Council's community offer, including:

- **Free swimming** for under-17s at Barton, Ferry, Leys and Hinksey pools;
- **Free youth clubs and activities** (e.g., the Oxford Youth Ambition programme);
- **Discounted leisure membership** for residents on qualifying benefits (including carers and people on disability benefits).

7.11   Under GO, all Greater Oxford residents, including those in Berinsfield, Botley, Kennington, Kidlington and Wheatley, would be eligible for the offer.

7.12   The ambition is also to extend provision to Abbey Sports Centre (Berinsfield), Kidlington & Gosford Leisure Centre, and Park Sports Centre (Wheatley).[105]

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[104] Alan Boswell Group, 2025. Oxford residents waiting over five years for social housing

[105] Oxford City Council, 2025. Greater Oxford: One council. Local decisions. A better place to live.

8. Appendix A

Assumptions underlying the homes-to-jobs ratio

8.1   The tables below set out the assumptions and sources for each step in determining the jobs-to-homes ratio. For steps 1–4, the inputs are averaged across the unitary authorities included in each proposal (for the 2UA and 1UA options). For the 3UA option, the inputs are averaged across the LSOAs within the new unitary authority geographies.

Table 14 – Assumptions underlying each step of the jobs to homes ratio

	3UA			2UA		1UA
	GO	Northern Oxfordshire	Ridgeway	Oxford and Shires	Ridgeway	Oxfordshire
1. Change in economically active residents						
Commuting ratio (for scenario 1 only)[106]	1.3	0.9	1.0	1.1	1.0	1.0
Double jobbing (% of those who have two-jobs)[107]	4.5%	4.5%	4.5%	4.5%	4.5%	4.5%
Unemployment rate[108]	3.7%	3.2%	2.9%	3.5%	3.0%	3.3%
2. Population						
Population / economically active resident [109]	1.9	1.8	1.9	1.8	1.9	1.9
3. Homes						
Population / average household size[110]	2.7	2.4	2.4	2.6	2.4	2.5
4. Home vacancy rate[111]	5.3%	5.0%	4.1%	5.1%	4.1%	4.8%
5. Homes-to-jobs ratio	S1: 0.5 S2: 0.7	S1: 0.8 S2: 0.7	S1: 0.8 S2: 0.8	S1: 0.7 S2: 0.7	S1: 0.8 S2: 0.7	S1: 0.7 S2: 0.7

[106] ONS, 2025. 2011 Census WU03UK - Location of usual residence and place of work by method of travel to work. The commuting ratio has been apportioned based on the origins of employees who would fall within the new GO boundary; 70% of the Oxford City ratio, 10% Cherwell, 8% South Oxfordshire, 9% Vale of White Horse, 4% West Oxfordshire

[107] *4.5% across Oxfordshire based on 2019 OGNA*

[108] ONS, 2025. 2021 Census TS066 - Economic activity status; ONS, 2025. 2021 Census Population estimates - small area (2021 based) by single year of age - England and Wales

[109] ONS, 2025. 2021 Census TS066 - Economic activity status; ONS, 2025. 2021 Census Population estimates - small area (2021 based) by single year of age - England and Wales

[110] ONS, 2025. 2021 Census TS041 - Number of Households; 2021 Census Population estimates - small area (2021 based) by single year of age - England and Wales

[111] ONS, 2025. Average of 2011 and 2021 Census Figure 1: Percentage of unoccupied dwellings for local authorities in England and Wales, 2021. [average taken as some 2021 data skewed by covid]

9. Appendix B

Technical appendix – additionality and agglomeration methodology

9.1   This appendix explains, step by step, how we estimate the economic impact of the three administrative options for Oxfordshire. We project jobs to 2050, convert jobs into direct GVA (in constant prices), and then add a small productivity uplift for agglomeration (i.e., the benefit of having jobs closer together around Oxford).

9.2   The model works by combining:

- Job growth by area (compounded to 2050);
- GVA per job, historical and current (held in 2023 prices) per area;
- Where jobs land (a simple core vs non-core weighting and a gentle distance-decay);
- A relative density index (how concentrated employment is around Oxford vs a fixed baseline); and
- A standard elasticity to convert small density differences into small productivity uplifts.
- We calculate the incremental agglomeration uplift year by year and (separately) a discounted total.

Step 1: Employment growth projections

9.3   The analysis begins with 2023 employment figures for each of the options under consideration.[112] Assumed compound annual growth rates (CAGRs), varying by area under each option to reflect differences in expected growth trajectories, are applied to project future employment levels through to 2050. These respective CAGRs by area within each option are as follows[113]:

- **3UA option:** Greater Oxford (1.5%), North Oxfordshire (1.3%), Ridgeway (1.2%);
- **2UA option:** Oxford and the Shires (1.1%), Ridgeway (1.1%); and
- **1UA option:** (1.0%).

Table 15 – Overall employment growth across options

Option	Current employment (2023 including West Berkshire)	Employment growth (2023-2050)
3UA	505,100	218,000
2UA	505,100	180,000
1UA + West Berkshire[114]	505,100	153,000

9.4   By 2050, the three options (3UA, 2UA, and 1 UA) show different absolute levels of employment, reflecting their growth assumptions. All options start from the same quantum of overall employment in 2023.

This step provides the baseline job projections that underpin the direct gross value added (GVA) uplift and contribute to later agglomeration calculations.

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[112] Note: For new areas under each of the options that do not comply with existing local authority boundaries, we have deployed a best fit approach using exisitng lower-super-output-area boundaries.

[113] Note: These CAGR percentages are justified in the main report.

[114] Note: West Berkshire is added to the 1UA option with historic rates of employment growth continuing to 2050 to allow for direct comparison with the 3UA and 2UA options which both include West Berkshire.

Step 2: Direct GVA

9.5   Projected jobs are converted into direct GVA based on the following methodology:

- **2023 baseline:** For each geography within each proposal, GVA per head is fixed at the 2023 level as the starting point for the projections.
- **2024-2050 projection:**
  - **1UA proposal:**
    - GVA per head is assumed to grow each year at the historic national rate of real GVA per head growth over the period 2000–2023. This provides a benchmark against which the higher-growth scenarios can be assessed.
  - **2UA and 3UA proposals:**
    - For existing jobs, GVA per head also grows at the historic national rate. This reflects a deliberately conservative assumption that the productivity of current employment is unlikely to be significantly enhanced by structural change.
    - For new jobs, GVA per head grows at an elevated rate relative to the 1UA proposal in each geography. This uplift captures the higher productivity anticipated under these proposal and is calibrated to align with the ratios used to justify the employment growth assumptions.

9.6   This approach ensures that the projected relationship between employment growth and GVA growth remains consistent with historic patterns of economic performance. It also reflects the nature of job growth anticipated under the proposals, for example the expansion of lab space and related high-value sectors, as outlined in the employment growth section above

Figure 5 – Direct GVA (£ billions) uplift generated by employment growth across options
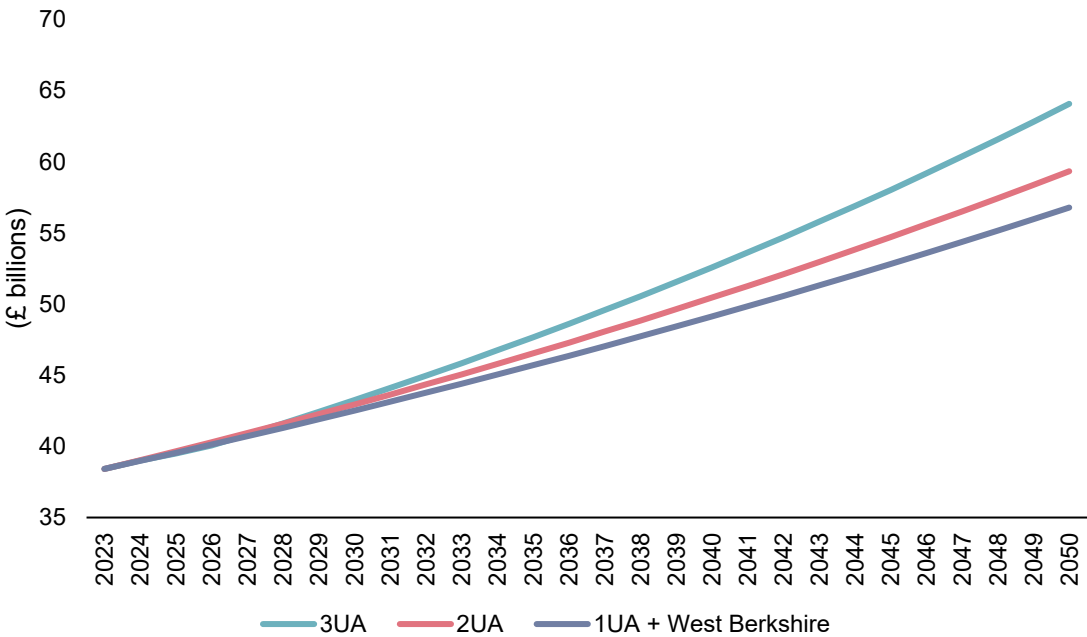
9.7   Alongside the GVA estimates, the analysis also considers the potential impact on tax revenues accruing to government. Evidence from national statistics comparing GVA and public sector receipts between 1997 and 2017 suggests that between 30% and 40% of GVA is collected as tax revenues by HM Treasury.[115] This occurs through a combination of business rates, VAT, corporate tax, and income tax. To capture this, the direct GVA uplift is multiplied by factors of 30% and 40%, providing a range for the possible fiscal benefit associated with the additional employment in each option.

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[115] ONS, 2025. Gross value added; ONS, 2025. Public sector finances

Step 3: Core vs non-core assumptions

9.8   Agglomeration benefits depend on job location as well as job numbers. Because exact distributions of future employment are unknown, a simple 'core vs non-core' structure is used:

- **Core jobs** are located in Greater Oxford and assumed to benefit fully from spillover effects; and
- **Non-core jobs** are located further afield and assumed to benefit only partially.

9.9   This UA-level approach is deliberately simple. We recognise that several non-core locations (e.g. Harwell, Milton, Begbroke, Culham) are tightly linked to Oxford's economy. We therefore do not heavily discount non-core jobs; instead we apply a moderate reduction so that jobs outside the city still contribute meaningfully to agglomeration.

9.10   Justification for this is as follows:

- **Productivity rises with access to economic mass.** Standard transport/economic appraisal links productivity to 'effective density' (employment mass weighted by generalised travel costs), which captures proximity to large, active labour and supplier markets. This is the basis of DfT's TAG guidance on wider economic impacts.[116]
- **Spillovers are highly local.** Evidence shows agglomeration effects attenuate quickly with distance/travel time; nearby activity has the strongest impact (from within-building scales up to neighbourhoods).[117]
- **Stronger for knowledge-intensive/services.** Meta-analysis finds positive, material elasticities of productivity to density, with larger effects in services and knowledge sectors—consistent with Oxford's economic mix.[118]

9.11   Greater Oxford accounts for 34% of R&D jobs in the study area, underscoring that the highest economic density and thus the strongest agglomeration potential sits in and around the city.

9.12   The core fraction is the proportion of each area's jobs that are treated as within the Oxford 'core', meaning they behave as though they are directly connected to the Oxford core economy. This is essentially a weighting device that bridges the gap between actual geography (which is coarse at the UA level) and the finer geography at which spillovers operate. The core fractions utilised are as follows:

Area	Core fraction	Justification
3UA		
Greater Oxford	1.00 (fully core)	Oxford has the largest concentration of jobs in the county, especially in universities, hospitals, and knowledge-based services. These jobs are at the heart of Oxford's economy, so we treat them as fully part of the core.
North Oxfordshire	0.00 (fully non-core)	This area is more connected to Banbury and the M40 corridor than to Oxford. It sits outside the main Oxford labour market, so we give it no core weighting.
Ridgeway	0.15	The Science Vale area (Harwell, Milton Park, Culham) has nationally significant R&D activity that is strongly linked to Oxford. We give it a small positive fraction to capture these links, without overstating them.
2UA		
Oxford and the Shires	0.55	When Oxford is grouped with nearby areas, commuting patterns suggest roughly half of jobs are strongly tied into Oxford's economy and half are not. A 0.55 weighting captures this 'mixed' picture fairly.
Ridgeway	0.15	As above.

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[116] Department for Transport, 2018. TAG UNIT A2.1 Wider Economic Impacts Appraisal

[117] Rosenthal, 2020. How Close Is Close? The Spatial Reach of Agglomeration Economies

[118] Centre for Cities, 2023. The impact of agglomeration on the economy

Area	Core fraction	Justification
1 UA		
Oxfordshire-wide average	0.35	Taking the county as a whole, we apply a weighting that is above Oxford City's share (to reflect Science Vale's importance), but still below 0.50, since northern Oxfordshire remains outside the main Oxford labour market.

9.13   These fractions are applied to the projected job totals in each geography to calculate an overall weighted core share. This represents the effective proportion of employment assumed to be close enough to Oxford to access the full strength of spillovers.

9.14   The use of core fractions ensures the analysis remains sensitive to how employment is spatially distributed, even when only broad area-level job forecasts are available. By combining these fractions with distance decay weights, the framework captures the reality that not all jobs contribute equally to agglomeration effects.

Step 4: Time-based decay weights

9.15   A critical element of the agglomeration framework is recognising that the productivity benefits of clustering fall away with distance from the economic core. The evidence is clear that spillovers fade with travel time. While jobs in Oxford itself (the core) experience the full extent of spillovers, jobs located further away capture only a proportion of this effect. The analysis incorporates this distance decay by applying travel time–based decay weights.

9.16   The rule applied is that jobs located within 10-minutes of Oxford are assumed to receive the full agglomeration benefit, so their weight is set at 1. Beyond this, the benefit declines smoothly following an exponential curve. For each minute of travel time beyond the 10-minute threshold, the weight is reduced by around 5% on a compounding basis.[119] This means that the further a job is from the Oxford core, the less it contributes to the overall agglomeration effect, but the decline is gradual rather than abrupt.

Figure 6 – Visual example of decay weight being applied to travel time

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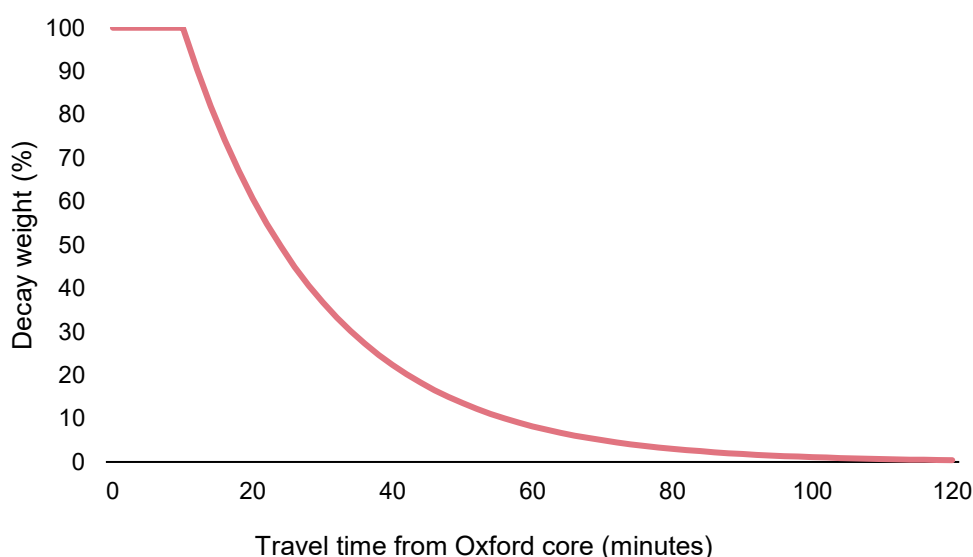
[119] KPMG, 2016. Effective Density: Measures of effective density for estimating agglomeration elasticities in Australian cities; Douglas, 2016. Wider Economic Benefits – When and if they should be used in evaluation of transport projects

9.17   The travel times used for each geography option were:

Area	Travel time	Justification
3UA		
Greater Oxford	15 minutes	Reflects the short journeys typical within a city.[120] GIS travel time analysis, backed up by DfT statistics, shows people in urban areas usually get to services much faster than in rural areas.[121] This also reflects the benefits of having many jobs and services close together in city settings.
North Oxfordshire	40 minutes	Represents more rural parts of the county, where typical travel times are longer.[122] This figure is above the national average, reflecting that people here are further from key centres and services.
Ridgeway	40 minutes	Similar to North Oxfordshire, this area is rural and further from Oxford. Longer travel times are in line with patterns for rural communities and show weaker direct access to the city.[123]
2UA		
Oxford and the Shires	27 minutes	This is a middle-ground figure. It sits between the short city average and the national average (29 minutes).[124] GIS analysis shows this matches areas that are partly urban and partly rural.[125]
Ridgeway	40 minutes	As above.
1 UA		
Oxfordshire-wide average	32 minutes	This reflects the county as a whole. It is just above the national commuting average (29 minutes), which makes sense given Oxfordshire combines a compact city with large rural areas.[126]

9.18   Applying the exponential decay function produced the following decay weights:

- **3UA option:** Greater Oxford (0.78), North Oxfordshire (0.22), Ridgeway (0.22);
- **2UA option:** Oxford and the Shires (0.43), Ridgeway (0.22); and
- **1UA option:** (0.33).

These weights adjust the contribution of each area's jobs to the agglomeration effect. For example, on average, a new job in Greater Oxford counts as almost four times as influential as a job in Ridgeway, because it is closer to the Oxford core.

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[120] Rosenthal, 2020. How Close Is Close? The Spatial Reach of Agglomeration Economies

[121] DfT, 2021. Journey time statistics, England: 2019; TravelTime API

[122] DfT, 2021. Journey time statistics, England: 2019

[123] DfT, 2021. Journey time statistics, England: 2019

[124] DfT, 2024. Transport Statistics Great Britain: 2023 Domestic Travel

[125] TravelTime API

[126] DfT, 2024. Transport Statistics Great Britain: 2023 Domestic Travel

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Step 5: Relative density

9.19   Once decay weights and core fractions have been applied to each area, the next stage of the analysis is to calculate relative density. This provides a single index that captures how concentrated jobs are around Oxford after adjusting for both geography and distance. This reflects the idea that:

- Jobs in the Oxford core contribute fully to agglomeration benefits; and
- Jobs further away still contribute, but less strongly, depending on their decay weight.

9.20   The calculation process involves three steps

- **Step 1 – Core weighted jobs:** For each option, the number of jobs is multiplied by the product of its core fraction and decay weight (δ) (see **paragraph 9.13**). This generates the effective number of "core-equivalent" jobs in that area.

  - **Example:** Ridgeway has a core fraction of 0.15 and a decay weight of 0.22. Each job in Ridgeway therefore contributes 0.15 × 0.22 = 0.033 'core-equivalent jobs.'

- **Step 2 – Overall core share:** The total number of core-equivalent jobs across all UAs is divided by the total jobs in the option. This produces the jobs-weighted core share (s_core).

  - **Example:** if an option has 700,000 jobs in total and 280,000 of these are core-equivalent, then s_core = 0.40.

- **Step 3 – Relative density index:** The final relative density is then a blend of the decay weight baseline and the core share. Conceptually, relative density increases as a larger share of jobs are located in or near Oxford. This is achieved through the formula:

$$\text{Relative density} = \delta + (1-\delta) \times s\_core$$

  - **Example:** If δ = 0.70 and s_core = 0.40, then relative density = 0.70 + 0.30 × 0.40 = 0.82.

The relative density step is crucial because it translates differences in job geography into a productivity effect. Without it, the model would simply scale GVA with job growth, ignoring where those jobs are located.

Step 6: Benchmarking against a reference case

9.21   Relative density values only become meaningful when compared to a baseline. To provide this benchmark, the 1UA option in the base year (2023) was used as the reference case. This reflects the existing configuration of Oxfordshire before any boundary changes are applied, ensuring the analysis is anchored in the 'real world' geography at the start of the period. Using 2023 as the base year avoids artificially inflating or deflating the agglomeration effect, since all options share the same employment quantum in that year.

9.22   The choice of the 1UA 2023 reference case also captures Oxfordshire's distinctive spatial pattern: employment is relatively concentrated around Oxford compared with many other county areas, but remains more dispersed than in major metropolitan cores. This makes it a balanced benchmark, dense enough to reflect Oxfordshire's current economic strengths, yet not so extreme as to overstate the gains from reconfiguration. By comparing subsequent options against this baseline, the model isolates the incremental effect of boundary choices rather than general trends in employment growth or density.

9.23   Each option's relative density in later years is expressed as a ratio against this baseline. If the ratio is above 1, the option is denser than the baseline and therefore expected to deliver stronger spillover effects. If it is below 1, the option is more dispersed and weaker in terms of agglomeration.

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- **Example:** In 2050, the 3UA option generates a relative density of around 0.83, compared to the reference value of 0.57 in the 2023 baseline. The RD ratio is therefore 1.46, which when raised to the elasticity (0.08) gives a small but meaningful productivity uplift. Applied to the GVA without agglomeration, this produces the incremental GVA attributed to agglomeration effects in the 3UA scenario.

Benchmarking ensures that productivity effects are not applied in absolute terms, but only in relation to a realistic baseline. Without this step, the analysis could overstate or understate spillovers by treating density as meaningful in isolation

Step 7: Translating relative density into productivity uplifts

9.24   The relative density ratios calculated in Step 6 show how concentrated employment is compared with the reference case. This step now translates these small shifts in effective density into measurable changes in productivity, and ultimately into additional GVA.

9.25   The link between density and productivity is captured by an elasticity parameter. This measures the percentage change in productivity associated with a 1% change in effective density. Based on the empirical literature, an elasticity of 0.08 was adopted.[127] This reflects evidence for knowledge-intensive and service-oriented economies, which characterise much of Oxfordshire's employment base.

From relative density to agglomeration multiplier

9.26   This process is as follows:

- **Relative density ratio:** For each option and year, the option's relative density is divided by the baseline RD_ref (Step 6).
- **Apply elasticity:** This ratio is then raised to the power of the elasticity (0.08).

This step is critical because it operationalises the theoretical link between density and productivity. The elasticity ensures that even relatively small shifts in effective density are converted into realistic but meaningful uplifts in output

Step 8: Incremental agglomeration effects

9.27   The agglomeration multipliers derived in Step 7 are applied year by year to GVA without agglomeration to generate total GVA with agglomeration.

9.28   To avoid overstating the benefits in the early years, the analysis treats these effects on an incremental basis. This means the agglomeration benefit in any given year is measured as the uplift compared with the reference baseline year (2023), rather than as a cumulative effect from the start.

- In the first year (2023), the incremental agglomeration effect is set at zero, because the system has not yet diverged from the baseline.
- From 2024 onwards, the incremental effect rises gradually as jobs grow and as more employment is concentrated closer to Oxford.
- By 2050, the incremental effect reflects the full additional productivity benefit generated by the new boundary configuration.

9.29   In addition to total uplift, the analysis also expresses the incremental agglomeration effect on a per-worker basis. This metric divides the total agglomeration benefit by the number of jobs in that year, giving an indication of the average productivity gain per worker attributable to agglomeration. It is a useful way of

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[127] Centre for Cities, 2023. The impact of agglomeration on the economy

interpreting the scale of the spillover effect relative to the size of the labour force. This shows not just how much extra GVA is produced overall, but how much of that uplift is embedded in the productivity of each job.

Figure 7 – Estimated productivity increase per job in each scenario
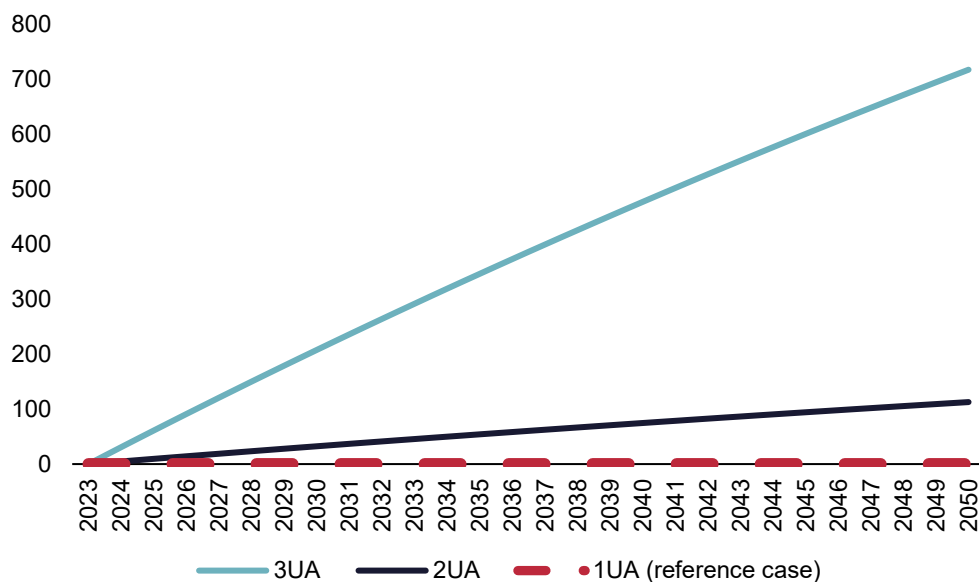
- **Sense check**: Literature suggests that there will be an uplift in productivity of 8% for every doubling in city size.[128] In the 3UA option, productivity by 2050 increases by approximately £700 per worker, relative to 2023 GVA per worker. This is an increase of 0.9%. The population across the entire area increases by 43% by 2050, less than half way to a doubling of city size. In the 3UA option, if all productivity benefits are applied to Greater Oxford (which will not happen in reality), the productivity uplift would be 2.1%. The population of Greater Oxford is expected to grow by 49% which is still less than halfway to a doubling of city size. It must also be recognised that the 3UA option represents a county-level area, whereas the benchmark evidence from the literature relates to city populations. Because population growth in both the wider area and Greater Oxford falls short of a doubling, and the estimated productivity gains are already below the 8% benchmark, this sense check gives confidence that our results are in the right range suggested by the literature while still remaining conservative.

Step 9: Discounting to Net Present Value

9.30   While the model generates annual agglomeration effects in constant prices, these values cannot be added directly to give a single measure of long-term benefit. Future gains are worth less than immediate ones, so the analysis applies a discounting process to bring all future benefits back to present-day terms.

9.31   A standard discount rate of 3.5% per annum was used, consistent with HM Treasury's Green Book guidance for economic appraisal.[129]

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[128] Centre for Cities, 2023. The impact of agglomeration on the economy

[129] HM Treasury, 2022. Green Book supplementary guidance: discounting

Contact Us

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volterra.co.uk

npallai@volterra.co.uk

07956 572 854

Chester House
1-3 Brixton Road
London
SW9 6DE

OXFORDSHIRE WASTE & ENVIRONMENTAL SERVICES TRANSFORMATION PROGRAMME (WESP)

Oxfordshire Unitary Councils Models

1.   Background

1.1   Waste, recycling, and environmental services are highly visible municipal services. In Oxfordshire local authorities deliver a weekly waste collection service to 318,960[1] domestic properties across more than 1,000 square miles.

1.2   They will form a significant part of local government reorganisation (LGR) in the county, providing an opportunity to harmonise both the strategic and two-tier operational delivery. It presents an opportunity to transform services and deliver very significant environmental, financial, and operational benefits to residents and businesses.

1.3   The current model consists of five 'high' performing Collection Authorities (District Councils) and a Disposal Authority (County Council). For the last decade Oxfordshire has been the highest recycling county in England with residents recycling 57.6% of their household waste against the national rate of 44.6%.

1.4   Although Oxfordshire's recycling rate is good, this performance has flatlined over the last few years and the cost of disposing of residual waste is the highest in the country[2]. In addition, the counties waste infrastructure, consisting of 31 sites, most of which are end of life, requires considerable investment to meet the needs of residents and businesses in the future.

1.5   Local Authorities in Oxfordshire recognise the value of voluntary sector providers who play a critical role in delivering recycling and reuse services. There is an appetite to accelerate, invest, and formalise this relationship as well as work more effectively with the 318 town and parish councils.

1.6   LGR provides an opportunity for Oxfordshire to reimage waste and environmental services and there is a real appetite to deliver fundamental change. Key data on waste, recycling and environmental services in Oxfordshire is   outlined in Annex A.

1.7   In conclusion, Local Authorities in Oxfordshire have strong foundations, a case for change, and the appetite to transform waste and environmental services as part of LGR.

2.   Transformation

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2.1 There is already an appetite in Oxfordshire to collaborate to deliver waste and environmental services. An options appraisal was completed in 2024 and detailed business case has been produced in 2025. This outlines a new operating model for waste collection, disposal, and environmental services. It identifies significant opportunities to collaborate in the future, including:

- The creation of a shared company hybrid model to provide an agile approach to transformation and delivery of the Governments waste and climate targets

- Delivery of circa £99m in financial efficiencies over 10 years including £10.6m in procurement savings

- A vision for infrastructure to meet the needs of residents and businesses

- Supporting the climate emergency, biodiversity, and the circular economy agenda which are priorities in Oxfordshire

2.2 The Councils have set up a Waste and Environmental Services Transformation Programme (WESP) and are completing a shared company delivery options appraisal to determine the future delivery model which will be responsible for delivering the business case.

3. National Policy Changes

3.1 The Environment Act (2021) and its action plan, The National Waste and Resources Strategy, has set in motion a series of significant policy changes that will reshape how local authorities manage waste and recycling.

3.2 Oxfordshire is already well placed to deliver Simply Recycling as each Collection Authority already provides a food waste and recycling service. The WESP business case has identified opportunities to increase recycling rates further and to reduce the level of residual waste. LGR provides local authorities with the opportunity to do this at scale and deliver greater financial and non-financial benefits.

3.3 There are further challenges relating to other policy implications that need considering. For example, the Emission Trading Scheme on energy from waste facilities and the governments net zero target. These ambitious targets can be better prioritised, planned, resourced, and delivered with the removal of two-tier complexities and the Oxfordshire WESP Business Case supports these government priorities.

4. Timeline and finances

4.1 Local Authorities in Oxfordshire have been collaborating on waste and environmental services for the last year. This has resulted in the production of a business case for change. A roadmap outlining this journey and the next steps is outlined in Annex B.

4.2   The Oxfordshire WESP business case provides a comprehensive picture of the current as-is service and the associated costs. The scale of waste spending in Oxfordshire as a proportion of total local authority spending has remained stable at about 7% for a number of years – £98.1m annually.

4.3   The principal mechanisms for improving waste management and reducing its costs are:
- To reduce the amount of waste collected and increase recycling performance; and
- To collect and dispose of waste more efficiently; and
- Joined up procurement

4.4   The new waste and environmental services operating model along with the detailed proposals in the WESP business case would deliver significant economies of scale and the integration of services across the county; from the standardisation and optimisation of working methods; and from collective purchasing power.

4.5   The WESP business case outlines that £20.1m of investment over the next 10 years will deliver efficiencies of £99m with average annual savings of £9.9m net and a payback period of three years. The table below outlines the costs and financial benefits of the three unitary council options being proposed in Oxfordshire. A detailed breakdown with yearly splits of costs and benefits from 2025/26 to 2032/33 is included in Annex C below.

LGR: WASTE AND ENVIRONMENTAL SERVICES SAVINGS ACROSS 8 YEAR PERIOD
(3 YEARS PRE & 5 YEARS POST VESTING)

£000s	Authority	Gross Benefit	Revenue Cost	Capital Cost	Net Benefit
Option 1	Oxford County Unitary	87,692	- 16,190	- 1,050	70,451
SINGLE COUNTY UNITARY		*87,692*	*- 16,190*	*- 1,050*	**70,451**
Option 2	North County Unitary	70,512	- 13,031	- 934	56,548
	Ridgeway Council	6,450	- 686	- 58	5,706
TWO COUNTY UNITARIES		*76,962*	*- 13,716*	*- 992*	**62,254**
Option 3	North County Unitary	55,795	- 10,438	- 929	44,428
	Ridgeway Council	4,853	- 601	- 50	4,202
	Greater Oxford	17,809	- 2,892	- 13	14,905
THREE COUNTY UNITARIES		*78,458*	*- 13,931*	*- 992*	**63,535**

4.6   Our proposals go further, by seeking to transform all aspects of waste and environmental services in the county: how the councils encourage behaviour change on the part of residents and businesses; how infrastructure is deployed to improve efficiency and service take-up; how biodiversity on public land can be fostered; and by improving the commercial performance of paid-for services.

5.   Unitary Councils Model

5.1   Oxfordshire is proposing three unitary council options to the government. The WESP business case is LGR natural and supports each of these in the following ways.

Option 1 - Single Unitary Authority

- Integrated waste and environmental services across existing three Collection Authorities (West / City / Cherwell) and County geography
- A separate contracted collection operation across two Collection Authorities (South / Vale) until the contract break clause in 2030
- Thereafter opportunity to integrate across Oxfordshire
- The WESP business cases recommends a hybrid operating model including in-source LATCo model to provide the flexibility to transform services.

Option 2 – Two Unitary Option

- Ridgeway Council proposal (South / Vale / West Berks) planning to extend West Berks existing waste service arrangements across the new geography - with integrated operations once South / Vale local authorities contract break clause kicks in, in 2030.
- Providing waste disposal for S&V area from the outset - dependent on unwinding/termination of existing County disposal contracts
- Oxford & Shires proposal (Cherwell / Oxford / West) fully integrated waste operation - as envisaged in WESP business case - including existing County disposal arrangements
- The WESP business cases recommends hybrid operating model including in-source LATCo model to provide the flexibility to transform services.

Option 3 - Three Unitary Option

- Ridgeway as above
- Greater Oxford and Northern Oxfordshire. Oxford & Shires proposal (Cherwell / Oxford / West) fully integrated waste operation - as envisaged in WESP business case - including existing County disposal arrangements
- The WESP business cases recommends a hybrid operating model including in-source LATCo model to provide the flexibility to transform services.

Annex A

- Gross spend on Waste and Environmental services in 2023/24 totalled £98.1m with a net spend of £78.2m

- In 2023/24 the 318,960 households in Oxfordshire generated circa 292,000 tonnes of waste and achieved a recycling rate of 57.6%

- The total waste and environmental services contract value held on contract registers for all Oxfordshire authorities is £886m, including long term strategic disposal contracts

- £20m generated annually from commercial products such as business and green waste

- A fleet of 600 vehicles with a capital cost of £72m

- 31 waste and environmental sites, most of which are end of life

Annex B

| Options Appraisal Apr-Sept 2024 | → | Mobilisation of WESP Jan-Apr 2025 | → | Business Case Apr-Jul 2025 | → | Socialisation of the Business Case with each Authority Aug-Oct 2025 | → | Submittion of LGR Proposals Nov 2025 | → | Delivery Options Appraisal Sept-Dec 2025 | → | Sign off of Business Case and Delivery Options Appraisal by WESP Board Dec 2025 | → | Consideration of Business Case and Delivery Options Appraisal by local authorities Jan-Mar 2026 | → | Government Announcement about LGR July 2026 |

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Annex C

Detailed financial projection of costs and benefits for each Oxfordshire unitary option

		PRE-LGR			POST-LGR					
		Year 1 £000s 2025/26	Year 2 £000s 2026/27	Year 3 £000s 2027/28	Year 4 £000s 2028/29	Year 5 £000s 2029/30	Year 6 £000s 2030/31	Year 7 £000s 2031/32	Year 8 £000s 2032/33	TOTAL £000s 8 YRS
OPTION 1 - COUNTY UNITARY	Gross Benefit	-	3,972	9,409	14,318	14,416	14,648	15,408	15,521	87,692
	Revenue Cost	1,120	4,030	2,890	2,490	1,390	1,390	1,490	1,390	- 16,190
	Capital Cost	0	550	0	250	0	0	0	250	- 1,050
	Net Benefit	1,120	608	6,519	11,578	13,026	13,258	13,918	13,880	**70,451**

		PRE-LGR			POST-LGR					
		Year 1 £000s 2025/26	Year 2 £000s 2026/27	Year 3 £000s 2027/28	Year 4 £000s 2028/29	Year 5 £000s 2029/30	Year 6 £000s 2030/31	Year 7 £000s 2031/32	Year 8 £000s 2032/33	TOTAL £000s 8 YRS
OPTION 2 - OXFORD	Gross Benefit	-	3,610	8,479	11,366	11,464	11,452	12,015	12,127	70,512
	Revenue Cost	987	3,679	2,599	1,931	936	936	1,026	936	- 13,031
	Capital Cost	-	550	-	192	0	0	0	192	- 934

	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Year 4	Year 5	Year 6	Year 7	Year 8	TOTAL
Net Benefit	987	619	5,880	9,243	10,528	10,516	10,989	10,999	**56,548**

OPTION 2 - RIDGEWAY

	Year 1 £000s 2025/26	Year 2 £000s 2026/27	Year 3 £000s 2027/28	Year 4 £000s 2028/29	Year 5 £000s 2029/30	Year 6 £000s 2030/31	Year 7 £000s 2031/32	Year 8 £000s 2032/33	TOTAL £000s 8 YRS
Gross Benefit	-	142	142	278	990	1,501	1,698	1,698	6,450
Revenue Cost	38	42	62	83	113	113	123	113	- 686
Capital Cost	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	58	- 58
Net Benefit	38	100	80	196	877	1,389	1,576	1,527	**5,706**

OPTION 3 - NORTH

	PRE-LGR			*POST-LGR*					
	Year 1 £000s 2025/26	Year 2 £000s 2026/27	Year 3 £000s 2027/28	Year 4 £000s 2028/29	Year 5 £000s 2029/30	Year 6 £000s 2030/31	Year 7 £000s 2031/32	Year 8 £000s 2032/33	TOTAL £000s 8 YRS
Gross Benefit	-	3,329	7,566	8,645	8,743	8,764	9,317	9,430	55,795
Revenue Cost	837	3,280	2,224	1,470	644	644	696	644	- 10,438
Capital Cost	0	550	0	189	0	0	0	189	- 929
Net Benefit	837	501	5,343	6,985	8,099	8,120	8,621	8,597	**44,428**

	Year 1 £000s	Year 2 £000s	Year 3 £000s	Year 4 £000s	Year 5 £000s	Year 6 £000s	Year 7 £000s	Year 8 £000s	TOTAL £000s

	2025/26	2026/27	2027/28	2028/29	2029/30	2030/31	2031/32	2032/33	8 YRS
OPTION 3 - RIDGEWAY									
Gross Benefit	-	123	123	123	739	1,135	1,305	1,305	4,853
Revenue Cost	33	36	54	73	99	99	108	99	-601
Capital Cost	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	50	-50
Net Benefit	33	86	69	50	640	1,036	1,198	1,156	**4,202**

	Year 1 £000s 2025/26	Year 2 £000s 2026/27	Year 3 £000s 2027/28	Year 4 £000s 2028/29	Year 5 £000s 2029/30	Year 6 £000s 2030/31	Year 7 £000s 2031/32	Year 8 £000s 2032/33	TOTAL £000s 8 YRS
OPTION 3 - GREATER OXFORD									
Gross Benefit	-	300	931	3,061	3,157	3,430	3,465	3,465	17,809
Revenue Cost	156	405	384	514	349	349	387	349	-2,892
Capital Cost	0	0	0	3	0	0	0	10	-13
Net Benefit	156	105	548	2,545	2,808	3,081	3,078	3,106	**14,905**

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UNMODIFIED PROPOSAL FOR THREE OXFORDSHIRE UNITARY COUNCILS

Dear Secretary of State,

On behalf of Oxford City Council, we are pleased to submit our submission pack in response to the call for Local Authorities to make suggestions for new Unitary Government solutions in Oxfordshire.

Our work represents substantial work with partners, business and communities across Oxfordshire and West Berkshire. We are confident that our proposals represent the best solution for Oxfordshire and West Berkshire, and that they help to meet the Government's priorities.

Working with your officials and the published guidance, we have developed the following:

1. An "unmodified" submission – type-C proposal as set out in the 2007 Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act. This includes a request for modification, in order to meet our aspirations and the Government's objectives, and includes West Berkshire alongside the district and city authorities currently within the Oxfordshire County Council area.

2. A "modified" submission – which represents our conclusion as to the best way to deliver LGR in Oxfordshire. Subject to your agreement to modification, it is this submission we wish to take forward and through consultation. This is a Type C proposal including West Berkshire alongside the district and city authorities currently within the Oxfordshire County Council area.

We look forward to hearing from you and working with the Government on the next phase of this work.

On behalf of:

Councillor Susan Brown

Oxford City Council

Part 1 – Unmodified Submission & Request for Modification

Submission (Unmodified): Three Unitary Councils in Oxfordshire and West Berkshire

Introduction

In response to the invitation made by the Minister of State for Local Government and English Devolution on the 5 February 2025, Oxford City Council submits the following proposals under the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007.

We believe the optimal solution for Local Government Reorganisation in Oxfordshire is for a three-unitary approach with authorities firmly rooted in place. **Our clear preference is for the creation of three unitaries, including the creation of a Greater Oxford Council which will involve boundary changes. That requires a modification to this proposal to be made by the Secretary of State. Our attached 3UA proposal document** *Empowering People, Growing Prosperity, Building Communities* **sets out a detailed rationale for such a modification to this unmodified proposal.**

Understanding both the challenges and opportunities across Oxfordshire forms the foundation of this proposal, which shapes authorities around the right scale and economic geography to improve outcomes through community-centred, preventative public services. This model will create a new, single tier of local government built upon meaningful localism, enhancing the ability of government to respond to local needs while providing a clear link to the emerging Thames Valley Mayoral Strategic Authority (MSA).

Our proposal recognises Oxford's role as an engine for growth, a world leader for innovation. It recognises Northern Oxfordshire's strong base of advanced manufacturing and green technology alongside the strong network of market towns, tourism destinations and idyllic smaller villages to the West and the newly-announced New Town in Heyford Park. It recognises Ridgeway as the region's energy powerhouse with a wide range of cutting-edge life science, quantum and space technologies companies, with its own strong market towns. It enables each of these areas to grow its strengths. It ensures that each of the three authorities can speak with a clear voice to one area, being close to its communities and able to represent them strongly at the regional MSA level.

We believe that this three-unitary model provides a clearer basis to represent local priorities to the Valley Mayoral Strategic Authority than alternative proposals for unitary structures in Oxfordshire. It also recognises the historic status and potential of Oxford as a regional economic engine with national significance and global reach.

The inclusion of West Berkshire in the total geography gives a current-day population of approximately 0.9million, providing a base for three financially viable authorities. This creates a geographically coherent Ridgeway – West Berkshire has very similar demographics to the existing South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse district councils. They retain elements of shared identity, and prior to the 1974 local government reorganisation, much of what is currently southern Oxfordshire and all of the Vale of White Horse were part of Berkshire. Crucially, this proposal respects the

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views and work of our neighbours. We recognise the desire of our neighbours to the South to join with West Berkshire creating a new Ridgeway Council and so we have included this as a Type C adjoining area within this proposal.

Although West Berkshire has previously sought Exceptional Financial Support, its inclusion with South Oxfordshire and Vale of the White Horse in a Ridgeway Council mitigates the risk of future financial failure. In the absence of West Berkshire, it is likely that a doughnut of rural Oxfordshire alongside a Greater Oxford would be required.

Our vision for change

Our submission is built from our belief and understanding that:

- Oxfordshire is not a single homogenous area. It has a population size bigger than almost any other unitary authority in the country. Local government delivered at this scale would not be able to suitably consider the distinct strengths and challenges of communities.
- There are distinct geographies across Oxfordshire and West Berkshire, based on historical identities, networks of market towns and economies. These distinctions should form the basis of natural areas of local government and governance.
- The city of Oxford is an economic and innovation driving force for the wider region – particularly the Oxford Cambridge Growth Corridor – and unitary status focussed on the city could unlock its further potential to grow while addressing existing transport issues.
- The most important factor for effective local government is to be place-based. This enables the wider requirements, strengths and challenges of that place to be considered, and maximise both access to and enfranchisement with local services and democracy.
- The current situation for public service delivery is unsustainable. Effective public services must be delivered locally, with services considering the needs at a neighbourhood level and with a sensible and coherent geography to focus on partnership and prevention.
- Devolution across the Mayoral Strategic Authority for Thames Valley is best supported by multiple strong unitary Councils – each able to speak to a distinct area and not have to balance between rural and urban priorities. Cities should have their own authorities represented at this table to present a strong, investible proposition to a strategic authority to progress economic growth.

Proposal

We formally submit the following combined 'Type B' and 'Type C' submission (as set out in the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007) for the creation of three new unitary authorities in Oxfordshire. This unmodified proposal **maintains the local authority boundaries** that sever suburban communities from their city of Oxford however this unmodified approach does still achieve the goal of creating three new unitary authorities with clearly differentiated populations.
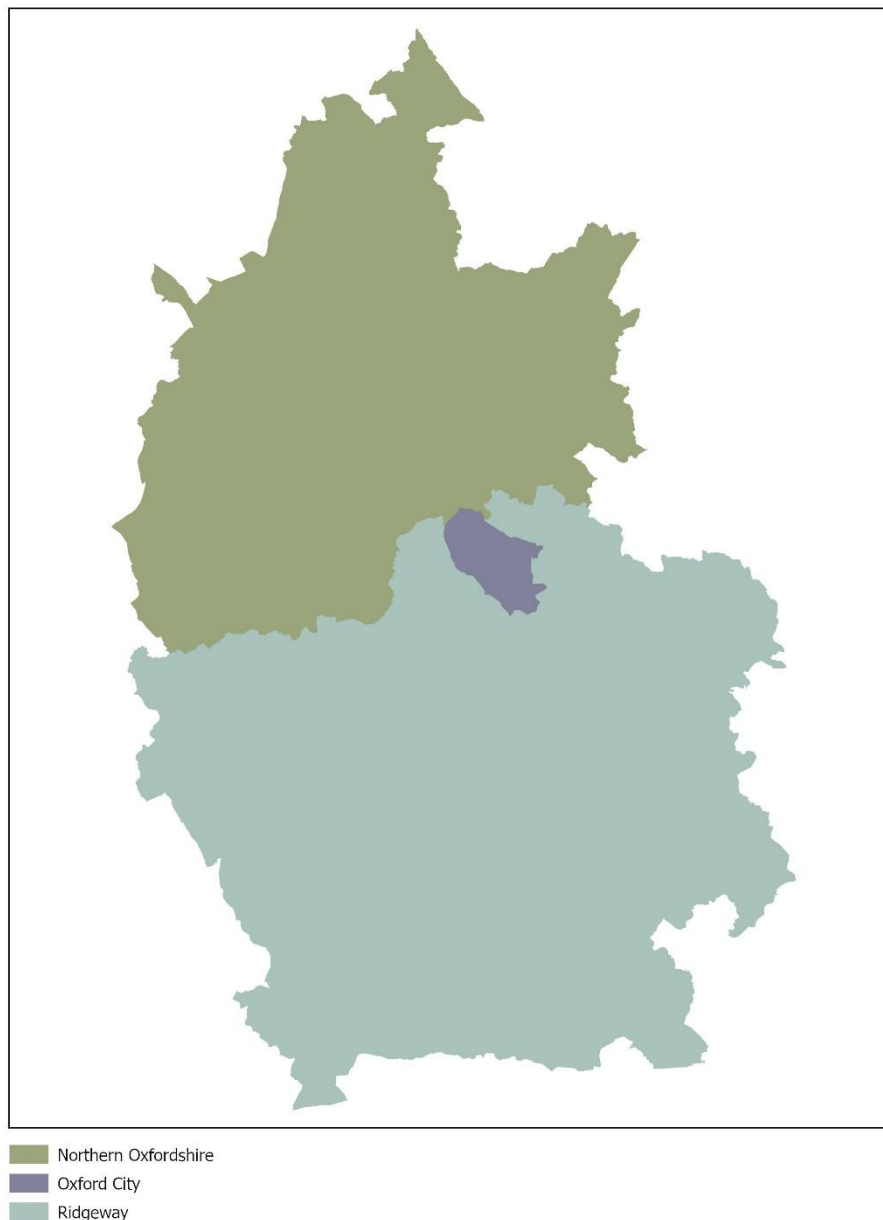
Figure 1. Unmodified Unitary Map – using district boundaries as the building blocks

1. **Oxford City** – Creating a new, city unitary for the City of Oxford recognises its status as an economic engine for the region which is currently inhibited by County-level governance structures.

   The ideal solution for this proposal seeks to harness the transformative opportunities of LGR to expand the City of Oxford boundaries to give communities who currently lie beyond the city limits but operate as de facto members a democratic voice over how their city evolves and public services are delivered. This will also give the city access to land to address housing shortages and an ability to unlock the economic growth opportunities which lie just beyond the boundary.

However, this **unmodified proposal** recognises that, even if boundary changes are not possible, creating a new unitary for the City of Oxford is essential to improve the lives of residents across Oxfordshire. The stark differences in the needs and priorities of urban Oxford and the more rural areas of Northern Oxfordshire and Ridgeway require separate and specific local governments which can drive economic growth and enable every resident to live well and contribute to their community.

2. **Northern Oxfordshire** – Creating a new unitary authority for the rural and market town communities in Northern Oxfordshire will enable the supercharging of their specific growth sectors such as advanced manufacturing, green technology and logistics. It will also create a new local government authority which can address the specific needs and priorities of these communities which include enhancing public services to support the aging population, address geographical isolation from services which drives rural deprivation and enhancing democratic representation for these communities whose interests are often eclipsed by urban areas under the current model.

3. **Ridgeway** – Creating a new unitary authority bringing together the historically linked area of the Ridgeway will enable a focus on growing its status as Oxfordshire's energy powerhouse and area of scientific innovation. It will grow the offer of the Harwell Science and Innovation campus and the wider companies working in cutting edge technologies. It will also create a new local government authority which can address the specific needs and priorities of the communities across its network of market towns and villages. It will support the aging population while addressing the pockets of deprivation in otherwise affluent towns and breaking down barriers which stop some residents from sharing in the wider prosperity of the place.

Ideally, this LGR proposal will capitalise upon this historic opportunity to transform local government to modify existing local authority boundaries to ensure that the villages surrounding Oxford, with strong commuting and leisure links to the city, are able to build on these links and strengthen access, while retaining the existing characteristics of their settlements. This would also enable targeted green belt release to meet the demand for housing and additional commercial space for Oxford.

However, this **unmodified proposal** demonstrates that even without boundary changes, the creation of a new unitary authorities for Northern Oxfordshire and Ridgeway provides significant advantages. This is essential to ensure this new level of local government is founded upon meaningful localism, enhances devolution by strengthening the voice of these communities at a regional level and creates opportunities to reshape public services to the specific shared needs of these communities through a preventative public services model.

As set out in the diagram below, our proposal, based on **unmodified local government district boundaries**, is for three new unitary councils designed around distinct social, economic and place geographies covering:

New Unitary	Comprised of (full Districts)	Population (2025)	Population[1] Projection (2040)	Council Tax Base 25/26
Oxford City	City of Oxford	171,498	173,100	47,638
Northern Oxfordshire	Cherwell, West Oxfordshire	293,188	334,469	108,596
Ridgeway	South Oxfordshire, Vale of White Horse, West Berkshire	472,156	520,767	191,303

We believe our approach represents a strong fit against all criteria set out in the invitation for LGR submissions:

Criteria 1: Establishing of a single tier of local government for the whole area concerned	✓

This proposal creates three new meaningful unitary authorities shaped around **functional geographies**: Oxford City, Northern Oxfordshire and Ridgeway. These unitary authorities will provide a single tier of local government **aligned with the specific demographics, economies and needs of these areas**. This new unitary structure will enable the **tailoring of services** and investments to local needs, alongside the ability to unleash the potential of the distinct growth sectors in each of the proposed unitaries.

This approach **ensures each authority can respond best to local needs, geographies and priorities** to provide **effective local government,** which responds to its communities. It empowers every resident to live well and contribute to the community which they feel a part of.

<u>**Limitations**</u> (without modifying boundaries)

Whilst it is essential that Oxford City, Northern Oxfordshire and Ridgeway are established as three separate unitary authorities, the benefits delivered by this approach can be maximised through a change to the boundaries of the City of Oxford to include areas which already operate *de facto* as part of the city's economic area. This will ensure the new local governments are able to tailor strategies and services to the unique needs and priorities of their populations. It would also address the historic under bounding of Oxford which has driven demand for (and therefore cost of) housing and seen innovative industries unable to locate or grow around the city.

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[1] [Population estimates for England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland: mid-2022](#)

Criteria 2: Unitary local government must be the right size to achieve efficiencies, improve capacity and withstand financial shock	✓

The functional foundations of the three unitary authorities within this proposal will enable the new local governments to unlock the **unique growth sectors in each area to supercharge economic growth**.

This will be accompanied by an **ambitious transformation of public service delivery**. The functional organisation of unitary boundaries will enable the precise targeting of services to the needs of populations to achieve efficiencies and improve capacity.

Finally, the creation of larger local government authorities will **improve financial resilience** and has the potential to increase council tax revenue through the harmonisation process.

Limitations (without modifying boundaries)

Whilst this unmodified proposal will ensure significant benefits for Oxford City, Northern Oxfordshire and Ridgeway, without expanding the boundaries of the Oxford City, land constraints **significantly restrict housing delivery**, economic strategies cannot empower certain growth sectors which lie just beyond the city limits and services cannot be accurately targeted to include users who live in areas such as Kidlington. This also results in the city's council tax base not representing those who use its services and infrastructure which therefore **fails to maximise the city's resilience to financial shocks** without establishing new boundaries around the functional areas of the city.

Criteria 3: prioritising the delivery of high quality and sustainable public services to citizens	✓

The functional organisation of the three new unitary authorities creates an opportunity to transform the delivery of public services through an **outcomes-focussed** system rooted within a **community-based, preventative approach**. It creates the opportunity to address persistent health and educational inequalities within Oxford which have proved difficult to resolve in the current county model. For Northern Oxfordshire and Ridgeway this approach will reshape service delivery to join up services in a cost-effective way through delivery alongside local partnerships – suitably tailored to their more rural setting.

The functional approach to the design of unitary authorities will provide **strategic direction** to enhance the quality and sustainability of public services. These will also benefit from new **Neighbourhood Area Committees**, designed around PCNs to ground services within a people-first approach which **targets offerings to the unique needs of each community** within the wider strategy. This will enable every resident in Oxford City, Northern Oxfordshire and Ridgeway to live well and contribute to their community.

Limitations (without modifying boundaries)

Creating dedicated unitary authorities for Oxford City, Northern Oxfordshire and Ridgeway will enable local governments to more **specifically target public services** to their citizens. However, without expanding the boundaries of Oxford, services targeted to the problems shared by residents of Kidlington and their neighbours in the City of Oxford for example will be **duplicated across each unitary authority**. Therefore, expanding the boundaries of the City of Oxford is essential to maximise efficiencies and ensure the highest quality of service delivery. It will also enable stronger planning of transport to ensure that those living in the areas around Oxford can better access its facilities and opportunities.

Criteria 4: Showing how councils can work together and support local place identity	✓

Local needs and viewpoints are the reason this proposal has been developed. Engagement has shown that residents want **councils which represent their communities** and **are not so large that they feel remote from local people.**

Only by creating distinct authorities for the contrasting geographies, demographics and identities of Oxford City, Northern Oxfordshire and Ridgeway can the **unique identities of each place** be truly represented and strengthened. Any proposal which combines the city of Oxford with large rural areas means that **rural and urban identities and priorities will be in conflict**. Engagement has clearly shown that **rural Oxfordshire feels distinct from Oxford and vice versa**. Diluting the governance of the places across a wider area would dilute the identity of each place.

These three separate unitary authorities are essential to support local place identity and ensure that local government structures respond to local needs. However, this proposal also ensures **continued opportunities for collaboration** between the unitary authorities for certain services where it makes sense to do so and take advantage of benefits of scale. This enables local government to adopt a **strategic approach** aligned with their communities' needs and priorities, giving them the **option to deliver services independently or collaborate where service needs overlap**.

Limitations (without modifying boundaries)

Only this proposal recognises the importance of creating a local authority which directly responds to the distinct local priorities of Oxford and enables the rural areas of Northern Oxfordshire and Ridgeway to focus on their own priorities and protect their local identities. However, without expanding the boundaries of Oxford, these will continue to artificially separate communities outside the Oxford local authority area that already form part of the wider city conurbation. Rather than having a say in the running of the city they are connected to, these residents will have their needs and identity combined with those distant rural locations. Expanding the boundaries would not erase the local identities, it would respect these villages as their own unique places with individual character and attractions but who have strong ties to the city, rather than the market towns further afield.

Criteria 5: Supporting devolution arrangements	✓

This 3-unitary proposal **significantly enhances devolution arrangements** and ensures the fair representation of the diverse residents of Oxfordshire at the developing proposal for the Thames Valley MSA.

Being able to represent three voices at this table ensures there is a **balance between the urban and rural** priorities of the wider area. It ensures that the city of Oxford has an equal footing in this strategic area with its other major metropolitan centres – such as Slough and Reading. It also ensures that the rural voices of Ridgeway and Northern Oxfordshire can be heard alongside those of the city of Oxford – without a single authority attempting to balance the contrasting priorities of very different areas and populations.

Limitations (without modifying boundaries)

To support devolution in Oxfordshire, it is essential that Oxford is represented at the Thames Valley MSA. However, without changing the boundaries of the new unitary to create Greater Oxford, the **MSA would lose out on a major opportunity for maximising economic growth in the region**. The increased housing delivery and economic growth which larger boundaries around Oxford would provide will help to meet the ambitions to make Oxford and wider Oxfordshire part of Europe's answer to Silicon Valley. Keeping the under bounded nature of the city would retain the limits of available commercial space which would mean **major innovative industries would choose to settle in Silicon Valley or Boston over the UK**.

Criteria 6: Stronger community engagement and empowerment	✓

The organisation of three unitary authorities around functional economic geographies and meaningful community identities means that stronger community engagement and empowerment is built into their design.

This design principle means that each new unitary authority will more closely align with the interests and priorities of its communities than the current administrative geographies do. This right-sized approach means that that local voice is more likely to be heard and represented effectively.

In addition, the proposed structures for enabling hyper-local engagement will also create a clear and consistent mechanism for meaningful community engagement and empowerment across the three unitary authorities. In particular, the creation of **Neighbourhood Area Committees (NACs)** will create a direct link between community and civil society groups and formal decision-making structures in the new authorities. They will ensure that service design and provision will be informed by the unique make-up of each community within the wider strategy of the unitary authority.

Existing local democratic institutions will retain an important role in this new structure, with the participation of Parish Councils in the NACs proposed, to further deepen the links between the new structure and already-existing social and democratic fabric of the current county area.

Limitations (without modifying boundaries)

Whilst this proposal improves community engagement and empowers local voices, the benefits could be significantly enhanced by modifying existing boundaries to recognise the functional geography of the City of Oxford. This also ensures that these Oxford-adjacent residents not currently included within the city boundaries **do not dilute the voices of rural and market town communities** in the new Northern Oxfordshire and Ridgeway unitary authorities.

Request for modification –

The preceding proposals are submitted following the invitation and the terms of section 2 of the Act. They follow a considerable amount of work completed with our partners. Pursuant to the Act, in particular section 7, the Secretary of State can, by order, implement proposals with modifications. Following our extensive workings, local knowledge, and analysis we are requesting that modifications are made to our proposals to substantially improve the overall benefits to be gained by reorganisation.

This approach follows the trajectory set out in our Interim Plan submissions and is considered by all partners to be essential to achieve best outcome for residents, communities and businesses through substantial enhancement of the benefit case. The modified proposal delivers a local government structure fit for the next fifty years.

The specific modification we are seeking is that –

- The boundaries of the Greater Oxford unitary set out above are extended to encompass areas around the City of Oxford with clear links to it, this includes the following parishes:

Parish	Current District
North Hinksey	Vale of White Horse
Wytham	
South Hinksey	
Wootton	
Appleton-with-Eaton	
Besselsleigh	
Cumnor	
Kennington	
Sunningwell	
Beckley and Stowood	South Oxfordshire
Berinsfield	
Cuddesdon and Denton	
Dorchester	
Drayton St. Leonard	
Elsfield	
Forest Hill with Shotover	
Garsington	
Horspath	
Little Milton	
Sandford-on-Thames	
Stadhampton	
Stanton St. John	
Toot Baldon	
Warborough	
Woodeaton	
Waterperry with Thomley	
Begbroke	Cherwell
Bletchingdon	

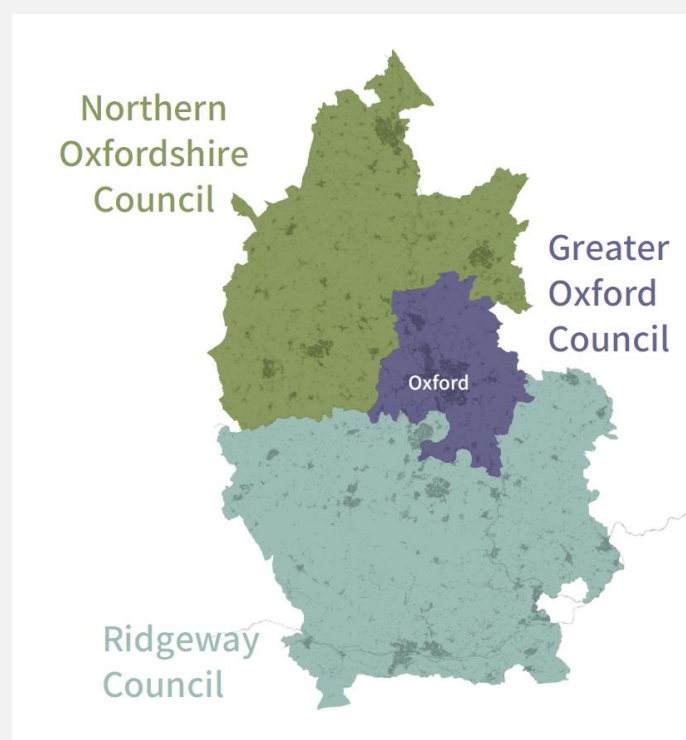|	
Charlton-on-Otmoor	
Fencott and Murcott	
Gosford and Water Eaton	
Hampton Gay and Poyle	
Horton-cum-Studley	
Islip	
Kidlington	
Noke	
Oddington	
Shipton-on-Cherwell and Thrupp	
Wendlebury	
Weston-on-the-Green	
Yarnton	

Figure 2. Modified Unitary Map

The proposal for a Green Belt-based boundary for Greater Oxford requires three local authority boundary changes around the city. In line with government guidance, parish councils have been used as the building blocks for these changes. Where parishes straddle the boundary, an in-out decision has been made largely on the basis of settlement patterns. Parishes that sit in the natural expansion space for Abingdon (Ridgeway) have been included in the Ridgeway geography. Eynsham is included in Northern Oxfordshire as an area with direct links to Witney (Northern Oxfordshire) and recognising that the topography would leave it untouched by Greater Oxford's strategic Green Belt release.

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We request this on the basis that –

- This would allow a substantial enhancement to the proposal set out above, and our ability to better meet the LGR criteria, as set out in our modified submission (attached) and enable the creation of a new Greater Oxford authority.
- This would restore the historic identity and current demographic links across Ridgeway with the inclusion of West Berkshire in the proposal.
- Modifications would see the creation of similar-sized councils by population compared to the Type B compliant proposals, creating a more balanced set of unitary authorities within Oxfordshire.
- The release of green belt around Oxford through the creation of Greater Oxford with expanded boundaries would unlock up to 40,000 additional homes by 2040, with an additional increase in commercial sites which would greatly increase GVA.
- There is a very strong financial sustainability justification, on the basis these modified proposals unlock a combined model which achieve £48.6m recurring net annual savings across the Oxfordshire Local Government system by year 5.
- Whilst we model a significant reorganisation one-off cost, estimated at around £36.2m, and costs relating to the transformation of services, these will be paid back from benefits within a 4-year period without need for Government support.

These boundary changes are –

- The most effective way to deliver a new Greater Oxford Unitary, which addresses the historic under-bounding. Formed of the key areas adjacent to the city where much new housing and economic growth is proposed, thereby supporting its long-term and sustainable growth and eliminating the democratic deficit which sees residents in the suburbs excluded from decisions within the city's current boundaries.
- Enabling far greater delivery of housing and economic growth than other proposals through strategic green belt release of 2.6% of current green belt. Land value capture from this release will be used to enhance the wider green belt, improving it as green space to support environmental priorities and enhancing access to these areas to support the wellbeing of residents.
- Minimal in overall impact, preserving existing parishes as their building blocks, with three of the six existing districts contained entirely within the three new unitary authorities.

Discounted options

We do not believe it practical to achieve the same via other means – particularly a future Principal Area Boundary Review (PABR). The significant downside of a PABR approach would be the substantially increased transition and service disruption time, alongside the significantly – and unnecessary – increased costs to implement. In effect, as the size and shape of authorities (particularly Oxford) are materially different a PABR would mean –

- Requiring, effectively, two rounds of reorganisation. Round 1 impacting seven authorities, and round 2 impacting three authorities.

- Transition period extended by a further 4 years, with substantial additional disruption for staff and service users
- Transition costs growing, in particular by duplication of transformation elements and additional ICT costs accrued
- Payback being delayed substantially, with benefits of savings of both economies of scale and transformation being deferred

On this basis we believe immediate modification to the only practical route forward.

We request this be considered, and our modified submission, as attached, be the version presented for consultation.

Part 2 – Modified Submission