

This report is public	
Local Government Reorganisation – Full Proposal	
Committee	Special Executive
Date of Committee	13 November 2025
Portfolio Holder presenting the report	Council Leader, Councillor David Hingley
Date Portfolio Holder agreed report	28 October 2025
Report of	Executive Director of Resources, Stephen Hinds

Purpose of report

This report summarises the council's Full Proposal for LGR in Oxfordshire which is due to be submitted to the Government on 28 November 2025. The Full Proposal makes the case for two unitary councils underpinned by a robust options appraisal and thorough financial analysis. Two unitary councils will help ensure the future of local government in Oxfordshire is cost effective, simplified and strengthened whilst unlocking further devolution for the county.

1. Recommendations

The Executive resolves to:

- 1.1 To consider the views of Council of 10 November 2025 on the final proposal.
- 1.2 Approve the Council's final proposal for Local Government Reorganisation in Oxfordshire of a two-unitary model comprising:
 - One unitary authority covering the boundaries of Cherwell District Council, West Oxfordshire District Council, and Oxford City Council, with the working title 'Oxford & Shires'.
 - A second unitary authority covering South Oxfordshire District Council, Vale of White Horse District Council, and West Berkshire Council, with the working title 'Ridgeway'.
- 1.3 Agree that the Leader submits the final proposal to government by the 28 November 2025 deadline.
- 1.4 Delegate authority to the Executive Director of Resources, in consultation with the Leader of the Council, to make any final amendments to the full proposal and associated documentation prior to submission.

2. Executive Summary

- 2.1 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. It indicated the Government's aim to reorganise and simplify the structures of councils in England by replacing county and district councils with unitary authorities (LGR – local government reorganisation) and devolve more powers and funding from national to local government primarily through strategic mayoral authorities covering one or several of the new unitary authorities (devolution).
- 2.2 On 5 February 2025, the Government wrote to the Leaders of all principal authority two tier Councils in England, including those in Oxfordshire. This was a formal invitation to those Leaders to develop a proposal for local government reorganisation and provided guidance on the development of proposals. The government invited the submission of Interim Plans by 21 March 2025, followed by Full Proposals by 28 November 2025.
- 2.3 Following submission of an Interim Plan by 21 March 2025, this report proposes the submission of a Full Proposal for a two unitary model based on one new unitary council covering the entire existing boundaries of South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse District Councils and West Berkshire Council, with the working title of 'Ridgeway', and a second new unitary council covering the entire existing boundaries of Cherwell and West Oxfordshire District Councils and Oxford City Council, with a working title of 'Oxford & Shires'.

Implications & Impact Assessments

Implications	Commentary
Finance	<p>Local Government Reorganisation is a process that the Government is requiring to take place in two tier local authority areas. Therefore, the council has no option but to meet the upfront costs of LGR that will be incurred prior to unitarisation taking place.</p> <p>LGR will have financial consequences and require a significant funding commitment from councils to deliver. Whilst it is possible that the Government may make a financial contribution towards council costs, it is more likely that local areas will be required to meet the costs of transition themselves as indicated in the invitation letter. The Government has indicated that in its view, savings from unitarisation in line with its criteria, will be more than sufficient to address these costs. Notwithstanding that view, the councils have indicated in their two unitary model proposal, that should government funding be available to support transition costs it will enable the councils to begin with a firmer financial footing, thus aiding long-term sustainability.</p> <p>Whilst the modelling has demonstrated that there is potential for significant savings to be delivered following LGR, it is highly likely that the costs of transition will be incurred both in advance and</p>

	<p>following unitarisation and so incurred by the current local authorities. Once the Government has indicated which of the unitary options it intends to proceed with, the relevant local authorities will need to agree an equitable approach to ensure that costs are distributed appropriately whether the fall prior to or after unitarisation.</p> <p>A review of reserves will take place prior to setting the budget for 2026/27 and a reserve relating to the potential costs of LGR will be proposed to be set aside to meet these additional costs in both 2026/27 and 2027/28. Executive approval would be required to release these reserves in line with the Council's Reserves Policy.</p> <p>It should be noted that the two unitary model proposal includes a full financial case based on work undertaken by PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC), PeopleTwo and supported by analysis undertaken by the Section 151 officers from across the five councils supporting the two unitary model.</p> <p>Additional work will be required going forward, and it should be noted that the process of LGR coincides with the fair funding review and a business rates reset, resulting in a lack of clarity over future levels of government funding for all councils.</p> <p>Michael Furness – S151 Officer & Assistant Director Finance</p>
Legal	<p>Local government reorganisation is governed by the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007. The Secretary of State can at any time invite proposals for a single tier of local government from local authorities and also has the power to direct authorities to submit proposals.</p> <p>The Council has submitted an Interim Plan for Local Government reorganisation.</p> <p>A Full Proposal is required to be submitted by 28 November 2025.</p> <p>The Full proposal is attached to this report. The approval of this proposal is an executive function in accordance with the Local Government Act 2000 under Section 9D(2). This means that decision on the submission of the Full Proposal rests with the Executive. Members are advised to consider all the information contained in the report and the Appendices in order to make an informed decision on the Final Plan.</p> <p>There may be a need for amendments to the Full Proposal to be made at short notice and therefore delegation to make such changes is needed as set out in the recommendation in the Executive report.</p> <p>Following submission of the Full Proposal, the Secretary of State may 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 consults every authority</p>

	<p>affected by the proposal (except the authority or authorities which made it), and such other persons as he considers appropriate.</p> <p>The best value duty is contained in s3 of the Local Government Act 1999 as a result of which the Council is under a duty to make arrangements to secure continuous improvement in the way in which functions are exercised, having regard to a combination of economy, efficiency and effectiveness. The report sets out the financial and other implications of Full Proposal which members are advised to consider in full.</p> <p>Such a fundamental change to public sector services over a two-year timescale will have to be carefully planned and programme managed to ensure critical services are maintained and that the new Unitary Authority is ‘safe and legal’ on day one. The transition and implementation plan will be governed through an agreed programme methodology for each unitary proposal with additional governance arrangements in Oxfordshire geography in order to properly prepare the close down of existing councils and stand new unitary councils. This complex programme management will include risk management considerations.</p> <p>Shiraz Sheikh – Monitoring Officer & Assistant Director Law & Governance</p>			
Risk Management	<p>The proposed two-unitary model for Oxfordshire and West Berkshire reflects a strategic response to national reform priorities, offering potential for improved efficiency and local accountability. However, it brings transitional financial pressures, legal complexity, and operational challenges that must be carefully managed. While no immediate risks are identified, a robust risk register and inclusive planning will be developed and maintained to ensure service continuity, stakeholder confidence, and equitable outcomes throughout the reorganisation process.</p> <p>Celia Prado-Teeling, Performance Team Leader, 28 October 2025</p>			
Impact Assessments	Positive	Neutral	Negative	Commentary
Equality Impact		X		<p>In making decisions, the Council acts in line with its duties under section 149 of the Equality Act 2010, including the need to eliminate unlawful discrimination, advance equality of opportunity, and foster good relations between people with and without protected characteristics. While this report does not identify any immediate equalities implications, a full equality impact assessment will be undertaken for each workstream during the transition phase of LGR to ensure any potential impacts are understood and appropriately mitigated.</p>

				Celia Prado-Teeling, Performance Team Leader, 28 October 2025
A Are there any aspects of the proposed decision, including how it is delivered or accessed, that could impact on inequality?		X		N/A
B Will the proposed decision have an impact upon the lives of people with protected characteristics, including employees and service users?		X		N/A
Climate & Environmental Impact		X		N/A
ICT & Digital Impact		X		N/A
Data Impact		X		N/A
Procurement & subsidy		X		N/A
Council Priorities	N/A			
Human Resources	N/A			
Property	N/A			
Consultation & Engagement	As detailed in the attached report, engagement was carried out aligned to the Government criteria, which included, but was not limited to the public, business, parish councils, members, members of parliament and partner organisations.			

Supporting Information

3. Background

- 3.1 The Government has set out its intention to significantly reform, at great pace, local government structures and implement devolution across England. The Government wishes to see successor councils emerge from the current two-tier system of district and county councils and that those successor councils and the existing unitary structured councils of England must join a Strategic Authority.

- 3.2 All Oxfordshire councils and West Berkshire Council support the Government's vision for simpler and more sustainable local government structures, where councils are empowered to respond to the needs of their communities and deliver value for money, efficient and high-quality services.
- 3.3 At its meeting on the 19 March 2025 Cherwell District Council alongside other district councils in Oxfordshire (being South Oxfordshire District Council, Vale of White Horse District Council, West Oxfordshire District Council) resolved submission of an interim proposal for a two unitary model covering the area of Oxfordshire and West Berkshire. Since March 2025, significant work has been undertaken by officers across multiple teams to develop the Full Proposal.

4. Details

- 4.1 The Government has set out criteria and guidance within the statutory invitation to support local government reorganisation. That guidance includes:
- a) A single tier and sensible geography avoiding creating (dis/)advantaged areas.
 - b) The right size to achieve efficiencies, improve capacity and withstand financial shocks - new Councils must be a minimum of 500,000 with exceptions on a case-by-case basis.
 - c) Prioritises the delivery of high quality and sustainable public services.
 - d) Meets local need and is informed by local views.
 - e) Supports devolution arrangements; and
 - f) Enables stronger community engagement and delivers genuine neighbourhood empowerment.
- 4.2 Whilst four of the six local councils in Oxfordshire and West Berkshire Council support and have developed the two unitary model proposed in this report, it should be noted that two other proposals will be submitted in Oxfordshire. Oxfordshire County Council will be proposing a one unitary model covering the whole of the current Oxfordshire county area, leaving West Berkshire Council unchanged. The proposal can be read in full, when published [Oxfordshire County Council Extra Cabinet 13 November 2025](#).
- 4.3 Oxford City Council is proposing a three unitary model covering a 'Greater Oxford' area which would cover the existing Oxford City council area expanded to encompass most of the area currently designated as greenbelt that is currently in neighbouring districts, a 'Northern' council area covering the remaining parts of the existing Cherwell and West Oxfordshire district councils and a 'Southern' council covering the remaining part so the existing South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse district councils and the West Berkshire unitary area. The proposal be read in full, when published [Oxford City Council, Special Cabinet 10 November 2025 / Oxford City Council Full Council Monday 24 November 2025](#).
- 4.4 The two unitary model for Oxfordshire and West Berkshire proposed in this report, sets out a clear, evidence-based plan to deliver better, more efficient and more locally accountable public services. It will create two new councils that offer the right balance between efficiency and local identity, each servicing around 450,000 – 500,000 people, meeting the Government's criteria and being large enough to be efficient and stable, but small enough to stay connected to communities. The Full Cherwell District Council

Proposal developed by Cherwell District Council, South Oxfordshire District Council, Vale of White Horse District Council, West Berkshire Council and West Oxfordshire District Council is attached.

- 4.5 The Government has outlined that Full Proposals need to be submitted by 28 November 2025. They anticipate that statutory consultation could be launched in the New Year and would likely close after the local elections in May 2026. Following this, decisions on which proposal to implement could be announced before the summer recess. Secondary legislation would then be prepared, to be laid in the House after the summer recess. The legislation could then be made, subject to Parliamentary approval. This would allow for shadow elections to the new unitary authorities on 6 May 2027. The new authorities would then go live on 1 April 2028.
- 4.6 There is consensus among all Oxfordshire councils in wanting to move at pace towards devolution and local government reorganisation, in the best interests of all our residents, businesses and our respective workforces. The ability of a Strategic Authority to stimulate innovation, sustainable growth and infrastructure delivery at a 'regional' scale, as opposed to a single local authority scale, is identified by Government as the key to long term economic growth and prosperity, and the functions and roles of new unitary councils need to be developed to compliment, rather than compete against this background.
- 4.7 Delay in progressing devolution and local government reorganisation, and any misalignment of timing, would significantly increase uncertainty and would not offer the clarity and pace that officers believe is essential to support sustainable growth and deliver transformative outcomes for our communities.

Legal Powers of the Government

- 4.8 The Government has invited any principal authority in the area of the county of Oxfordshire, to submit 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'). The submission of an Interim Proposals by the 21 March 2025 was an essential first step towards developing this Final Proposal, with the requirement of submission to MHCLG being before 28 November 2025.
- 4.9 The Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007 (the '2007 Act') is the legislative basis for the creation of unitary councils. Under section 2 of the 2007 Act, the Secretary of State may invite either a county council or district council to put forward a proposal for a single tier of local government. This proposal can comprise:
- A single tier of local government for the whole of the county (Type A proposal).
 - A single tier of local government for a district (or more) within the county (Type B proposal).
 - A single tier of local government for one of the above that also includes one or more relevant adjoining areas (e.g. all or part of an adjoining county area) (Type C Proposal).
 - A combination of the above Types B or C proposals.
- 4.10 Until 25 January 2008, the Secretary of State (SoS) was able to direct principal councils to bring forward a proposal, which meant that the SoS could effectively
- Cherwell District Council

force unitarisation where proposals were not made voluntarily. However, this provision expired on 25 January 2008. The indications in the White Paper are that the Government will reintroduce this power of direction in due course – although the 2007 Act will need to be amended or replaced to enable this. This outcome is likely to be delivered in the English Devolution Bill, which is expected to come into force sometime in 2026.

- 4.11 Proposals under section 2 of the 2007 Act do not require a consensus from every authority affected by it. However, where a proposal is made jointly by every authority, the requirements on the SoS to consult are reduced to exclude consultation with every authority affected.
- 4.12 Subject to consultation requirements, following the receipt of a proposal under section 2 of the 2007 Act, the SoS may implement the proposal, with or without modification under section 7 of the 2007 Act. They may also seek advice from the Local Government Boundary Commission for England ('Commission') who may make an alternative proposal which the SoS may implement with or without modification.
- 4.13 There are no other specific timescales which the SoS must adhere to when taking a decision, but the SoS must consult with authorities affected by the proposal (other than those which made it) and such other persons as they think appropriate before reaching a decision.
- 4.14 Proposals regarding the creation of a new authority (unitary) are executive functions. There is a statutory presumption that all local authority functions not reserved to the Council in Regulations will be the responsibility of the executive (section 9(D)(2) Local Government Act 2000).
- 4.15 Based on the criteria within the invitation letter and White Paper on what proposals must include and what should be avoided, the two unitary model proposed in this report meets the criteria for submission.

5. Alternative Options and Reasons for Rejection

- 5.1 The following alternative options have been identified and rejected for the reasons as set out below.

Option 1: Not to submit the Full Proposal.

This would be contrary to the direction issued by the Government and therefore not recommended.

Option 2: Other options contain the Full Proposal.

The other options are set out in the attached Full Proposal and rejected for the reasons provided within.

6 Conclusion and Reasons for Recommendations

- 6.1 This report proposes the submission of a Full Proposal for a two unitary model based on one new unitary council covering the entire existing boundaries of South

Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse District Councils and West Berkshire Council, with the working title of 'Ridgeway', and a second new unitary council covering the entire existing boundaries of Cherwell and West Oxfordshire District Councils and Oxford City Council, with a working title of 'Oxford & Shires'.

Decision Information

Key Decision	Yes
Subject to Call in	No
If not, why not subject to call in	Report debated at Full Council
Ward(s) Affected	All

Document Information

Appendices	
Appendix 1	Full Proposal document: Two Councils. One better future. (The appendices to the proposal document are attached individually)
Appendix 2	Previous Executive LGR interim plan report and decision – Special Executive, 19 March 2025
Background Papers	None
Reference Papers	Letter from Secretary of State to Leaders to two-tier councils in Oxfordshire, 5 February 2025
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Executive Director Approval	28 October 2025