

# Draft Consultation Response – 1UA - One Oxfordshire

March 2026

- 1. To what extent do you agree or disagree that the proposal suggestions councils that are based on sensible geographies and economic areas?**

Strongly Agree

- 2. To what extent do you agree or disagree that the proposed councils will be able to deliver the outcomes they describe in the proposal?**

Strongly Agree

- 3. To what extent do you agree or disagree that the proposed councils are the right size to be efficient, improve capacity and withstand financial shocks?**

Strongly Agree

- 4. To what extent do you agree or disagree that the proposed councils will deliver high quality, sustainable public services?**

Strongly Agree

- 5. To what extent do you agree or disagree that the proposal has been informed by local views and will meet local needs?**

Strongly Agree

- 6. To what extent do you agree or disagree that establishing the councils in this proposal will support devolution arrangements?**

Strongly Agree

- 7. To what extent do you agree or disagree that the proposal enables stronger community engagement and gives the opportunity for neighbourhood empowerment?**

Strongly Agree

- 8. If you would like to, please use the free text box to explain the answers you have provided to questions 1-7 referring to the question numbers as part of your answer. You may also use the box to provide any other comments you have on the proposal.**

### **1. Sensible geographies and economic areas**

#### **A single, coherent economic geography**

One Oxfordshire is built around an established, well recognised and easily articulated county geography that already functions as a single economic, social and public service delivery area. Oxfordshire shows strong internal economic coherence, with around 85% of working residents living and working within the county, reflecting integrated travel to work patterns, labour markets and infrastructure networks. It is a recognised functional economic area and a significant net contributor to the national economy, supporting around 430,000 jobs and generating approximately £29.3bn in GVA per year. These physical, social and economic characteristics are countywide and do not align with smaller or newly created unitary boundaries. One Oxfordshire reflects the real economic footprint of this county.

#### **Alignment with how the economy already operates**

Key economic and growth functions are already delivered effectively at county scale, including strategic planning, transport and highways, public health, education and skills, and economic partnership and inward investment. One Oxfordshire strengthens this by bringing strategic planning, housing, infrastructure and transport into a single decision-making framework. Where housing pressures are linked to employment growth, coordinated countywide planning is essential to align homes, jobs and infrastructure in the right places. Multiple unitaries risk planning disputes, inconsistent policies, and failure to deliver the large-scale sites and transport links that underpin growth. A single council could produce and deliver a single local planning without the cooperation failures that multi-council arrangements have historically produced in Oxfordshire.

The Oxfordshire economy is anchored by nationally recognised and interconnected economic and spatial geographies including the Knowledge Spine from Science Vale through Oxford to Bicester, the Science and Innovation Campus at Harwell, and wider strategic corridors such as the Oxford–Cambridge Arc, and the Chilterns and Cotswolds National Landscapes. These cut across district boundaries but align naturally with a single county footprint. Anchor institutions benefit from a single, authoritative partner for negotiations over skills, land, transport, and research commercialisation. One Oxfordshire reflects this reality, whereas smaller unitaries risk fragmenting strategic economic planning and weaken Oxfordshire's collective economic voice.

## **A stronger platform for investment and global engagement**

Evidence shows Oxfordshire's fastest growing sectors are distributed across the county, reinforcing the case for a single economic footprint. Many economic development functions are most effective at county scale, including inward investment, skills planning, business support and infrastructure delivery.

Oxfordshire's Knowledge Spine — linking Bicester, Oxford, Culham, Milton Park and Harwell and the Oxford-Cambridge Growth Corridor — relies on countywide coordination. Attracting inward investment requires presenting Oxfordshire at countywide or pan-regional scale, with a coherent portfolio of opportunities across knowledge-intensive sectors. A strong proposition depends on combining strategic scale with locally defined sites and projects.

Over the past five years, Enterprise Oxfordshire's inward investment team has supported 184 inward investment projects, securing c.£3.6bn of investment and supporting around 6,500 jobs across Oxfordshire. This would be fragmented by a 2UA or 3UA model but can be delivered at a strategic scale alongside local tailoring in the One Oxfordshire model.

## **A county-wide approach to the visitor economy**

Oxfordshire's visitor economy, valued at around £2.4bn annually, is inherently countywide. The county attracts 30 million visitor trips each year and supports 11% of employment. Visitor movements, destinations and supporting infrastructure do not align with proposed unitary boundaries. Major assets such as Blenheim Palace, the University of Oxford's colleges and museums, and Bicester Village operate as distinct draws across the county, alongside nationally protected landscapes. One Oxfordshire enables a more integrated approach to managing the visitor economy, bringing together transport, infrastructure, place shaping and destination management at the scale at which impacts are experienced. This maximises value while managing pressures coherently so benefits are shared across the county.

## **Sensible geography for public service delivery**

One Oxfordshire is the only proposal that fully meets government guidance on population scale, serving 760,000 residents. This creates the strongest and largest possible tax base, improves financial resilience and enables demand and cost pressures to be managed effectively across our diverse communities and geography. 85% of public services, by expenditure, are already delivered on a countywide footprint. One council aligned to a recognised county geography avoids fragmentation, supports efficient strategic decision making and strengthens alignment between planning, infrastructure and service delivery. Splitting the county would introduce duplication, weaken resilience and increase transition risk with no guarantee of improving outcomes for residents.

## **Managing uneven demand through sensible geography**

A countywide geography is particularly important for planning and managing uneven care needs. Demand for Children's services is highly uneven, with persistent concentrations in Oxford City and parts of Cherwell and lower demand in South and West Oxfordshire. This pattern is consistent across safeguarding, early help, children in need, child protection, children in care, youth justice and SEND. A single authority can pool high and lower demand areas and deploy resources where needed flexibly and seamlessly. Disaggregation would lock concentrated demand into smaller councils, reducing resilience and increasing risk unnecessarily.

### **Addressing county-wide challenges at the right scale**

Many of Oxfordshire's most pressing challenges are inherently countywide, including housing affordability, infrastructure capacity, labour market accessibility and health inequalities. Housing affordability is inseparable from economic growth and transport capacity and requires countywide coordination and delivery. One Oxfordshire provides the scale needed to respond strategically and coherently. Alternative proposals introduce boundaries that cut across economic realities, fragment planning and increase risk.

## **2. Deliver the outcomes described in the proposal**

The One Oxfordshire proposal is credible because it links outcomes directly to the scale, governance, financial resilience and delivery mechanisms required to achieve them. It is evidence based, shaped by demand and cost analysis, and builds on existing countywide services that are already performing well, particularly in adult and children's social care, SEND and public health. Unlike alternative models, it avoids unnecessary fragmentation and transition risk, cost and disruption. Instead, a single unitary can focus on integrating new services into a redesigned countywide model, making it easier for vulnerable residents to access critical services. This will make use of existing relationships with health and criminal justice services, and voluntary and community support organisations to strengthen these ties.

### **How One Oxfordshire will deliver its outcomes**

Outcomes will be delivered through operating at the right scale, enabling economies of scale, removing duplication, avoiding disaggregation costs, supporting strategic investment and devolution. Integrated strategy and service delivery will align services around people and place, support systemwide commissioning and partnership working, and use data and evidence to drive prevention. Robust financial foundations include independently assured modelling, lower transition costs, faster savings realisation and capacity to invest in transformation and prevention. Strong neighbourhood governance will operate alongside scale through area-based committees, strengthened local delivery and dedicated support for town, parish and neighbourhood engagement. Clear leadership and transition governance will ensure service continuity, independent assurance and a safe, lawful transition. The model

aligns strongly with devolution and strategic growth by providing a single credible partner for government and investors.

### **Delivering new housing**

Three councils in Oxfordshire have recently had their local plans rejected for failing to meet the duty to co-operate. The Oxfordshire Plan 2050 – Joint Statutory Spatial Plan similarly failed because the five planning authorities could not reach an agreement on how to plan for future housing need across the county, by creating a single unitary authority for Oxfordshire this risk will be mitigated. An established economic area managed by a single unitary will support the delivery of increased housing supply and create a political institution that will be required to resolve long standing issues of co-operation across the local housing market. The 3UA proposal argues that housing delivery for Greater Oxford can be best achieved through greenbelt release and that this release can only effectively be delivered where the only significant land available to a local planning authority is green belt. This is not the case and clear mechanisms exist for bringing forward appropriate development in the green belt where a compelling case can be made and evidenced and the review tests can be met. Little is said in the 3UA case about housing delivery in the other two authorities. Seeking to lock-in city expansion through the LGR process assumes a static NPPF and a political outcome pre-disposed to this approach. The appropriate way to take strategic decisions about future land use is through the evidenced based Spatial Development Strategy process as set out the Planning and Infrastructure Act 2025. At scale housing delivery is most effectively delivered over the widest footprint, including but not only considering development around the city.

### **Disaggregation is the single greatest risk to delivering outcomes**

Evidence shows that disaggregation is the dominant risk to outcomes. Larger authorities achieve lower unit costs when key drivers are controlled for, particularly in people-based services. There is no robust evidence that fragmented unitaries deliver lower costs in children's services, adult social care or SEND. Disaggregation weakens workforce resilience, specialist commissioning and market stability.

### **Outcomes depend on prevention and prevention depends on scale**

Prevention relies on pooled risk, integrated commissioning and systemwide data, all of which are undermined by disaggregation. Demand drivers do not change with reorganisation. A single authority is better placed to invest in early intervention, manage needs and resources sustainably and reduce inequalities.

### **Continuity of well performing services matters**

Residents and partners prioritise stability in statutory services. One Oxfordshire protects good and improving services and avoids the unnecessary disruption that disaggregation would bring. The other models proposed for Oxfordshire introduce significant transition risk without clarity on how new service models would drive

prevention and reduce needs. Instead of using scarce resources to disaggregate, further service transformation can be delivered in concert with the NHS and our Voluntary, Faith and Community Sectors. This will drive prevention and early intervention and support integration of aligned services such as housing, leisure and culture.

### **Delivery credibility rests on transition planning and risk management**

Lower transition costs, faster payback, simpler governance, independent assurance and clear leadership provide confidence that outcomes will be delivered.

### **3. Right size to be efficient, improve capacity and withstand financial shocks**

One Oxfordshire is built on aggregation rather than fragmentation, maximising efficiency, workforce and commissioning capacity, and financial resilience. Fragmented models introduce duplication and structural risk without addressing demand.

#### **Efficiency**

A single authority removes duplication in leadership, corporate functions, statutory roles, IT and procurement. In services such as highways, scale enables bulk purchasing, shared expertise and preventative maintenance, reducing unit costs and protecting assets.

#### **Capacity**

Scale supports recruitment, retention, market stability and service continuity, particularly in statutory people-based services. Rurality and uneven demand reinforce the need for countywide risk and resource pooling.

#### **Financial resilience**

Serving over 760,000 residents, One Oxfordshire delivers the highest recurring savings, lowest transition costs and fastest payback. The populations in the other two Oxfordshire proposals fall below and, in some cases, well below the government threshold of 500,000 increasing the potential for financial shocks and funding volatility. Disaggregation costs are real and recurring. Only One Oxfordshire provides the balance sheet strength to invest in prevention and long-term sustainability.

#### **Fire and Rescue Services**

Retaining Oxfordshire Fire and Rescue Service within a single authority avoids transition cost, preserves reserves and maintains resilience. These are firm foundations to transition into a Thames Valley MSA in due course. Without a clear path towards a Mayoral Strategic Authority (MSA), it is unclear what the benefits are to a highly short-term solution to operating a safe and legal fire and rescue service for Oxfordshire. The likely cost of a freestanding Oxfordshire Fire and Rescue Authority would be between £34m and £50m and would carry a high level of financial risk. For example, the annual impact of pay inflation – estimated at around £0.8m for

an uplift of around 3% would need to be met within the funding for the authority rather than being supported by the flexibility of the wider council budget. Other options – such as a merger with Royal Berkshire Fire and Rescue carry service and financial risks. It is unclear what the benefits of this are given the commitment to progress to an MSA at pace. Ultimately, we believe that making a blue light service potentially financially unsound through disaggregation creates an unacceptable level of risk that can only be mitigated by creating a countywide unitary through One Oxfordshire.

#### **4. High quality, sustainable public services**

High-quality services are already delivered most effectively at county scale. One Oxfordshire protects and strengthens these services by avoiding fragmentation. The One Oxfordshire proposal is designed to protect, continue and strengthen existing high-performing services, particularly adult social care, children's social care, SEND and homelessness, by avoiding the fragmentation and disaggregation that would place service quality and continuity at risk.

By bringing all local authority functions together within a single unitary, One Oxfordshire enables:

- more joined-up services
- simpler access through a single front door
- consistent eligibility and county-wide standards
- stronger alignment between prevention, early intervention and statutory services

This integration supports both service quality today and sustainability over the long term, particularly in the face of rising demand and workforce pressures. Smaller councils may appear more local, but the risks to vulnerable people from breaking up safe, established and high-performing services are immediate.

#### **Disaggregation is the greatest risk**

Breaking up high performing services increases operational, safeguarding and financial risk, particularly in people-based services. One Oxfordshire is the only model that guarantees continuity of statutory safeguarding, avoids postcode lotteries, and maintains consistent standards and pathways for vulnerable children and adults across the county. Instead of wasting public money on disaggregation activity, services will join up leisure and housing to create holistic service pathways to meet needs and prevent escalation of needs on higher cost services.

Disaggregation increases risk in people-based services where scale underpins:

- workforce resilience and recruitment
- specialist commissioning
- market stability and provider viability

Fracturing commissioning power would increase exposure to high-cost spot purchasing, weaken market leverage and drive cost inflation. Fragmentation also increases administrative burden and complexity without improving outcomes.

### **Prevention and sustainability depend on scale**

Taking cost drivers into account, larger authorities tend to cost less per unit. Fragmentation does not reduce demand and undermines sustainability.

The evidence shows that:

- larger authorities achieve lower unit costs when deprivation, income and market conditions are taken into consideration
- more disaggregated unitaries do not deliver lower people-service unit costs, making savings assumptions unsafe
- the strongest predictors of cost are deprivation and demography, not council boundaries

A larger authority is better placed to pool risk, invest in prevention, stabilise markets and manage long-term demand through system-wide commissioning.

### **Protecting vulnerable people**

County-wide pooling avoids postcode lotteries and ensures services are delivered based on need rather than boundaries. SEND provision, specialist placements and safeguarding pathways are system-wide by nature, requiring county-scale planning, commissioning and risk pooling.

Under disaggregation:

- neighbouring councils could inherit radically different levels of demand and cost based solely on boundary design
- smaller authorities would have limited resilience to absorb volatility
- reliance on out-of-area placements could increase, raising cost, complexity and legal risk
- achieving the ambitions set out in the recent *Every Child Achieving and Thriving* white paper, particularly the expectations that schools will form or join multi academy trusts will be harder to manage particularly for schools that are currently local authority-maintained schools
- One Oxfordshire embeds simpler and safer governance arrangements, which support the deliverability and transformation of quality services.
- A single authority also strengthens partnership working with the NHS, VCS and other public sector partners by providing a clear, stable and accountable partner
- Alternative proposals introduce significant governance complexity, which compounds risk, slows down service delivery and adds additional layers of accountability and decision-making, while lacking the capacity to effectively

drive transformation and strengthen service delivery. This blocks ability to improve outcomes.

## **5. Informed by local views, meeting local needs**

The proposal is informed by extensive engagement with residents, businesses, town and parish councils, public sector partners, the voluntary sector, young people and the workforce. Engagement consistently shows support for simplicity, service continuity, financial resilience and meaningful local influence.

### **Resident priorities**

Engagement consistently identified a clear set of shared priorities:

- clear and accountable decision-making
- minimal disruption to services
- financial resilience
- simpler access to services
- strong local identity and influence

These priorities are directly reflected in the One Oxfordshire model. Clear governance and accountability scored highest in resident feedback, alongside minimising service disruption and reducing duplication. While residents expressed strong attachment to their local communities, engagement showed that people value meaningful local influence through neighbourhood, town and parish arrangements, rather than the creation of additional councils that increase complexity and confusion.

### **Stakeholder engagement**

Engagement extended well beyond residents and consistently reinforced the same core messages, while highlighting sector-specific risks and requirements:

- Town and parish councils supported the simplicity of a single council but stressed the importance of strong local focus, clear routes for resolving local issues, and avoiding the transfer of additional responsibilities without funding. Proposals for area committees, neighbourhood governance and a strengthened Oxfordshire Councils' Charter were welcomed as practical responses to these concerns.
- Businesses prioritised clarity, speed and certainty in decision-making, supported a single planning authority and a clear county-wide economic vision, and emphasised the importance of strong democratic accountability within any new structure.
- Transport and infrastructure providers emphasised the importance of scale for efficiency and of the impact of administrative barriers across commuting

pathways on creating inconsistent policies in areas like ticketing, route subsidy and active travel infrastructure.

- Voluntary and community organisations prioritised service stability, clear geography and minimal disruption. They explicitly raised concerns about fragmentation and competition if the county were split, including risks associated with widening inequalities and disruption to trusted delivery relationships.
- Public sector partners valued geographic coherence, pooled budgets and system alignment, and highlighted workforce and service delivery risks if services were fragmented across multiple authorities.
- Employees emphasised the importance of minimising disruption to services and career pathways, noting that fragmentation of services poses greater risks to workforce stability than organisational scale alone.

### **Equality and local needs**

Analysis of adult social care demand shows that need in Oxfordshire is shared, system-wide and granular, varying by age group, service type and neighbourhood rather than by district boundary. Geographical differences in demand for children's services are already outlined above also.

A single county-wide authority therefore aligns with how local needs actually present and how services must respond in practice. Fragmentation would embed unequal pressures between councils based on boundary design rather than need. Only One Oxfordshire can ensure that services are designed and delivered based on need, not geographical boundaries.

A robust Equality Impact Assessment underpins the proposal. Analysis shows that need is system-wide and granular rather than aligned to district boundaries.

### **Preserving Oxford's city status**

Engagement also highlighted the importance of protecting Oxford's city status, civic and political identity and historic role, alongside wider county reform. For many residents and stakeholders, Oxford's status as a city is not symbolic but closely tied to local identity, democratic representation and civic pride.

The One Oxfordshire proposal recognises this and provides a clear, practical route to preserving Oxford's city status through Charter Trustees, ensuring the continuation of the city's historic mayoralty, civic traditions and ceremonial functions. This directly responds to concerns raised during engagement that local identity should not be lost as part of reorganisation.

By contrast, alternative proposals do not clearly set out how Oxford's city status would be protected, nor how civic continuity would be maintained. The absence of explicit provision for Charter Trustees or equivalent arrangements creates uncertainty for residents and risks undermining confidence that local identity and heritage would be safeguarded.

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## 6. Support devolution arrangements

The One Oxfordshire proposal is designed to support and unlock devolution, by creating a single, resilient local authority that can act as a clear, credible and strategically capable partner to a future strategic authority, preferably a Mayoral Strategic Authority (MSA). A single county-wide unitary provides the scale, governance clarity and delivery capacity required for devolved powers over transport, housing, skills, economic development and infrastructure, avoiding the fragmentation and competing voices that would weaken Oxfordshire's position and influence under multiple smaller councils.

One Oxfordshire is the only local government reorganisation proposal that:

- advocates for the whole of Oxfordshire as a recognised functional economic area and a recognisable anchor institution for inter-regional initiatives such as the Oxford-Cambridge Growth Corridor and England's Economic Heartland.
- provides a single, coherent and financially resilient partner for devolution, and
- directly supports the government's wider devolution objectives
- provides the clearest governance to drive productivity and revenue growth through a single local growth plan and spatial development strategy
- offers financial resilience and scale, reducing the risk of devolved powers being held by weaker or fragmented councils.
- provides a single front door for engagement with government, investors and strategic partners
- is best placed to support future devolution of the governance of fire and rescue services

One Oxfordshire sets out a clear and simplified dual-delivery model, fully aligned with government devolution policy intent:

- Strategic functions (transport, housing, skills, economic development and investment) exercised at mayoral level.
- All local government functions delivered by a single Oxfordshire Council, covering the full functional economic area.

This creates the clearest possible division of responsibilities between local and regional governance, avoiding blurred accountability. A single Oxfordshire Council provides a strong, stable and credible partner for an MSA. This alignment enables more coherent policy-making across strategic transport, housing, skills and

economic development — particularly important in a region where high-performing economic areas are currently strong but disconnected.

### **Preserving functional economic geography and accelerating growth**

The proposed Thames Valley MSA would be able to leverage complementary sectoral strengths across the region into a unified, distributed growth model. This approach connects places, boosts housing delivery, supports innovation and drives productivity.

By collaborating across member councils, the MSA will be able to accelerate progress on productivity, create integrated supply chains, expand labour market opportunities and speed up innovation — delivering sustained productivity growth and increased revenue locally and nationally.

One Oxfordshire is uniquely positioned to support this model because it:

- preserves Oxfordshire as a single, recognised functional economic area with clear narrative of place and identity within the wider region
- avoids fragmenting strategic corridors such as the Knowledge Spine,
- delivers an authority who can be a more effective partner, with single voice for the area, and
- offers a single local growth plan and spatial development strategy feeding into regional plans.

### **Coordinating LGR and devolution reduces risk and disruption**

Co-ordinating the transition to a single unitary authority and an MSA at the same time avoids repeated disruption to services and governance. This is particularly important for complex, high-risk functions such as Oxfordshire Fire and Rescue Service.

The proposal anticipates the establishment of:

- a shadow MSA, and
- an Implementation Executive with continuing / preparing authority status to oversee governance, strategic planning and financial frameworks prior to the transfer of powers.

One Oxfordshire significantly limits disruption at a time when Berkshire councils would be joining the MSA as existing unitaries, ensuring continuity and stability during transition.

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## **7. Enables stronger community engagement and neighbourhood empowerment**

Neighbourhood governance is embedded through area committees, strengthened town and parish partnerships and protected local identity. Financial resilience provides the headroom needed for sustained local empowerment. Risks of remoteness are manageable through design, while risks of fragmentation are permanent.

One Oxfordshire commits to a robust and consistent neighbourhood governance framework, including:

- area committees aligned to real communities (city neighbourhoods, market towns and rural clusters),
- councillors acting as community convenors, shaping place-based priorities,
- neighbourhood-level forums and engagement mechanisms to influence service design and delivery.

These are not temporary or discretionary arrangements. The proposal explicitly sets out permanent structures, supported by the financial resilience of a single authority, ensuring neighbourhood governance is durable, visible and properly resourced.

This approach ensures that every community—urban, rural or market town—has a clear and consistent route to influence decisions.

Crucially, the proposal is clear that good neighbourhood empowerment depends on financial headroom. One Oxfordshire's stronger savings and resilience enable:

- sustained investment in area committees and neighbourhood working,
- consistent support for local engagement across the whole county,
- empowerment that is long-term and reliable, not vulnerable to cuts.

The risks of “remoteness” under a single council are solvable through good design and consistent engagement. By contrast, the risks under alternative proposals - service fragmentation, weaker finances and inconsistent neighbourhood arrangements—are structural and permanent.