

CABINET
14 July 2026

PROCUREMENT OF A STRATEGIC PARTNER TO SUPPORT LOCAL GOVERNMENT REORGANISATION ACROSS OXFORDSHIRE AND WEST BERKSHIRE

Report by Deputy Chief Executive (Section 151 Officer)

RECOMMENDATION

1. The Cabinet is **RECOMMENDED** to:

a) Approve the commencement of a procurement exercise to appoint a Strategic Partner to support the delivery of Local Government Reorganisation (LGR) across the Oxfordshire and West Berkshire councils involved in scope, supporting both the statutory transition to new unitary arrangements and wider transformation objectives across the system;

b) Approve the commencement of procurement on the basis of an estimated contract value in the region of £3.0 million, with the contract expected to commence in September 2026 and run until March 2029 or 12 months following vesting day, whichever is later. The proposed costs will be tested and refined through the procurement process, with final costs confirmed prior to contract award. Costs will be shared in accordance with the agreed 80/20 Memorandum of Understanding, which is the cost-sharing agreement between the councils involved in the scope of Local Government Reorganisation for relevant LGR-related work, with 80% funded by Oxfordshire County Council and 20% funded collectively by the partner councils;

c) Delegate authority to the Chief Executive (in his capacity as LGR Oxfordshire and West Berkshire System Implementation Team Leader), following completion of the procurement process and subject to all required approvals, to take all necessary steps to award and enter into the contract, provided that the final arrangement remains within the contract value and duration parameters set out in this report. Any proposed arrangement outside those parameters would be reported back to Cabinet for approval.

Executive Summary

2. Oxfordshire and West Berkshire are entering a period of LGR which requires a safe and legally compliant transition to new unitary arrangements, while also creating an opportunity to reshape how public services are delivered across

the county and neighbouring area. The proposed procurement of a Strategic Partner is intended to support both the statutory transition and the wider transformation needed to deliver high-performing, financially sustainable councils and better outcomes for residents.

3. Cabinet approval is sought because of the strategic importance of the proposal and the estimated contract value. The procurement will be undertaken on a competitive outcome-based basis, with the contract value currently estimated to be in the region of £3.0 million. The contract is expected to commence in September 2026 and run until March 2029 or 12 months following vesting day, whichever is later. This provides flexibility to support the programme through the anticipated vesting day in April 2028 and the immediate post-vesting implementation period. The proposed costs will be tested and refined through the procurement process before final costs are confirmed prior to contract award.

Background and Rationale

4. Oxfordshire and West Berkshire are entering a period of LGR at a time of significant opportunity to reshape public services, governance and outcomes for residents. While statutory requirements will necessitate a safe and legally compliant transition to new unitary arrangements, the ambition for Oxfordshire and West Berkshire is to go further and use this period as a catalyst for system-wide transformation.
5. The programme aims to deliver:
 - high-performing, financially sustainable unitary authorities
 - improved integration and redesign of services across the system
 - stronger place-based leadership and improved community outcomes
 - a modern, digitally enabled and prevention-focused operating model
6. Experience from other areas and emerging Oxfordshire and West Berkshire planning work indicate that separating transition and transformation can lead to missed opportunities, weaker integration and slower benefits realisation. Oxfordshire and West Berkshire therefore intend to progress both in parallel, requiring a different delivery approach from a traditional LGR programme focused only on day one readiness.

Need for a Strategic Partner

7. LGR is a complex and time-bound programme with an immovable deadline linked to vesting day. The scale of change, the need to coordinate across multiple councils and the ambition to deliver both statutory transition and wider transformation mean additional specialist capacity and capability are required beyond existing resources.
8. A Strategic Partner is therefore proposed to provide targeted support where external expertise and delivery capacity will add most value.

Scope and Role of the Strategic Partner

9. The Strategic Partner will work alongside senior leadership and the implementation team to provide system-wide support and additional specialist capacity for the design and delivery of LGR, including stakeholder engagement, shared design principles and decision frameworks, implementation planning, and independent assurance, challenge and delivery support.
10. The partner will act as a collaborator and system integrator, bridging strategy and delivery across the Oxfordshire and West Berkshire system, while not replacing internal leadership, accountability or decision-making.

Options Considered

11. A range of resourcing models has been considered to identify the most appropriate way to secure the additional capacity and specialist capability required to deliver LGR at pace. The options considered included delivery using internal resources, interim or contractor backfill, interim or contractor programme support, multiple discrete consultancy packages, a lead consultancy or Strategic Partner model, and a full delivery partner model.
12. The assessment considered cost, delivery risk, market capacity, access to specialist expertise, programme coherence, local ownership and the ability to support both transition and transformation. Internal delivery and backfill options would retain local knowledge but are unlikely to provide sufficient capacity or specialist change capability for a programme of this scale. Multiple discrete consultancy packages could provide targeted support but would create additional procurement and coordination overheads and potentially be non-compliant if proved to be disaggregated spend. A full delivery partner model could provide significant external resource but would carry higher cost and perception risks and may not bring in the specific strategic advice and expertise required for this programme.
13. Experience from other authorities who have gone through LGR indicates that a Strategic Partner model provides the most effective balance between accessing specialist capability and capacity, maintaining local ownership and accountability, ensuring coherence across the programme, and supporting transformation while managing delivery risk. This model would provide continuity across commissions and flexible access to external support, while keeping leadership and decision-making responsibility with the councils. In addition, this model would support knowledge transfer and the opportunity for internal resources to form part of the delivery team resulting in a smoother implementation.

Procurement Approach and Timetable

14. The procurement will be undertaken through a competitive process via the best procurement route taking account of the programme timetable. This could be

via an existing framework or under the Procurement Act 2023 via the Competitive Flexible Procedure. Due to the values involved, a direct award is not a compliant option. In either option, a number of bidders will be invited to bid for the contract with a sole supplier being awarded the Contract. A consortium bid could also be considered. The process will be led by Commercial & Procurement in consultation with Legal to ensure compliance with Contract Procedure Rules.

15. The procurement will be outcome-based, allowing bidders to propose approaches and solutions aligned to the Oxfordshire and West Berkshire system LGR objectives. This will be reviewed as part of the market engagement with the potential bidders.
16. Oxfordshire and West Berkshire intend to progress the procurement at pace over the summer so that the Strategic Partner can be identified, appointed and ready to mobilise as soon as possible, with the contract expected to commence in September 2026 and run until March 2029 or 12 months following vesting day, whichever is later.
17. The proposal supports the Oxfordshire and West Berkshire system ambition to improve outcomes for residents through the creation of financially sustainable, modern and effective public services. The Strategic Partner will support the delivery of redesigned and more efficient services, improved system-wide collaboration, digitally enabled and prevention-focused approaches, and long-term financial sustainability.

Financial Implications

18. The proposed contract is currently estimated to be in the region of £3.0 million over the contract period. This is an initial planning estimate, informed by an assessment of similar work carried out previously, and is intended to provide a basis for commencing the procurement. The final contract value will be determined through the procurement process and confirmed prior to contract award, subject to the relevant financial and governance approvals. Funding is expected to be met from LGR programme resources and shared in accordance with the agreed 80/20 MOU, which is the cost-sharing agreement between the councils involved in the scope of LGR for relevant LGR-related work, with 80% funded by Oxfordshire County Council and 20% funded collectively by the partner councils. Expenditure will be closely monitored and managed within the approved contract value.
19. The current MOU is only until the minded to decision (Phase 1 LGR), based on acceptance of the relevant costs by the LGR leads. The commitment for a strategic partner will be beyond this period. It will therefore be necessary to confirm the position in advance to ensure a way of Oxfordshire County Council liability and the agreed formal mechanism for the payment from the system prior to contract award.

20. Oxfordshire County Council LGR anticipates that expenditure plans are being formulated and, prior to contract award, it will be necessary to confirm that sufficient funds are available to cover the final approved value of the contract.

Comments checked by:

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Legal Implications

21. The value of the proposed services is in excess of the services threshold under the Procurement Act 2023 (the Act) and therefore the procurement must be conducted in accordance with the Act as well as the Council's Contract Procedure Rules.
22. Legal Services will prepare the necessary contract documentation.

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Staff Implications

23. The Strategic Partner will provide additional capacity and capability to support delivery of the LGR programme. The role is not intended to replace existing staff but to complement internal resources, provide specialist support and enable internal teams to focus on core responsibilities.

Equality & Inclusion Implications

24. Equality and inclusion considerations will be addressed through the Council's standard processes. The procurement relates to programme support rather than direct service delivery; however, any changes arising from the Strategic Partner's advice or recommendations will be subject to the Council's usual equality and inclusion assessment processes.

Sustainability Implications

25. The proposal primarily relates to procurement of professional services. However, the wider programme ambition includes developing sustainable and efficient service models, including digitally enabled and prevention-focused approaches, which may contribute to long-term environmental and social sustainability objectives.

Risk Management

26. Key risks associated with the proposal include the complexity of system-wide delivery across multiple councils, tight timescales requiring parallel activity, dependency on legal and procurement processes, and uncertainty regarding future unitary structures.
27. The procurement process, specification design and contract management arrangements will be used to mitigate these risks. The Strategic Partner itself is intended to reduce programme risk by strengthening capacity, improving coordination and providing assurance, challenge and proposing risk mitigation strategies.

Consultations

28. The proposal has been developed through collaboration across Oxfordshire and West Berkshire councils and through a working group established to refine the specification, shape transformation ambitions, support procurement activity and inform evaluation arrangements. The approach was also discussed at a meeting of the chief executives on 15 June 2026, where there was collective support for adopting a Strategic Partner model and a clear commitment from the councils to continue working together on this procurement. This reinforces the joined-up approach already being taken through the cross-council working group. Further engagement with stakeholders and partners will continue throughout procurement and implementation.

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Deputy Chief Executive (Section 151 Officer)

Annex: Nil.

Background papers: Nil.

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