

This report is public	
Initial Response to Government: Statutory Invitation for Local Government Reorganisation	
Committee	Executive
Date of Committee	19 March 2025
Portfolio Holder presenting the report	Councillor David Hingley, Leader of the Council
Date Portfolio Holder agreed report	11 March 2025
Report of	Stephen Hinds, Corporate Director Resources and Transformation

Purpose of report

To provide an overview of the interim plan and each of the proposal for local government reorganisation in Oxfordshire, prior to submission to the Government on 21 March 2025.

1. Recommendations

The Executive resolves to:

- 1.1 Note the receipt of the statutory invitation received from the Minister of State for Housing, Communities & Local Government on 5 February 2025.
- 1.2 Note the interim plan update as set out in Appendix 1 and the emerging options for local government reorganisation set out in Appendices 2-4.
- 1.3 Note that the Leader of the Council, with the support of Officers, will write to the Minister of State for Local Government and English Devolution to express support for a preferred option.

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.
 - 2.2 Oxfordshire County Council responded to Government to request a place on the local government reorganisation fast track and a request to only postpone the elections in May 2025 if Oxfordshire could be fast tracked on the most ambitious timescales.
 - 2.3 On 5 February 2025, the Government shared that Oxfordshire had not been successful in obtaining a place on the fast track and that elections would go ahead
- Cherwell District Council

as scheduled on 1 May 2025. At the same time, the County Council and all other Councils in Oxfordshire were sent the statutory invitation in which to prepare a proposal/s to reorganise local government across Oxfordshire.

- 2.4 Since the receipt of the statutory invitation, all Councils across Oxfordshire have been working together on such emerging options accompanied by a single interim plan update for the County. That plan, and the three emerging options, are in the Appendix, which will be submitted to Government by 21 March, with a view to submitting final proposals by no later than 28 November 2025

Implications & Impact Assessments

Implications	Commentary
Finance	<p>There are no immediate financial implications arising from the report, but resources will be required to work up the options outlined in the Appendix and ultimately to reorganise local government across Oxfordshire. It should be noted that figures quoted are indicative and these will need to be developed during the period following the submission of this proposal. It should also be noted that any potential changes to Local Government funding (i.e. fairer funding, business rate reset etc.) could have impacts on any future models of delivery.</p> <p>Joanne Kaye, Head of Finance & deputy S151 Officer, 11 March 2025</p>
Legal	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007 (the '2007 Act') is the legislative basis for creation of unitary councils. Under section 2 of the 2007 Act, the Secretary of State ('SoS') 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: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 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. 2. Until 25 January 2008, the SoS was able to direct principal councils to bring forward a proposal, which meant that the SoS could effectively 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 to enable this. This is likely to be done in the English Devolution Bill, which is expected to come into force sometime in 2026. 3. 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

	<p>on the SoS to consult are reduced to exclude consultation with every authority affected.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 4. 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. As the SoS has indicated that feedback on these initial proposals will follow, it is likely that the powers under section 7 may only be invoked following the submission of further proposals in November 2025. 5. 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. 6. 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. 7. These proposals are submitted in response to an invitation by Government and in accordance with the White Paper. White Papers are policy documents that set out Governments intention to create new legislation. The English Devolution Bill is expected to support existing legislation for the creation of new authorities. <p>Shiraz Sheikh Assistant Director Law & Governance & Monitoring Officer, 12 March 2025</p>		
Risk Management	<p>There are no immediate risks arising directly from this report, however reorganisation on this scale will present significant risks and issues, which will be fully identified as part of the work involved in preparing the proposals for submission in the Autumn. A dedicated risk register will be created to monitor and manage any risks related to the LGR.</p> <p>Celia Prado-Teeling, Performance Team Leader, 10 March 2025</p>		
Impact Assessments	Positive	Neutral	<p>Commentary</p>
Equality Impact			<p>There are no immediate equality implications arising directly from the report.</p> <p>Celia Prado-Teeling, Performance Team Leader, 10 March 2025</p>
A Are there any aspects of the proposed decision, including how it is delivered or accessed, that could		x	Neutral

impact on inequality?				
B Will the proposed decision have an impact upon the lives of people with protected characteristics, including employees and service users?		x		Neutral
Climate & Environmental Impact		x		There are no immediate climate and / or environmental implications arising from the report.
ICT & Digital Impact				Not applicable
Data Impact				Not applicable
Procurement & subsidy				Not applicable
Council Priorities	This paper supports all of the Council's priorities.			
Human Resources	N/A			
Property	N/A			
Consultation & Engagement	Political Group Leaders have been appraised of the white paper, and a Leaders group met on Friday 7 March 2025 to discuss progress in the development of options.			

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.
- 3.2 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.
- 3.3 The Government has stopped short of instructing places on how to reorganise local government, and arrive at successor councils, but instead has been clear that areas must work together on a proposal/s for the benefit of residents.
- 3.4 The Government has set out guidance to support local government reorganisation. That guidance includes:

- a) Size/council footprint to achieve efficiency saving – new Councils must be a minimum of 500,000 with exceptions on a case by cases basis;
- b) The delivery of high quality and sustainable services;
- c) Enable devolution to a Strategic Authority;
- d) Empower neighbourhoods and;
- e) Be informed by a level of engagement.

3.5 The Government has requested that Councils commence work to reorganise in two phases. The first phase is to share an update and outline options to Government by 21 March and it is understood that Government will share feedback with Councils at some point after the local elections. The second phase is to commence the development of final proposals and the Government expects all Councils to respond by no later than 28 November.

3.6 Onward Timescales are not yet known for any statutory consultation, but the Government has confirmed that a new Council or Councils will go live in May 2028 with shadow elections to a Council or Councils in May 2027.

4. Details

4.1 Councils across Oxfordshire have been working together to arrive at a set of initial options in which to reorganise local government and move away from the two-tier system. In summary those options are below. The names of those Councils at (b) and (c) are descriptive at this stage: -

- (a) A single unitary Council – Oxfordshire Council;
- (b) Two unitary Councils – City, West and Cherwell Council and Ridgeway Council (derived from existing boundaries of South Oxfordshire, Vale of White Horse and West Berkshire Council);
- (c) Three unitary Councils – Greater Oxford City Council, West and Cherwell Council and Ridgeway Council (all with varying degrees of boundary changes driven by an extension of the existing boundaries of Oxford City Council).

4.2 With respect to Option 2 in particular, this option emphasizes the potential for improved public services. By building on existing practices and collaborative ventures in areas like revenue collection, waste management, and social care, the new councils are expected to sustain and enhance high-quality service delivery. There is a particular focus on maintaining and building upon current strengths in children's and adult services.

4.3 Enhancing community engagement is another central theme. The plan outlines opportunities for strengthened local input and neighbourhood empowerment, with mechanisms like Area Oversight Boards and improved collaboration with Town and Parish councils. The new model aims to preserve distinct local identities while fostering a unified approach to public services and local governance.

4.4 The analysis anticipates significant efficiency savings from the transition. Drawing on modelling work, there is an expectation of annual savings in the region of £20m–£30m, with additional transformational benefits potentially generating further

financial gains. Although detailed modelling remains in progress, these savings, alongside reduced transition costs, form a strong economic case for the two unitary model.

- 4.5 Finally, the plan highlights the benefits for strategic devolution and economic growth. The restructured councils would provide a stronger, unified voice within a devolution framework, aligning with key regional growth corridors like the Oxford-Cambridge Growth Corridor. This alignment is expected to unlock further opportunities for local innovation, infrastructure investment, and overall economic development.

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: The Council may not wish to submit any proposals to Government in which to reorganise local government. Given the Government's stated expectation that areas should submit proposals, this option is not recommended.

6 Conclusion and Reasons for Recommendations

- 6.1 This proposed option is in line with the guidance from central Government and identifies the submission and members are asked to both note the receipt of the statutory invitation received from the Minister of State for Housing, Communities & Local Government on 5 February 2025, and to note the interim plan update as set out in Appendix 1 and the emerging options for local government reorganisation set out in the Appendices 2, 3 and 4.

Decision Information

Key Decision	No
Subject to Call in	No
If not, why not subject to call in	The Chairman of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee has agreed to waive call-in of the decision as the deadline to call-in would be after the deadline to submit the initial response.
Ward(s) Affected	All

Document Information

Appendices	
Appendix 1	Local Government Reform Plan
Appendix 2	Option 1 – Single Unitary Council
Appendix 3	Option 2 – Two Unitary Councils
Appendix 4	Option 3 – Three Unitary Councils
Background Papers	Minister of State for Housing, Communities & Local Government on 5 February 2025
Reference Papers	N/A
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Corporate Director Approval (unless Corporate Director or Statutory Officer report)	N/A (report of Corporate Director)