

CABINET
17 March 2026

**Local Government Reorganisation in Oxfordshire: Statutory
consultation response**

Report by Deputy Chief Executive (S151 Officer)

RECOMMENDATION

1. **The Cabinet is RECOMMENDED to:**
 - (a) **approve the submission of three consultation responses (Annex 1, 2 and 3) to the Ministry for Housing Communities, and Local Government (MHCLG)'s consultation on local government reorganisation (LGR) in Oxfordshire as requested by the Minister of State for Local Government's letter on 5 February 2026.**
 - (b) **Delegate authority to the Deputy Chief Executive and S151 Officer in consultation with the Leader to make any changes to the text/and or formatting of the submissions prior to submission to government whilst not materially affecting the overall content of the responses**

Executive Summary

2. On 5 February 2025, an invitation from the then Minister of State of Local Government and English Devolution to submit proposals for LGR by 28 November 2025 was received by Oxfordshire's Council Leaders. Three proposals were submitted to government by the 28 November 2025 deadline: a single council for all Oxfordshire, two Councils including West Berkshire and three Councils, also including West Berkshire.
3. On 5 February 2026 MHCLG published its statutory consultation on the proposals for local government reorganisation in Oxfordshire. The government is consulting on each of the three proposals submitted.
4. Oxfordshire County Council is listed as a statutory consultee and must respond to the consultations by 26 March 2026. The draft responses to each of the consultations are attached in annexe 1, 2 and 3 of this report and detail the suggested responses and wording that this Council intends to submit.
5. In line with Cabinet's previous intention, the consultation response favours a single council for Oxfordshire as the Council believes that this would create a single front door for all local authority services across the historic and recognised county of Oxfordshire.

Background

6. Local government across England is undergoing significant reform as part of the national programme of local government reorganisation and devolution. In December 2024, the government signalled its intention to streamline local governance structures, inviting councils in two-tier areas to put forward proposals for new models of unitary local government. In response, all councils in Oxfordshire received a statutory invitation in early 2025 to develop options for how services could be delivered more efficiently and sustainably in future.
7. Oxfordshire currently has a two-tier system comprising one county council and five district councils, alongside a network of 318 town and parish councils and parish meetings. Town and parish councils and parish meetings are outside the scope of this local government reorganisation but are encouraged to consider responding to the statutory consultation.
8. By November 2025, three proposed models for local government reorganisation had been submitted to the Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG). The Ministry published its statutory consultation on the three proposals on 5 February 2026. This council is listed as one of the statutory consultees.
9. Responding to the consultation is an Executive responsibility and so final sign-off will be sought through Cabinet. An all-member briefing on 16 March 2026 will give all members of the council the opportunity to express their views in relation to the statutory consultation. Whilst the Council's official response will be submitted via a Cabinet decision, councillors may also choose to submit their own consultation response individually.
10. The statutory consultation can be accessed via the MHCLG website: [Proposals for local government reorganisation in Oxfordshire - GOV.UK](#) and it is the council's intention to respond to all three proposals:
 - (a) One unitary council comprising the current areas of Cherwell District Council, Oxford City Council, Oxfordshire County Council, South Oxfordshire District Council, Vale of White Horse District Council and West Oxfordshire District Council
 - (b) Two unitary councils. These would comprise of Oxford and Shires Council (Cherwell District Council, Oxford City Council and West Oxfordshire District Council) and Ridgeway Council (South Oxfordshire District Council, Vale of White Horse District Council, plus West Berkshire Council who are outside of the invitation area)
 - (c) Three unitary councils. These would comprise of Greater Oxford Council (Oxford City Council plus a boundary change to encompass parts of Cherwell District Council, South Oxfordshire District Council and Vale of White Horse District Council), Northern Oxfordshire Council (most of Cherwell District Council and West Oxfordshire District Council) and Ridgeway Council (South Oxfordshire District Council, most of Vale of White Horse District Council plus West Berkshire Council who are outside of the invitation area)

Consultation Themes

11. Oxfordshire County Council, as one of the affected councils within the proposals, is a statutory consultee. Other statutory consultees include councils that fall within the Oxfordshire invitation area, neighbouring councils, public service providers including health and the police, and certain other business, voluntary and community sector and educational bodies. The consultation itself is grouped into a number of themed questions which ask respondents the extent to which they agree or disagree with the respective proposal as follows:
 - (a) Sensible geography and economic areas
 - (b) Delivery against outcomes
 - (c) The right size to be efficient, improve capacity and withstand financial shocks
 - (d) The extent to which proposals will put local government in the area as a whole on a firmer footing, particularly given that West Berkshire are in receipt of exceptional financial support
 - (e) Delivery of high quality, sustainable public services
 - (f) The extent to which proposals have been informed by local views and will meet local needs
 - (g) The extent to which proposals will support devolution arrangements
 - (h) The extent to which proposals enable stronger community engagement and gives the opportunity for neighbourhood empowerment
 - (i) If a proposal involves a boundary change, the extent to which the proposal will deliver strong public services and financial sustainability to justify the boundary change
12. For each of the questions above, respondents are asked to state their level of agreement from strongly disagree through to strongly agree. An opportunity to provide additional information to support a submission is also included in an open text box question.
13. The proposed responses to each of the three consultations are attached as annexes 1, 2 and 3 of this report and Cabinet is asked to approve the responses for submission.

Corporate Policies and Priorities

14. MHCLG issued a statutory invitation to Oxfordshire County Council and district/city partners inviting the council to submit proposals for local government reorganisation in line with the English Devolution and Community Empowerment Bill.
15. The development of new local government proposals for the county will contribute towards creating a greener, fairer and healthier county by

streamlining local governance arrangements and empowering communities to have a greater say in services in their local communities.

Financial Implications

16. The consultation responses for each of the three proposals set out the Council's view of whether the successor councils would be the right size to be efficient, improve capacity and withstand financial shocks.
17. The fragmentation of services and contracts and diseconomies of scale, that would arise through either the 2UA or 3UA proposals would increase costs and reduce the ability of each successor council to respond to pressures and national and local funding issues.
18. Compared to other freestanding fire authorities, an Oxfordshire Combined Fire and Rescue Authority would be relatively small so on-going financial sustainability would likely be an issue unless the service merged with another neighbouring fire authority. This would add further complexity to the implementation of the 2UA and 3UA proposals.
19. 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 in both of the 2UA and 3UA proposals. 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.

Comments checked by:

Kathy Wilcox, Head of Corporate Finance

Legal Implications

20. All the functions of the County Council are executive functions unless identified in The Local Authorities (Functions and Responsibilities) (England) Regulations 2000 ("Regulations") or other primary legislation or Regulations as being reserved for Council. The response on behalf of the Council to a statutory consultation constitutes an executive function and therefore the Cabinet is the appropriate decision taker.

Comments checked by: Anita Bradley, Director for Law and Governance and Monitoring Officer, anita.bradley@oxfordshire.gov.uk

