

3 Unitary Councils – Draft Response

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

Strongly disagree.

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 disagree.

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 disagree.

4. To what extent do you agree or disagree that this proposal will put local government in the area as a whole on a firmer footing, particularly given that some councils in the area are in receipt of exceptional financial support?

Strongly disagree.

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

Strongly disagree.

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

Strongly disagree.

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

Strongly Disagree.

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

Strongly Disagree.

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

Q1. Sensible geographies and economic areas

Splitting Oxfordshire into three unitaries would fragment an already coherent economic and social geography with very little vision for the Ridgeway and North Oxfordshire councils set out in the 3UA proposal. Oxfordshire is already a coherent economic area, with strong internal connectivity and a self-contained labour market - 85% of residents work within the county. Furthermore, nearly a third of Oxford's labour force commute in from outside the city (ONS 2021). Oxfordshire functions as a single labour and housing market, with strong internal connectivity and countywide travel patterns for work, education, healthcare and leisure. Transport corridors, housing markets and economic activity operate at a county scale rather than within city or district boundaries.

A three unitary model would introduce artificial boundaries, disrupt countywide partnerships and make it harder to deliver joined up services, particularly in health, social care, transport and economic development. Fragmentation would weaken Oxfordshire's ability to plan and deliver growth strategically and reduce leverage with government and investors.

Oxfordshire's Knowledge Spine — linking Bicester, Oxford, Culham, Milton Park and Harwell and the Oxford-Cambridge Growth Corridor — relies on countywide coordination. Splitting the county would fragment economic strategy, planning and investment, increasing duplication and reducing investor confidence. 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. 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. Undertaking this work on a smaller geography could risk fragmentation and unnecessary competition between areas. The significant amount of housing development required to unlock economic growth requires an integrated approach to planning and delivery, this would be best met through a single unitary council as key supporting services such as strategic infrastructure, water and digital systems serve multiple labour markets and sites, making a countywide approach to planning and prioritisation of sites essential.

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

3UA model but can be delivered at a strategic scale alongside local tailoring in the One Oxfordshire model.

The proposed Ridgeway Council would share boundaries with Oxford, Swindon and Reading and act as an inhibitor to the development of these key areas.

Services currently delivered countywide, including transport, adult social care and children's services, would become fragmented, costly and harder to access under a three unitary model. Disaggregation risks duplication, confusion for residents and weaker financial viability.

The proposal focuses overwhelmingly on Greater Oxford and does not adequately test the identity, viability or sustainability of the proposed North Oxfordshire or Ridgeway councils. No clear identity or place narrative for these two councils are set out with no clear economic, social or cultural focal points. A Greater Oxford authority risks loss of identity for surrounding communities, particularly for Kidlington, Botley and Wheatley who would be subsumed into Greater Oxford.

Different electoral arrangements, four-year cycles for Ridgeway and North Oxfordshire and bi-annual for Greater Oxford, would also create confusion for residents and reinforce perceptions of an Oxford centric model.

Q2. Ability to deliver the proposed outcomes

The three unitary proposal relies on optimistic assumptions about growth, green belt release for development, housing delivery and transformation savings, with limited consideration of downside risks. The growth assumptions are exactly that – assumptions. It is the decisions of a future authority that will enable or disable those assumptions to be realised.

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 greenbelt. This is not the case and clear mechanisms exist for bringing forward appropriate development in the greenbelt 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. The issues around scarcity and high house prices could then realistically remain and even be exacerbated under this proposal.

The Oxfordshire 2050 Plan – Joint Statutory Spatial Plan failed to be delivered because the five planning authorities could not reach an agreement on how to plan for future housing and growth allocations across the county. This demonstrates that multiple planning authorities cannot be relied upon to reach an agreement to deliver housing and growth ambitions. Only creating a single unitary authority for Oxfordshire can truly ensure housing and growth potential for the county is fully realised.

By splitting responsibility for housing and employment across three authorities, the model risks fragmentation that would act as a barrier to delivery. The proposals are unclear on how long-standing issues of co-operation across areas would be addressed and is especially unclear on the visions for housing and growth in Ridgeway and the North Oxfordshire councils. There is a risk that this will result in getting the balance wrong between job growth and housing delivery across the geography, exacerbating the twin challenges of housing affordability and pressure on transport infrastructure. If projected growth and savings are not realised, the financial consequences could be significant and difficult to manage for small unitary authorities.

While the proposal emphasises growth, it provides little evidence of how this growth would be inclusive or address Oxford's deep and widening inequalities. Oxford already performs strongly on economic output yet remains one of the UK's most unequal cities. Further growth alone, without targeted interventions, will not reduce poverty or inequality.

Proposals to address inequality through apprenticeships and housing lack detail and scale. Skills and employment programmes are most effective when delivered at county scale, and many new jobs would be filled by people moving into the area rather than existing residents in need. Increased housing supply does not guarantee affordability or access for current residents, particularly without safeguards. Despite generating significant growth within the city, with PwC's Good Growth for Cities Index highlighting that the city saw a 5.1% annual GDP growth between 2020-21, inequality in the city is growing. Oxford is the UK's second most unequal city. 26% of children in Oxford live below the poverty line (Census data, 2021.) Just under a third of the households in Oxford experience at least 1 dimension of deprivation (Index of Multiple Deprivation 2025) and six areas of the city are in the 20% most deprived areas in the country (two in Northfield Brook, two in Blackbird Leys, one in Littlemore and one in Rose Hill.) Conversely, there now 21 areas in Oxford that are in the top 10% least deprived in the country – an increase from 12 in 2019. This demonstrates that by concentrating efforts into a Greater Oxford authority, the inequality gap will continue to widen and only a single countywide unitary can ensure that growth benefits are felt across the county.

Disaggregation of services, particularly public health, adult social care and children's services, would be materially costly, complex and risky. Smaller budgets would

reduce commissioning power and resilience, and shared service arrangements lack clear governance. The proposal recognises workforce risks but provides little detail on how these would be managed. £15.9m transformation savings arising from redesigning social care services are estimated to be delivered from year 5 onwards; the proposal says that this total includes cost avoidance measures which CIPFA LGR guidance advises should not be included so the saving is overstated. It is also unclear what costs would be required to deliver the savings or for social care systems and whether these adequately reflect the cost of disaggregating these services.

There are extensive shared service arrangements between existing Berkshire and surrounding councils. West Berkshire itself is either a partner or lead for over 30 shared service arrangements, removal from these shared service contracts would be felt by all Berkshire and surrounding councils at a critical and fragile time and may serve to undermine the stability of their neighbouring authorities.

There is also an added complexity of needing to disaggregate Local Government Pension Scheme funds from Oxfordshire and Berkshire, with no clear method of managing this.

The proposal places significant reliance on local freedom over council tax precepting without setting out how affordability, harmonisation or divergence between neighbouring councils would be managed. This creates governance, fairness and reputational risks in a single functional housing and labour market. A single unitary provides clearer accountability, consistency and transparency.

Q3. Size, efficiency and financial resilience

Two of the three proposed unitaries would fall well below the government's recommended population threshold of 500,000, relying on uncertain future growth to achieve scale. This is especially relevant for the Northern Oxfordshire Council proposal which lacks any economic narrative. Arguments for smaller authorities focus on identity and governance rather than demonstrating improved efficiency, capacity or resilience. The three proposed unitaries are also unbalanced in revenue budget size with the largest over twice as large as the smallest.

The methodology for estimating tax bases across revised boundaries is not set out, limiting assurance over the robustness of the figures. The council tax bases are also uneven, with Greater Oxford having a materially lower council tax-raising capacity relative to the other proposed unitaries.

Smaller unitaries would increase costs, duplicate senior leadership and undermine high performing countywide services. Diseconomies of scale would impact on the ability to manage on-going reductions in funding arising through the Fair Funding Review 2.0 and create a much less resilience to withstand future funding changes.

Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) projections, which include assumptions about known savings, costs and demography changes, are not included for any of the seven existing local authorities. Similarly, the balance sheet disaggregation does not account for any capital or borrowing requirements in the MTFS of the existing local authorities. As a result, the opening financial positions of the proposed unitaries on vesting day could differ materially from those modelled.

The comparator authorities which have been used in the benchmarking analysis behind the conclusions about financial resilience included in the proposal are not explained. This information might change the conclusions reached.

The proposal includes significant boundary changes, including West Berkshire, without demonstrating proportionate financial or service benefits. Including West Berkshire would import financial risk, disrupt established service geographies and increase transition complexity.

Strategic partnerships operate more effectively on a county level because they can achieve economies of scale, particularly when addressing poverty and inequality. Work by the Centre for Local Economic Strategies (2024) to create 'anchor networks' of public and private sector organisations has found that these organisations are best placed to work on a larger scale when making meaningful interventions in their local economies. For example, in Birmingham, currently the largest unitary council in the country, organisations such as the NHS, housing associations, the council, universities and the voluntary sector have worked together on an initiative to direct hard-to-fill entry-level roles in the health sector at unemployed residents in the most deprived parts of the city, leading to over 550 job offers to unemployed residents in just over two and a half years. (Centre for Local Economic Strategies, 2024.) Only a single unitary can achieve this level of scale and joined-up targeted working to ensure years of widening inequality in Oxfordshire are reversed.

Q4. Financial sustainability and footing

Disaggregating countywide services into three unitary councils, and the boundary changes required to do that, as well as disruption to established geographies for health and fire authorities for example, would be resource intensive, complex and significantly increase transition risk.

While headline transition costs appear plausible, a substantial proportion of costs and savings are unexplained or insufficiently evidenced in the proposal, undermining confidence in the financial case. There is also limited differentiation between one – off transition benefits, sustainable efficiencies and cost avoidance. The proposal does not fully account for existing MTFS pressures, so there is a risk that the new councils will start with weaker financial positions than presented.

Key costs relating to IT, workforce, shadow authorities, legal advice and service disaggregation are unclear. There is also no mention of the removal of duplication of

roles beyond the senior management layer, for example in front office or service delivery roles, when bringing together district authorities nor additional middle leadership staff and safeguarding teams needed in social care across 3 unitaries. Recurring savings appear to be overstated and rely on assumptions that are not transparent or aligned with best practice guidance.

The proposal acknowledges the impact of the Fair Funding Review but does not reflect this in the level of savings which can be achieved, given the expected reductions in funding as a result of its implementation.

There is no mention of one – off transformation costs in the narrative. These can be inferred from subtracting the £36.2m transition costs (pages 95 and 114) from the £57m total one-off costs in Table 5.7 on page 116 but there is no narrative to explain what these relate to, nor how they have been calculated.

Costs associated with running shadow authorities, legal advice, staff relocation, changes to third-party payments or disaggregating social care services are not mentioned in the narrative so it is not clear how these have been treated.

Net recurring savings totalling £48.6m by year 5 are set out on in the proposal (page 96). The total is made up of £28.3m transformation benefits, offset by £13.7m transformation costs plus £34.0m transition savings. The majority of the savings are unexplained, or the amounts are unspecified in the proposal. Narrative within the report also suggests that the calculation includes savings that CIPFA LGR guidance advises should not be included such as a reduction in depreciation and notional interest). A 5% efficiency saving against the Public Health budget is assumed - this is funded by a ring-fenced grant and does not directly impact on the General Fund. Since a large share of the savings is unexplained or reliant on high-level assumptions, with limited distinction between one-off transition benefits, sustainable efficiencies and cost-avoidance there is a material risk that savings could be overstated.

Furthermore, the inclusion of West Berkshire Council who have in principle approval from MHCLG for exceptional financial support of £30m in 2026/27 in addition to £20m in 2025/26 (increased from £3.0m) and £13m in 2024/25 has the potential to significantly impact on the stability of Ridgeway council from the outset.

A single unitary offers higher savings, lower transition costs, faster payback and significantly lower delivery risk. It would also maintain established policing, fire and rescue, NHS and voluntary sector geographies.

Q5. Quality and sustainability of public services

Planning and Infrastructure

A three unitary model would perpetuate fragmented planning and undermine integrated delivery of housing, transport, infrastructure and environmental services. Smaller authorities would struggle to coordinate land release, infrastructure investment and strategic planning. A single, integrated highways service allows Oxfordshire to leverage bulk purchasing, shared specialist equipment, and streamlined supply chains. This reduces unit costs, improves productivity, and delivers better value for taxpayers. Larger contracts also attract competitive pricing and enable extra investment across the county. Unified planning supports a proactive, preventative maintenance approach, up to 20 times cheaper than reactive pothole repairs. This extends the lifespan of Oxfordshire's £6 billion road network, ensures compliance with Department for Transport standards, and reduces overall deterioration, avoiding costly emergency interventions. The artificial boundaries of the 3UA proposal would cause significant blockers to transport infrastructure as all buses need to cut through the city.

Oxfordshire is a significant minerals supplier, supplying 25% of minerals to the south-east region, so this is economically important, but this proposal gives no mention to it. There is real complexity in minerals and waste planning in a small unitary environment. The three councils would have a duty to cooperate, but identifying quarries and waste sites is going to be a challenge and, with no final point of political accountability, there is a risk that there is no agreement.

Childrens and adults social care, education and homelessness

Disaggregating highways, adult social care, children's services and SEND would introduce unacceptable transition risks, weaken economies of scale, fragment provider markets and increase costs. Evidence shows larger authorities deliver more resilient and higher performing care services.

Fragmentation risks postcode lotteries, workforce instability and loss of strategic integration with health and other partners. Joint or shared governance arrangements proposed in the 3UA model are legally complex, unproven and introduce accountability risks. The three unitary proposal is based on the break-up of a high-performing and CQC 'Good' rated adult social care service to create smaller place-based services. This carries significant operational and financial risk around service fragmentation, transition complexity, lack of consistency, and weaker financial viability compared to the One Oxfordshire model, which emphasises service continuity, consistency, scale and financial resilience. The 3UA model fails to provide a compelling, evidence-based case for the high-risk and costly disaggregation. Moreover, it is based on a non-compliant legal framework. The process of dividing services, budgets and staff is complex and could distract from service improvement.

There is a duty to make enquiries into abuse or neglect and to establish a multi-agency Safeguarding Adults Board (SAB). The duty requires a simple, clear line of accountability. The 3UA proposal to retain a single SAB to cover three unitaries is legally complex. A SAB is a statutory body of a local authority, not a free-floating

entity that can be 'shared' via a lead authority model while claiming to be the single statutory board for all three. This legal error creates an immediate and significant vacuum of governance and accountability.

The proposed joint-board arrangements are unproven, fragmented, ambiguous and introduce unnecessary risk. This model of SAB is also unable to hold the local authority and Director of Adult Social Services (DASS) to account, which is meant to be its primary function. A single SAB, operationally hosted and funded by the lead authority, cannot be truly independent in scrutinising a safeguarding failure within that same lead authority. By contrast the 1UA model provides simple, clear and continuous accountability for the SAB. Additionally, it should be noted that neighbouring authorities who have set up a similar shared Board have recently disaggregated this model.

The Care Act 2014 creates a specific duty to integrate care and support with health services (e.g. the NHS) and health-related services (e.g. housing, leisure). The 3UA model requires a high-risk disaggregation that could sever, not strengthen, health partnerships during the transition. There will also be additional duplication created by the need to potentially have a Local Authority Designated Officer (LADO) and principle social workers which have not been factored into the proposed joint arrangements. The 1UA model combines ASC and district-level housing functions into one entity safely.

Similarly, disaggregation of Children's Services (including SEND) comes with unacceptable risk, with the potential to disrupt a whole generation of children in Oxfordshire. Smaller authorities could be overwhelmed by demand and may struggle to recruit skilled staff. Larger councils deliver better Ofsted-rated services and have the scale to keep costs down.

Both the County Councils Network (CCN) and Newton have evidenced that larger councils deliver better Ofsted-rated services and have the scale to keep costs down. The CCN is urging government to stick to its 500k population rule and ensure reforms don't shatter fragile care services.

Splitting SEND and Children's Services responsibilities between three councils risks fragmented approaches, with different priorities, policies and commissioning strategies; disruption to families who move or live near boundaries; and higher costs as well as a loss of economies of scale in commissioning. While disaggregation is possible, a generation of children will be affected by this disruption. Each new unitary may interpret statutory duties differently, and there is a risk of inconsistent thresholds for intervention, assessment and support across Oxfordshire and West Berkshire. The proposal suggests some functions (e.g. safeguarding, youth justice) will be shared, but the details and governance of these partnerships are not fully specified. This also does not take account of the raft of reforms that are being delivered including: Working Together 2023 and the delivery of area partnerships, *Every Child*

Achieving and Thriving education and SEND reforms (February 2026), and the Families First reforms.

There is no acknowledgement of the staff shortages and need for staffing created by a 3UA model. There is no acknowledgement of the complexities of disaggregation of the designated schools grant and the implication of financial challenges as a result.

Housing and homelessness services would be more inconsistent and financially fragile under three authorities, particularly given higher demand pressures in Oxford and patterns of demand being inconsistent around the rest of the county. Partnership working would become more complex and less coherent.

Fire and Rescue

An independent analysis of the likely cost of a freestanding Oxfordshire Fire and Rescue Authority shows that this could be between £34m and £50m at the maximum and would likely be somewhere between those. Compared to other freestanding fire authorities it would be relatively small even at the higher end of that range so on-going financial sustainability would likely be an issue unless the service merged with another fire authority adding further complexity to the implementation of the proposal. A merger would most likely be with Berkshire Fire and Rescue Service unless legislative changes permit a Foundation Strategic Authority to take on this responsibility.

The ability to fund capital works and any increases in costs for new vehicles above the existing planned level, would also be challenging as this would be reliant on capital receipts from the existing OFRS property estate, revenue contributions, or borrowing which would impact on on-going revenue costs.

There would be diseconomies arising from the requirement for additional governance and activity such as the need to develop and agree a budget and produce a separate statement of accounts. Ongoing commissioning of effective value for money support services including those critical for delivery of an emergency service would be challenging for a service of this scale.

The level of reserves and balances that would be disaggregated would be relatively small. A smaller organisation, especially with lower levels of financial reserves, would be less financially resilient to sudden events. 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. It would also be less able to cope with the costs of major incidents or accidents. 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.

Q6. Local views and equality

The proposal's engagement appears focused on Oxford. There is limited evidence of meaningful engagement with residents in the proposed North Oxfordshire, Ridgeway or West Berkshire areas, or with communities proposed for inclusion in Greater Oxford. With no political proponents championing this from of the Ridgeway Council (significantly altered from the Ridgeway promoted in the 2UA option) or the North Oxfordshire council, it is unclear whether effective future political and civic leadership would emerge. It is unlikely to do so organically, especially in North Oxfordshire.

Engagement questions were leading and did not address major service responsibilities such as social care or SEND. Quotes used in the proposal disproportionately reflect Oxford-centric views. The other two council areas (Northern Oxfordshire and Ridgeway) seem largely ignored, particularly regarding the needs of residents.

The proposal mentions conducting two Oxford Resident Panel surveys on the 'Future of local Government for Oxford' but does not mention conducting similar for residents of the proposed Northern Oxfordshire and Ridgeway areas. Additionally, whilst the proposal overly-focuses on the Greater Oxford Council it even seems to ignore the wishes of some of the villages it wants to subsume into this Greater Oxford. For example, Kidlington has recently changed its status from a village to a town after Kidlington Parish Council voted unanimously following a consultation with residents. In the Parish Council proposal for this change they explicitly state that part of the reason for doing this is because they do not want to be subsumed into a Greater Oxford Council and will be strongly opposing the 3UA proposal. The engagement quotes in the 3UA proposal do not reference Kidlington or present any positive feedback from residents there as to why they would welcome the Greater Oxford Council.

Overall, the proposal cannot be said to be informed by local views, as the evidence provided in the proposal suggests that it has only been informed by views in Oxford. There is therefore a huge risk that the unitary councils in Ridgeway and Northern Oxfordshire will not meet local needs, as they have not been designed or informed by local views.

Q7. Devolution

Smaller is not better when it comes to devolution. A single council is easier for government and regional partners to work with, providing a single point of contact, avoiding duplication and an inconsistent approach to regional priorities. Smaller unitaries would lack the financial resilience and strategic capacity needed to deliver on devolved powers.

The 3UA proposal argues that Oxford as a city would not be politically represented on a future combined authority. This could be addressed through the appointment process that the future council agrees in its constitution.

Fragmenting Oxfordshire into three unitaries would weaken the county's voice within a strategic authority, be it foundational or mayoral, and create competing interests. Government guidance favours larger, strategic partners for devolution which can best be found in the One Oxfordshire proposal with a single, unified, voice for the county.

Q8. Community engagement and neighbourhood empowerment

The proposal risks fragmenting local identity and representation and gives limited attention to town and parish councils. Neighbourhood Area Committees are insufficiently defined and risk adding bureaucracy without guaranteed empowerment.

This will be particularly detrimental to the towns and villages that would become part of Greater Oxford, in particular Kidlington, Botley and Wheatley who would face a potential loss of identity under this proposal.

There is very little mention of town and parish councils in the 3UA proposal, and their engagement. The One Oxfordshire model builds on a strong network of parish and town councils, ensuring that neighbourhood governance is integrated with, not layered on top of, existing local democratic institutions. The County Council has a developed Town and Parish Council engagement strategy and as part of the one unitary proposal, the council commits to strengthen local democracy through robust neighbourhood governance, area committees and closer partnerships with town and parish councils. A single county unitary will use its scale and resources to work to support all parish and town councils to participate as much as they want to in their places. A clear and dedicated point of contact will be established, and a learning and development programme and advice hub will be delivered.

A single county unitary can provide consistent, well-resourced neighbourhood governance across Oxfordshire, strengthening local democracy while avoiding duplication and inequity.

10. This is a proposal that is accompanied by a request that the Secretary of State considers boundary change or that affects wider public services. To what extent do you agree or disagree that the proposal sets out a strong public services and financial sustainability justification for these changes?

Strongly disagree.

11. If you would like to, please use this free text box to explain your answer to question 10.

A. Oxfordshire County Council believes that the incorporation of West Berkshire does not meet the government's request for reorganisation.

- It would place Oxfordshire on a weaker financial footing – West Berkshire Council is in receipt of exceptional financial support (EFS) from the government and has received in principle approval for a further £30m EFS in 2026/27 in addition to £20m for 2025/25 (revised up from £3.0m) and £13m for 2024/25. The government expect local authorities seeking additional support to have robust plans to deliver the improvements and service transformation required to help them to return to financial stability over the multi-year settlement. The on-going, and escalating, requirement for EFS means that including West Berkshire Council would import significant and unnecessary financial risk into Ridgeway Council from day one. It would also add further complexity and risk to transformation costs and savings. The proposal argues that West Berkshire is too small to survive on its own and that the 3UA model represents the greater good. This means the model is not about what's best for Oxfordshire, but about Oxfordshire residents 'saving' West Berkshire. It is not in Oxfordshire's interests to subsidise or 'save' West Berkshire.
- Including West Berkshire would raise planning challenges - Reading is very tightly bounded and much of West Berkshire growth effectively forms suburban Reading. 74% of West Berkshire is protected within the North Wessex Downs National Landscape. West Berkshire has a closer functional relationship with Reading, and creating a firmer boundary between the two authorities could create unnecessary friction, such as storing up housing conflict and duty to cooperate issues for the future.
- There is limited travel to work pattern between West Berkshire and Oxfordshire.
- There are extensive shared service arrangements between existing Berkshire and surrounding councils. West Berkshire itself is either a partner or lead for over 30 shared service arrangements, removal from these shared service contracts would be felt by all Berkshire and surrounding councils at a critical and fragile time and may serve to undermine the stability their neighbouring authorities.
- It would create a ceremonial boundary change between Oxfordshire and Berkshire and require additional boundary adjustments across Oxfordshire and West Berkshire.
- Oxfordshire is a recognised and significant geography, with established economic, social and administrative coherence and a strong unified voice for the county at a future MSA table. Including West Berkshire would break this coherence, creating a less logical geography for local government and a weaker voice for the MSA.
- It would create unnecessary and costly disruption of Oxfordshire Fire and Rescue Service, the coroners service and the boundaries of the Lieutenancy, which all operate on an Oxfordshire footprint in addition to the complete disaggregation of services such as SEND, adult and children's social care and transport.
- Finally, as mentioned in Q6 B, there is no evidence provided in the proposal to suggest residents of West Berkshire want these changes to happen. Where West Berkshire is discussed, the proposal frames inclusion as West Berkshire being "too small to survive on its own", and Ridgeway providing financial sustainability and risk

spreading. This is a technocratic argument, not a democratic one. There is no claim that residents want this outcome, only that it is deemed necessary.

DRAFT