



Abingdon-on-Thames Town Council

Royse Court Offices, Bridge Street, Abingdon, OX14 3HU

Cherie Carruthers, Town Clerk/Chief Executive

Telephone: 01235 522642

Email: enquiries@abingdon.gov.uk

Website: www.abingdon.gov.uk

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Five councils launch ambitious plan for local government reform

Change is coming to local government across England, and five councils have worked together to create a proposal for two new, innovative and locally accountable unitary authorities for Oxfordshire and West Berkshire that will tackle existing inefficiencies, improve services, and support local communities in response to the government's call for reform of council structures.

The proposal is one of three being put forward for the area and has the potential to save the most money of all the options – with possible savings reaching £59.8m a year. It would create authorities that are big enough to be efficient, stable and reliable, but local enough to care and be responsive to communities.

The proposal would create two councils covering the following geographical areas:

- **Oxford and Shires Council** would comprise all of the existing district areas of Cherwell, Oxford City and West Oxfordshire.
- **Ridgeway Council** would be made up of the whole of West Berkshire Council's area and all of the existing district areas of South Oxfordshire and the Vale of White Horse.

The proposal has been designed to meet the criteria set out by the government earlier this year. The criteria called for all proposals to be for councils that serve populations of around 500,000, are financially stable, deliver high-quality services, are responsive to the needs of communities, and support positive growth across the region.

The key benefits of the proposal would be:

- Significant cost savings and financial stability – helping to protect key services. Financial modelling indicates this proposal has the potential to generate the highest level of ongoing financial savings and provides the best combined financial resilience among the three proposals being submitted for Oxfordshire and West Berkshire.
- Reimagined service delivery, addressing concerns raised by residents during widespread public engagement earlier this year.
- Sustainable growth for Oxford, market towns and rural areas, balancing the needs of different communities and delivering more jobs, better transport and the right homes in the right places.
- A high standard of democratic representation with councils that are the right size to respond to the needs of individual communities.

Financial modelling shows the new councils have the potential to save around £59.8m per year after paying off initial transition costs, which looks like the highest saving of the three models proposed in Oxfordshire and West Berkshire. These savings would come from reducing the number of councils and adopting a new, innovative approach to service delivery. It would also help to minimise the disaggregation risks associated with splitting upper-tier services, as the proposal involves two existing upper-tier councils.

The proposal sets out plans to make services more cost-effective while improving outcomes. Oxfordshire County Council is currently responsible for around 85 per cent of the council spending in its area, with a significant proportion of that going on Adults' Social Care and Children's Services. Research shows that these services can often be less efficient across a large area like Oxfordshire, where the average spend per person is above the national average, while demand is low. The proposal includes a new, local approach to these services that would reduce costs while delivering a much more local, responsive, and improved service.

In line with national guidance, each council will have just under 100 councillors providing good democratic representation at a level local enough to allow councillors to understand their communities.

The proposed councils would turbocharge economic growth by focusing on the unique nature of each area. Oxford & Shires would focus on growth linked to Oxford's world-class innovation and knowledge economy and the wider area's world-class engineering sector and booming rural economy. Ridgeway would focus on making the most of advanced research, rural enterprise, and connectivity across the M4 and A34 corridors.

The councils would support sustainable housing growth, combined with much better transport planning, to manage the growth of Oxford and the wider area in a practical way. This would allow Oxford to flourish as a global brand, not just as an island within the county, but as part of the wider region. It will also reduce the requirement to build on the green belt, which itself could place more pressure on Oxford's strained services, increase congestion, and damage the character of the city.

The proposal will be considered by councils across Oxfordshire and West Berkshire in the coming weeks, before it is submitted to the government by the deadline of 28 November.

While the local councils will formally decide which proposal to endorse at their meetings, the ultimate decision on which is taken forward will sit with the government.

It is anticipated that the government will then consult with residents and stakeholders on all proposals for the area in 2026 before deciding which model is put in place in early summer. The new council or councils are expected in 2028.

Residents can read the full proposal or an abridged version on the website <http://twocouncils.org>. The proposal covers all key aspects, including how services will be run, financial modelling, implementation plans and vision for the future.

Cllr David Hingley, Leader of Cherwell District Council, said: “Our proposal for two new unitary councils will create authorities that are designed around what our communities truly need. They will be locally accountable to their residents and underpinned by sound finances, positioning them to serve and empower future generations.

“By drawing from the strengths of all parts of Oxfordshire, Oxford and West Berkshire, these councils will be the right size to deliver for our residents and businesses – enterprising, connected and ready to meet local priorities.”

Cllr David Rouane, Leader of South Oxfordshire District Council, said: “Residents have been clear; they want councils to be efficient while delivering better services. They also need to represent their communities and deliver on their behalf. This is the opportunity to address current problems, and this proposal creates councils that will deliver better services, save money, and positively tackle big topics such as infrastructure and housing growth in a way that works for local communities.

Cllr Bethia Thomas, Leader of the Vale of White Horse District Council, said: “This is a once in a generation opportunity – and we need to think about what will truly deliver for our communities both now and in the future.

“We believe that means basing the councils on existing communities and a shared history and sense of identity while also being forward-thinking and innovative. It is an opportunity to be bold and to redesign councils, so they are fit for the future and fit to serve the places we hold dear.”

Cllr Jeff Brooks, Leader of West Berkshire Council, said: “It’s important that through LGR we deliver the best option for our residents. This proposal is about creating councils that are big enough to cope, but small enough to care. It could save the most money of all the proposals and take a modern and innovative approach to service delivery, learning from our good work locally but also from other areas.

“It will help us proactively tackle the financial challenges facing West Berkshire as a small unitary authority whilst preserving the character and communities we hold dear.”

Cllr Andy Graham, Leader for West Oxfordshire District Council, said: “We were clear that residents needed to come first in any discussions around future options for local government. The feedback we have received over the last several months has shaped this proposal, so it truly reflects our communities, both now and in the future.

“We wanted to build on the obvious benefits of a two-unitary option while creating something that is new, forward-thinking and makes the most of this change in approach to deliver more for local people while protecting the services they currently value.”

More information on the proposal is available at <https://twocouncils.org>

Ends

Notes to editors:

Decision making process

- The full proposals for the single-Oxfordshire unitary proposal and three-unitary proposal are expected to be released on 31 October via Oxfordshire County Council and Oxford City Council, respectively
- All of the councils in Oxfordshire will be considering all three proposals before formally backing one in the coming weeks. In all cases, both Full Council and Executives/Cabinet will consider the position before Executive/Cabinet make the final choice. This is not the case for Oxfordshire County Council, where Full Council will not be debating their position, only their Cabinet.
- The two-unitary proposal has been developed by West Berkshire Council and the Oxfordshire district councils of Cherwell, South Oxfordshire, Vale of White Horse and West Oxfordshire – that’s four of the six councils in Oxfordshire. There has been shared financial modelling along with data sharing with all Oxfordshire councils to provide all the proposals with key information required to develop them.

The democratic papers for South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse District Council will be available here:

- [Vale of White Horse Council meeting, Wednesday 5 November](#)
- [South Oxfordshire Council meeting, Thursday 6 November](#)

Background engagement

- In June, the two-unitary proposal engaged with residents, communities, town and parish councils, public sector service providers, MPs, businesses and many more to ensure the proposal was informed by local views. The engagement included more than 20 public events and over 2,100 people responding to an online survey. The results have directly shaped the proposal, and evidence is provided in the proposal itself.
- The councils have jointly commissioned some external specialist support to provide independent analysis of key areas such as financial forecasts, how to boost economic growth and how to better deliver services such as adult social care. This has meant the proposal contains the most up-to-date and forward-thinking approaches to delivering the best possible structures and services. The costs of this support has been shared between councils to minimise costs.

More detailed information from the proposal

- Detailed financial modelling undertaken by PwC, and supported by CIPFA, show the following. These figures include the cost of transition, the potential savings from merging councils and the potential savings by delivering more efficient services in each model:

	Single county unitary (not including West Berkshire)	Two unitary proposal	Three unitary proposal
Recurring net annual benefit after transformation (year on year savings)	£58.4m	£59.8m	£47.7m

Overall, this estimate shows that in the long term the two-unitary option will be the most cost-effective, and will only take marginally longer than the single county unitary option to pay back the cost of transition.

- A detailed review of Adult Social Care and Children's Services options was undertaken by the specialist organisation [PeopleToo](#) who have worked on these services with many councils across the country. The research backs a wider national trend that shows larger councils are often less efficient at delivering Adult Social Care and Children's Services. Their analysis shows:
 - Significant savings could be made of around £22m - 23m by operating at the two unitary level compared to current county-wide levels
 - Cost per client in Adult Social Care in Oxfordshire are currently between 19% - 23% above the England average – this would be reduced in the two unitary option
 - The number of Children Looked After in Oxfordshire is currently 29% below the national average but cost per person supported is 34% above the national average
 - Under the two unitary options there would be more local commissioning that could come at cheaper cost, more focus on prevention work, better back office processes and less reliance on costly placements
 - The analysis of options shows the two unitary options delivers significant savings, better services and improved resilience.
 - It would improve the service in Oxfordshire while making West Berkshire more resilient and sustainable
- Pressures would remain regarding SEND and demand increases but the smaller authorities would be better placed to manage it

Communications

South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse District Councils
01235 422400
southoxon.gov.uk | whitehorsedc.gov.uk