Notice of Meeting

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Extraordinary Executive

Wednesday 12 November 2025 at 6.00 pm

in the Council Chamber, Council Offices, Market Street, Newbury

Note: This meeting can be streamed live here: https://www.westberks.gov.uk/executivelive
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Date of despatch of Agenda: Tuesday 4 November 2025

For further information about this Agenda, or to inspect any background documents referred to in Part I reports, please contact Sadie Owen (Principal Democratic Services Officer) on 01635 519052, e-mail: sadie.owen1@westberks.gov.uk

Further information and Minutes are also available on the Council's website at www.westberks.gov.uk

West Berkshire COUNCIL

To:	Councillors Jeff Brooks (Chairman), Patrick Clark, Heather Codling (Vice-Chairman), Iain Cottingham, Nigel Foot, Denise Gaines, Stuart Gourley, Tom McCann, Justin Pemberton and Vicky Poole

Agenda

Part I

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1. **Apologies for Absence** 5 - 6
   To receive apologies for inability to attend the meeting (if any).

2. **Declarations of Interest** 7 - 8
   To remind Members of the need to record the existence and nature of any personal, disclosable pecuniary or other registrable interests in items on the agenda, in accordance with the Members' Code of Conduct.

Items as timetabled in the Forward Plan

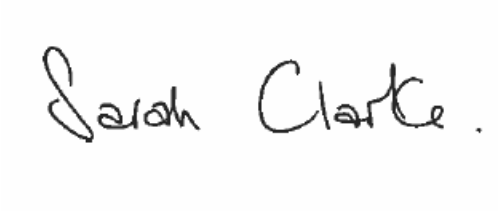
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3. **North Wessex Downs National Landscape Management Plan 2025 - 2030 (EX4733)** 9 - 178
   Purpose: to seek approval for adoption of the new North Wessex Downs National Landscape Management Plan 2025-30 for this National Landscape legally referred to as an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB).

4. **Local Government Reorganisation - Full Proposal for Oxfordshire and West Berkshire (EX4717)** 179 - 642
   Purpose: the English Devolution White Paper published on the 16 December 2024, outlined the government's plans to reset the relationship with local and regional government. The government stated that rebuilding and reforming local government would be the foundation of devolution, with a focus on getting the basics right.

   On the 10 February, West Berkshire Council received a formal request on behalf of South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse Councils to consider the option of a new unitary council covering the three areas. That resulted in the development of an Interim Proposal, that was approved by West Berkshire Council's Executive at a meeting on 19 March 2025.

   The government invited the submission of full proposals by the 28 November, and this report proposes the approval by Executive of the Full Proposal, produced at Appendix A, for submission to Government.



Sarah Clarke
Executive Director: -Resources

If you require this information in a different format or translation, please contact Sadie Owen on telephone (01635) 519052.

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Executive – 12 November 2025

Item 1 – Apologies for absence

Verbal Item

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Executive – 12 November 2025

Item 2 – Declarations of Interest

Verbal Item

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North Wessex Downs National Landscape Management Plan 2025 - 2030

Committee considering report:	Executive
Date of Committee:	12 November 2025
Portfolio Member:	Councillor Denise Gaines
Report Author:	Rachael Lancaster
Forward Plan Ref:	EX4733

1 Purpose of the Report

1.1 To seek approval for adoption of the new North Wessex Downs National Landscape Management Plan 2025-30 for this National Landscape legally referred to as an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB).

2 Recommendation

2.1 That Executive approve the adoption of the North Wessex Downs National Landscape Management Plan.

3 Implications and Impact Assessment

Implication	Commentary
Financial:	There are no new financial implications arising from the proposal to adopt the Management Plan. The North Wessex Downs National Landscape receives annual revenue funding contributions according to the DEFRA funding formula: 75% central Government, 25% combined local authority contributions. West Berkshire Council contributes to the NWDNL Partnership in line with this formula.
Human Resource:	The workforce for the North Wessex Downs National Landscape is funded by DEFRA and contributions from local authorities whose areas overlap with the designated area. There are no known changes to this funding that would have implications for the current workforce and the ability to oversee delivery of the requirements of the Management Plan by stakeholders.

Legal:	West Berkshire Council is required by Section 89 of the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000, as amended by the Levelling up and Regeneration Act 2023, to prepare and publish a management plan for any and all AONBs in its area. The Management Plan is prepared by the NWDNL Partnership acting on behalf of the relevant local authorities to ensure consistency across the landscape. However, in order for the Council to be able to meet its obligation under the Act the Management Plan requires adoption by the Council.			
Risk Management:	The designation of the national landscape and the enhanced duty introduced by the Levelling up and Regeneration Act to 'seek to further' the statutory purposes of Protected Landscapes presents a barrier to development as it must be applied to decision making in respect of planning applications as well as site allocations through any future Local Plan. This has implications for the District in terms of the ability to meet government housing targets and growth. However, National Landscape are required to review the Management Plan for the National Landscape at least every five years. An extension of 12 months was agreed by DEFRA but this will end in November. If the proposal is not approved the Council will be unable to demonstrate that it has fulfilled its obligations under Section 89 of the CRoW Act 2000 which requires the Council to "prepare and publish a management plan which formulates [their] policy for the management of the AONB and for carrying out of their functions in relation to it".			
Property:	None			
Policy:	Section 89 of the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 requires the council to, "prepare and publish a Management Plan which formulates [their] policy for the management of the AONB and for carrying out of their functions in relation to it."			
	Positive	**Neutral**	**Negative**	**Commentary**
Equalities Impact:				

A Are there any aspects of the proposed decision, including how it is delivered or accessed, that could impact on inequality?	X			National Landscapes strive to be inclusive and accessible to all. The Management Plan aligns with and supports this and the ability of people who share protected characteristics to experience and enjoy the benefits of these landscapes protected for the nation.
B Will the proposed decision have an impact upon the lives of people with protected characteristics, including employees and service users?	X			National Landscapes strive to be inclusive and accessible to all. The Management Plan aligns with and supports this and the ability of people who share protected characteristics to experience and enjoy the benefits of these landscapes protected for the nation.
Environmental Impact:	X			The Government has tasked National Landscapes to play their part in nature's recovery in line with its international declarations to manage 30% of our land and sea for nature by 2030 (30x30) and the national targets set through its Protected Landscapes Targets and Outcomes Framework (PLTOF), emanating from its Environmental Improvement Plan 2023. There are ten targets in total with three of these specifically apportioned to each National Landscape. Details of how the North Wessex Downs National Landscape has considered nature recovery and climate change are set out in Chapters 5 and 7 respectively. A Habitats Regulation Screening Assessment has been carried out as required by the Habitats Regulations.

Health Impact:	X			The mental, physical and emotional health benefits of experiencing natural beauty are becoming increasingly understood and appreciated. The Landscapes Review, led by Julian Glover and published in 2019, challenged Protected Landscapes to do more to welcome people and enable underrepresented groups in particular to enjoy these benefits too. Projects and programmes are delivered within the landscape to support access to, and enjoyment of, these nationally important areas. Each National Landscape has a website and literature to guide people to activities and locations that they may wish to visit
ICT Impact:		X		None
Digital Services Impact:		X		None.
Council Strategy Priorities:	X			The Management Plan supports Priority Area 3 (Tackling the Climate and Ecological Emergency), specifically area 3.C (3.14). the management plan sets out how the National Landscape will be protected and enhanced.
Core Business:		X		Business as Usual
Data Impact:		X		None

Consultation and Engagement:	Three stages of consultation have been carried out a) Pre-drafting (formal notification, key questions proforma of LA partners, initial consideration of considerations for the review by NWDNL Staff) b) Drafting Stage (meeting with LA partners, review of chapters) c) Public Consultation (6 week consultation ending 30 April 2025, online, 3 webinars, facilitated workshop for key stakeholders)

4 Executive Summary

4.1 West Berkshire Council is required by Section 89 of the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 to prepare and publish a management plan for any and all Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) that fall wholly or partially within its area. Whilst the legislation remains unchanged and refers to AONBs, these protected landscapes are now more generally referred to as National Landscapes following national rebranding in 2023.

4.2 Section 245 of the Levelling Up and Regeneration Act (LURA) 2023 strengthened the duty on relevant authorities in relation to National Landscapes, and the importance of their Management Plans, contained in sections 85 and 90A of the Countryside and Rights of Way (CRoW) Act 2000. The legal Duty under s.85 of the CRoW Act as amended makes it now a legal requirement for “relevant authorities”, including all public bodies, to seek to further the purpose of conserving and enhancing the natural beauty of the national landscapes. This duty applies to relevant authorities in exercising or performing any functions relating to or affecting land in the National Landscape areas. Helping to deliver the outcomes, policies, and targets of the Management Plan is an important component of fulfilling this Duty.

4.3 The North Wessex Downs National Landscape Council of Partners has prepared a draft Management Plan on behalf of, and in consultation with, West Berkshire Council and other relevant local authorities. This Plan requires adoption by the respective authorities in order to fulfil the legal requirements placed on them by Section 89 of the CRoW Act 2000.

4.4 Successful delivery of Management Plans for protected landscapes can only be achieved by working collaboratively with other local authorities and key stakeholders across the whole National Landscape for each area. The council maintains a close working relationship with its partners in the North Wessex Downs National Landscape Partnership to achieve this and has been an integral part in the development of this Plan to help alignment with the Council’s current and emerging policies.

a) Proposal

4.5 That Council approve the adoption of the North Wessex Downs National Landscape Management Plan.

a) Reason for Proposal

4.6 Section 89 of the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 requires the council to, "prepare and publish a Management Plan which formulates [their] policy for the management of the AONB and for carrying out of their functions in relation to it.''

4.7 Adoption of the Management Plan prepared by the North Wessex Downs National Landscape, for and on behalf of the local authorities that fall within the protected area, helps fulfil this part of the requirement.

5 Supporting Information

a) Introduction

5.1 West Berkshire Council ("the Council") is required by Section 89 of the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 ("the Act") to prepare and publish a management plan for any and all Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty ("AONB") that fall wholly or partially within its area. AONBs remain legally designated as such but are now generally referred to as "National Landscapes" following national rebranding in 2023.

5.2 Section 89 of the Act requires the Council to "prepare and publish a management plan which formulates [their] policy for the management of the AONB and for carrying out of their functions in relation to it." A National Landscape partnership, if such one has been designated, prepares the Management Plan, on behalf of and in consultation with the relevant local authorities for the relevant AONB as a single plan, which is then adopted by those authorities.

5.3 Section 245 of the Levelling Up and Regeneration Act (LURA) 2023 amended Sections 89 and 90 of the Countryside and Rights of Way (CRoW) Act 2000 and introduced a new Section 90A. Under these amendments the Secretary of State may by regulations make provisions:

(a) requiring a plan under Section 89 relating to an AONB in England to contribute to the meeting of any target set under Chapter 1 of part 1 of the Environment Act 2021 ("Improving the Natural Environment")

(b) setting how such a plan must contribute to the meeting of such targets;

(c) setting out how a plan under Section 89 relating to an AONB in England must further the purpose of conserving and enhancing the natural beauty of that area. This legal requirement is known as the 'seek to further' duty.

5.4 It is now a legal requirement for "relevant authorities", including all public bodies, to seek to further the purpose of conserving and enhancing the natural beauty of the national landscape (Section 85(1A) of the Act).

5.5 This duty applies to relevant authorities in exercising or performing any functions relating to or affecting land in the National Landscape areas. Helping to deliver the priorities, policies, and targets of the Management Plan is an important component of fulfilling this duty.

5.6 Successful delivery of Management Plans for protected landscapes can only be achieved by working in partnership within local authorities, and collaboratively across the whole area of the National Landscape. The Council has a key role to play in this delivery. The Council maintains a close working relationship with its partners in the North Wessex Downs National Landscape Partnership to achieve this and has been an integral part in the development of this plan to help alignment with the Council's current and emerging policies.

North Wessex Downs National Landscape Management Plan

5.7 National Landscape Management Plans are required to be reviewed every five years. However, in November 2022 the North Wessex Downs National Landscape Partnership formally agreed to take up the option, proposed by DEFRA, to extend the Management Plan 2019-24 for one year, and approved the required Light Touch Review Statement 2024-25 in July 2024.

5.8 The extension was to enable the review of the Management Plan to follow Natural England's Management Plan Guidance for National Landscapes and incorporate DEFRA's Protected Landscapes Targets and Outcomes Framework (PLTOF). In the event, although the Management Plan review has been informed by earlier drafts, publication of the Management Plan Guidance was delayed until June 2025, after the review process was largely complete.

5.9 The Management Plan sets out the long term goals for the management of the national landscape and sets out a set of overarching principles to be applied when using and implementing the Management Plan. These include:

- All change should be landscape-led, seeking to conserve and enhance natural beauty and landscape character
- Management and change should respect the cultural landscapes and communities of the North Wessex Downs
- Decisions about future landscape change should always be informed by an understanding of the past, using tools such as historic environmental characterisation
- No major development should take place either in the North Wessex Downs National Landscape or where it would harm the setting, except where it has been demonstrated through supporting evidence that exceptional circumstances exist which clearly override the highest level of protection.
- Farming, forestry and other land management systems should be environmentally sustainable and nature-friendly

- Nature recovery should be pursued hand in hand with economically viable farming and land management

- Nature recovery should aim to restore ecological connectivity, contributing to the Nature Recovery Network to build and support resilient wildlife populations in the face of climate change.

- Land management should support climate mitigation and adaptation, using nature-based solutions that deliver multiple benefits and respect landscape character.

- The importance of engagement, outreach and landscape accessibility for all, including underrepresented communities, removing physical, cultural and perceptual barriers and creating equitable opportunities to connect with the landscape and be active partners in its stewardship, should be recognised.

- The value of the landscape for access, education, health and well being should be realised in ways that resolve, remove and prevent conflicts between access and biodiversity and the historic environment

- Change should not future exceed environmental limits of natural resources, eg. demand for water must no exceed levels that threaten the ecology of chalk streams

- Actions within the North Wessex Downs National Landscape should take place with an awareness of the wider context, including the landscape setting and the geography of Big Chalk.

Consultation

5.10 Consultation on development of the North Wessex Downs AONB Management Plan 2025 has taken place in three main stages, as follows:

(a) Pre-drafting:

- Formal notification of the Plan review to local authority partners and Natural England.
- Key Questions proforma survey of local authority partners.
- Initial consideration of considerations for the review by NWDNL staff.

(b) Drafting:

- Meetings with local authority partners to discuss survey responses and provide briefing on associated developments, inc. PLTOF.
- Thematic chapter reviews by NWDNL staff, Partnership members and experts.
- Follow-up meetings with chapter reviewers.
- PLTOF target apportionment.
- Drafting by chapter reviewers and NWDNL staff, with additional external input on selected points.

(c) Public Consultation

- Summary of main changes circulated among local authority partners.
- Six-week public consultation, ending on 30 April 202 .
- Short web survey.
- Online consultation on the whole draft Management Plan.
- Three public webinars, attended by 30-40 people.
- Promotion inc. NWDNL web site, newsletter and social media posts.
- One-day facilitated workshop for key stakeholders – around 75 people invited, 26 attended.
- Some consultees asked for and were given extensions to the deadline so they could still respond.

5.11 In parallel with these stages, a number of other work streams have been running for some or all of this time:

- North Wessex Downs Landscape Character Assessment review: led by Land Use Consultants and managed by the NWDNL staff unit.
- Habitats Regulations Screening by Craggatak Consulting.
- Publication design led by Blooberry Creative Ltd.

5.12 The review process has been guided by the Management Plan Review Group (MPRG), a sub-group established by the Management Working Group on behalf of the Council of Partners to oversee the review. The MPRG has met periodically throughout the process. There have also been regular reports to Management Working Group and Council of Partners meetings.

Processing Comments Received

5.13 For each chapter, each individual response was read, considered and annotated according to whether the comment was accepted, partly accepted or noted. Where a response was only partly accepted or noted, a brief note was added explaining the reasoning behind the decision (except where a comment was simply supportive or did not suggest any change). Where a change was accepted or partly accepted, a brief reference to that part of the Plan to be amended was added.

5.14 The default position has been to accept changes where they correct errors or rectify omissions, clarify or helpfully illustrate the meaning of the text, and/or represent additions or improvements that support the thrust of the Management Plan and the purposes of designation.

Amendments to the Consultation Draft

5.15 Most comments have been supportive and helpful. In a few cases, there was pressure for a significantly different approach to certain subjects. In these cases, as with all the comments, our response has been based principally on the purposes and national status of the designation and the Landscape Character Assessment. A small number of comments have required consultation with colleagues or external experts who contributed to chapter reviews and drafting earlier in the process to check facts and revised or new text before deciding on amendments to the Plan.

5.16 To improve the structure and clarity of the Management Plan in response to comments the Vision has been separated from Chapter 1 Context and Framework and placed on

its own. A new chapter 2 has also been added near the beginning of the Plan which incorporates the Overarching Principles, lists all the thematic Priorities in one place and highlights the role of all stakeholders in implementation.

5.17 The amended Management Plan reflects the broad range of comments received. It is an improvement on the consultation draft: clearer, more accurate and more comprehensive, with better coverage of certain topics.

5.18 Remaining elements to be added to the published Management Plan are additional partner logos, acknowledgments and a revised glossary.

Main Changes to the Management Plan

5.19 A summary of the main changes from the Management Plan 2019-24 (extended to 2025) was circulated to all NWDNL local authority partners at the start of the public consultation period in March. They are:

(a) Updated background and context, including reference to legislation and policy, the global and national nature recovery context, farming and land management support, collaborative initiatives beyond the boundaries of the National Landscape, and the IUCN Green List standard for protected areas and the importance of cultural landscapes.

(b) Reference to the strengthened duty on relevant authorities under s.85 of the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000, as amended by s.245 of the Levelling Up and Regeneration Act 2024, and the increased importance of protected landscape Management Plans.

(c) A new set of overarching principles to guide use of the Management Plan by everyone involved in the North Wessex Downs National Landscape.

(d) A much stronger emphasis on nature recovery, with reference to the Government's Environmental Improvement Plan, 30 by 30, the NWDNL Nature Recovery Plan (2023) and Local Nature Recovery Strategies.

(e) Reference to the DEFRA Protected Landscapes Targets and Outcomes Framework, including the full set of targets and those apportioned to the North Wessex Downs National Landscape.

(f) Greater prominence given to climate change, and the contribution the National Landscape can make to mitigation and adaptation.

(g) More attention to the importance of healthy soils and other opportunities for responsible farming and land management to contribute to the purpose of designation.

(h) A shift in emphasis from responsible tourism towards improving and widening access more generally for health and well being.

(i) Special Qualities of the protected landscape are now referred to as Valued Qualities, in accord with current landscape character assessment practice.

(j) Priorities, designed for all those involved in the National Landscape, replace Strategic Objectives, which were principally designed for the NWDNL staff unit.

(k) Key Issues reviewed, updated and amended where appropriate.

(l) Policies reviewed, strengthened and where possible rationalised.

b) Proposals

5.20 Executive is asked to approval of the Adoption North Wessex Downs National Landscape Management Plan 2025-30.

5.21 A joint meeting of the Management Working Group and the Management Plan Review Group was held on 11th June 2025 to approve proposed changes to the Consultation Draft Management Plan in light of the consultation responses received. The Adoption Draft Management Plan was recommended to the Council of Partners for approval.

5.22 The Council of Partners approved the Management Plan subject to some minor amendments (now incorporated) on 16th July 2025 and recommended it to the local authority partners for formal adoption.

5.23 The Management Plan is presented in the latest designed version to give members a clearer picture of the document they are being asked to adopt. Note that design work is continuing. There will be further refinements to graphics and other illustrations, and the final document will be carefully proof-read to correct any remaining errors.

6 Other options considered

6.1 Whilst there is an option to not adopt the Management Plan there remains a duty on the Council under the CRoW Act 2000 to have such a plan in place and a strengthened duty that the local authority “seek to further the purpose of conserving and enhancing the natural beauty of the area of outstanding natural beauty”.

6.2 Furthermore, the Council has been an integral part of the development of the Management Plan and the consultation process that followed. All comments received were given due consideration, and the final Management Plan has been extensively amended to in response.

6.3 Given the above, the option to not present the Management Plan for adoption has been dismissed.

7 Conclusion

7.1 The adoption of the North Wessex Downs National Landscape Management Plan fulfils the duties placed on the authority under Section 89 of the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000, as amended by the Levelling Up and Regeneration Act 2023. The Management Plan, as proposed, has been given due consideration by the Council as part of the development and consultation process.

8 Appendices

8.1 Appendix A – North Wessex Downs National Landscape Management Plan 2025 – 2030

8.2 Appendix B – Habitat Regulation Assessment Screening

Background Papers:

Subject to Call-In:

Yes: ☒ No: ☐

The item is due to be referred to Council for final approval	☐
Delays in implementation could have serious financial implications for the Council	☐
Delays in implementation could compromise the Council's position	☐
Considered or reviewed by Scrutiny Commission or associated Committees, Task Groups within preceding six months	☐
Item is Urgent Key Decision	☐
Report is to note only	☐

Wards affected: Aldermaston, Basildon, Bradfield, Bucklebury, Burghfield & Mortimer, Chieveley & Cold Ash, Downlands, Hungerford & Kintbury, Lambourn, Newbury Speen, Pangbourne, Ridgeway, Tilehurst & Purley and Tilehurst Birch Copse

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North Wessex Downs
NATIONAL LANDSCAPE

Management Plan 2025 – 2030

Cover image to be updated

North Wessex Downs National Landscape

Produced on behalf of the Council of Partners

Our partners

Basingstoke and Deane

Hampshire County Council

Oxfordshire County Council

South Oxfordshire District Council
Listening Learning Leading

Swindon Borough Council

Test Valley Borough Council

Vale of White Horse District Council

West Berkshire Council

Wiltshire Council



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Foreword

Need photo

Protected Landscapes are our most iconic and inspiring places. They were created from 1949, with post-war Britain recognising everyone has a right to access the countryside – from Northum-berland's dark skies to the South Downs' Seven Sisters. 75 years on, the needs are greater than ever, with nature underpinning our health, economy and climate. That's why this government will empower Protected Landscapes to become greener, wilder and more accessible.

Covering 25% of England, but half of our priority habitats, Protected Landscapes are essential to nature's recovery. This government understands that we will not achieve our Environment Act tar-gets or commitment to protect 30% of nature by 2030 without Protected Landscapes.

Recovering this natural capital is essential to ensure sustainable economic growth. Protected Landscapes are fundamental to strengthening the nation's economic health by looking after the natural resources we depend on. Through nature's recovery, Protected Landscapes protect com-munities from flooding, fight climate change, enable sustainable food production and create green jobs. They also have a vital role in connecting diverse communities with nature - underpinning the nation's mental and physical health and reducing the strain on our NHS.

This incredible potential is beginning to be set out in the Protected Landscapes Targets and Out-comes Framework. However, it will only become reality through the work of Protected Land-scapes teams in collaboration with local communities, land managers, public bodies and other partners.

Protected Landscape Management Plans provide the focal point for all partners to agree a local ambition and a pathway to deliver it, shaping the future of our most special places, and therefore the country. It is vital that all partners work together to develop and implement Management Plans. To support this collaboration, we have issued guidance on the Protected Landscapes duty which requires relevant authorities to seek to further the purposes of Protected Landscapes.

In recognising their importance to the nation, this government has committed to reinvigorating Protected Landscapes with new legislation, resources and tools. I look forward to developing this with you and other partners because it is only together that we can protect and enhance these re-markable places for generations to come.

Yours sincerely

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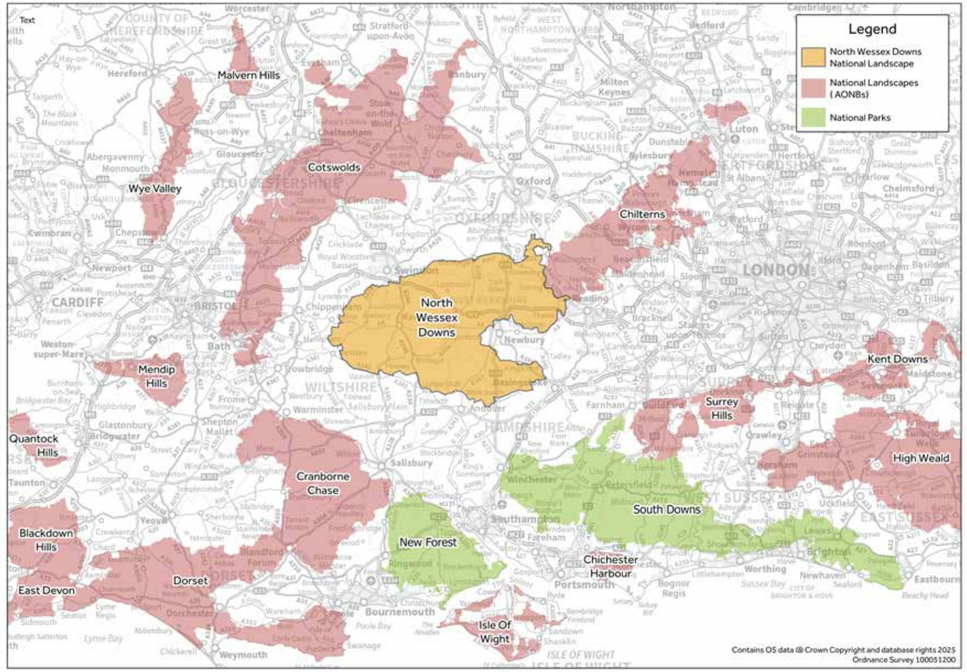


Figure 1. Regional context of the North Wessex Downs AONB with other protected landscapes.
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Introduction

By Sarah Nichols, outgoing Chair of the North Wessex Downs National Landscape Council of Partners.



It has been an immense privilege to serve as Chair of the North Wessex Downs National Landscape Partnership during the past four years. As we look ahead to the 2025–2030 Management Plan, I reflect with pride on the progress made under the 2019–2024 Plan (extended to 2025), during which we strengthened our commitment to conserving and enhancing this extraordinary landscape for future generations.

One of the most exciting developments of my tenure has been our work to seek International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) Green Listing accreditation—an internationally recognised standard for well-managed protected areas. This ambitious undertaking has required rigorous evaluation of our conservation efforts, governance, and community engagement, ensuring that the North Wessex Downs meets the highest global benchmarks. The process has fostered stronger partnerships and deeper collaboration, reinforcing our commitment to sustainability and biodiversity.

Over the past four years, we have faced both challenges and opportunities. There is widespread recognition that climate change and biodiversity loss require decisive action across all sectors, and new initiatives in regenerative agriculture, nature recovery, and heritage conservation have enhanced the resilience of our landscapes. We have also strengthened our engagement with communities, landowners, and policymakers, ensuring a shared vision for the future.

As I step down, I do so with confidence in the dedication of the Partnership, the staff team and our many stakeholders. The 2025–2030 Management Plan builds upon our achievements and sets an ambitious course for the future. I look forward to seeing the North Wessex Downs thrive in the years ahead.

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Sarah Nichols
Outgoing Chair, North Wessex Downs National Landscape Partnership

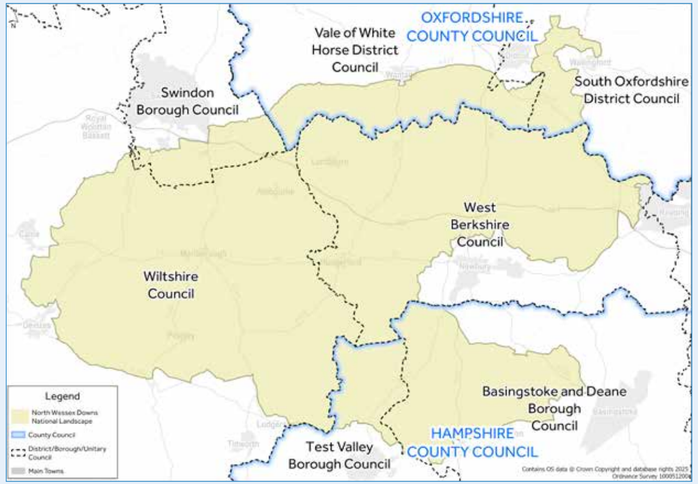


Figure 2. The partners of the North Wessex Downs National Landscape.
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By Gill Haggarty, incoming Chair of the North Wessex Downs National Landscape Council of Partners



The only constant is Change - we must fully embrace it and the challenges and opportunities it presents, in order to enhance and protect our outstandingly beautiful landscape

I step into the chairmanship of the North Wessex Downs National Landscape (NWDNL) Council of Partners at an exciting and challenging time as the accelerating pace of change will materially influence NWDNL and all other National Landscapes.

This, the fifth Management Plan to be published since the formation of the NWDNL Partnership, continues to build upon the successes and achievements of the previous Plans. It sets out strategic priorities for the next five years which must be carried out with ever-increasing impetus in order to ensure that we conserve and enhance this landscape as a place of natural beauty in which both wildlife and communities thrive. To do this we must engage with a wide audience and set ambitious targets.

A summary of the Partnership's activities and achievements during the last Plan period may be found elsewhere in this document.

Nationally, the Government enacted many important changes during the last Plan period which included strengthening of targets, adoption of 30by30* and a review of the first Environmental Improvement Plan (EIP). A significant output of the updated EIP was that the Government recognised the national importance of protected landscapes, as highlighted in the 2019 Glover Review, and in November 2023 all designated Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONBs) in England and Wales became rebranded as National Landscapes. The duty of relevant authorities under Section 85 of the Countryside and Rights of Way (CROW) Act 2000 was greatly strengthened: it now says they "must seek to further the purpose of conserving and enhancing the natural beauty" of the National Landscape.

During the upcoming Plan period even more change is anticipated to environmental schemes and targets, funding, policies and governance; for example, the current review of local government organisation may reduce the current nine local authorities. This underlines the importance of interactions between the NWDNL and its local authorities to support them to deliver their strengthened s.85 Duty.

The biggest current threat to our habitats and species is climate change. The NWDNL Nature Recovery Plan (available on the NWDNL website) identifies habitat vulnerability to climate change and measures that will help our key habitats to be more resilient in the face of increasing global temperatures and changing weather patterns. The NWDNL Climate Adaptation Plan will be published during the Plan period.

The attainment of the IUCN Green Listing accreditation during this Plan period will be an important milestone, as the NWDNL will create the template for other National Landscapes to achieve Green Listing and this framework will provide the benchmarks by which we will measure our progress against both future targets and historic baselines, as set out in the Partnership's Business Plan.

This Management Plan is the culmination of the inputs from many teams and sources and has been widely consulted upon. It is owned by everyone and can only be achieved through close collaboration and partnership with the local authorities, businesses, farmers, communities and individuals who live, work and visit the NWDNL - together we can make a difference.

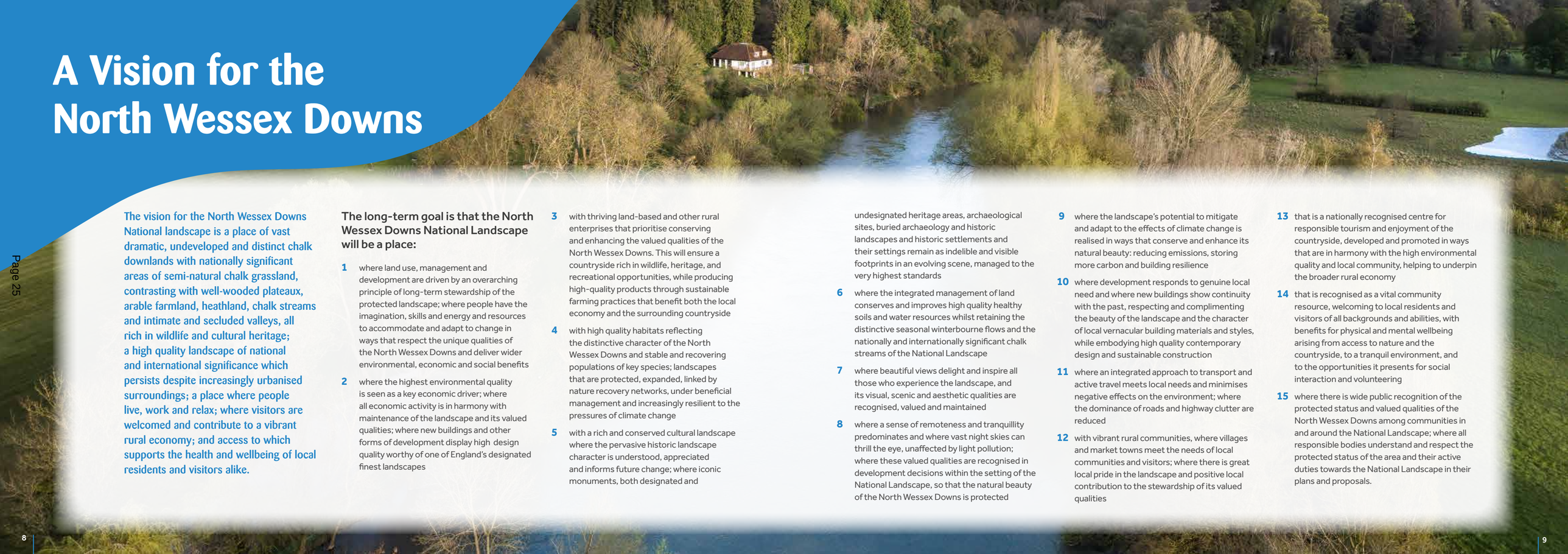
I look forward to working with all the partners of the NWDNL and I would like to thank Sarah Nichols for her chairmanship during the last Plan period as well as all the people that have contributed to the delivery of past achievements and to the development of this new Plan.

Need sig

Gill Haggarty
Chair of the North Wessex Downs National Landscape Partnership

**The UK has committed to protect 30% of land and sea for nature by 2030 (30by30), to support the global 30by30 target agreed at the UN Biodiversity Summit (COP15) in 2022. Our commitment to this international target is enshrined within the 2023 Environmental Improvement Plan.*

A Vision for the North Wessex Downs



The vision for the North Wessex Downs National landscape is a place of vast dramatic, undeveloped and distinct chalk downlands with nationally significant areas of semi-natural chalk grassland, contrasting with well-wooded plateaux, arable farmland, heathland, chalk streams and intimate and secluded valleys, all rich in wildlife and cultural heritage; a high quality landscape of national and international significance which persists despite increasingly urbanised surroundings; a place where people live, work and relax; where visitors are welcomed and contribute to a vibrant rural economy; and access to which supports the health and wellbeing of local residents and visitors alike.

The long-term goal is that the North Wessex Downs National Landscape will be a place:

1 where land use, management and development are driven by an overarching principle of long-term stewardship of the protected landscape; where people have the imagination, skills and energy and resources to accommodate and adapt to change in ways that respect the unique qualities of the North Wessex Downs and deliver wider environmental, economic and social benefits

2 where the highest environmental quality is seen as a key economic driver; where all economic activity is in harmony with maintenance of the landscape and its valued qualities; where new buildings and other forms of development display high design quality worthy of one of England's designated finest landscapes

3 with thriving land-based and other rural enterprises that prioritise conserving and enhancing the valued qualities of the North Wessex Downs. This will ensure a countryside rich in wildlife, heritage, and recreational opportunities, while producing high-quality products through sustainable farming practices that benefit both the local economy and the surrounding countryside

4 with high quality habitats reflecting the distinctive character of the North Wessex Downs and stable and recovering populations of key species; landscapes that are protected, expanded, linked by nature recovery networks, under beneficial management and increasingly resilient to the pressures of climate change

5 with a rich and conserved cultural landscape where the pervasive historic landscape character is understood, appreciated and informs future change; where iconic monuments, both designated and undesignated heritage areas, archaeological sites, buried archaeology and historic landscapes and historic settlements and their settings remain as indelible and visible footprints in an evolving scene, managed to the very highest standards

6 where the integrated management of land conserves and improves high quality healthy soils and water resources whilst retaining the distinctive seasonal winterbourne flows and the nationally and internationally significant chalk streams of the National Landscape

7 where beautiful views delight and inspire all those who experience the landscape, and its visual, scenic and aesthetic qualities are recognised, valued and maintained

8 where a sense of remoteness and tranquillity predominates and where vast night skies can thrill the eye, unaffected by light pollution; where these valued qualities are recognised in development decisions within the setting of the National Landscape, so that the natural beauty of the North Wessex Downs is protected

9 where the landscape's potential to mitigate and adapt to the effects of climate change is realised in ways that conserve and enhance its natural beauty: reducing emissions, storing more carbon and building resilience

10 where development responds to genuine local need and where new buildings show continuity with the past, respecting and complimenting the beauty of the landscape and the character of local vernacular building materials and styles, while embodying high quality contemporary design and sustainable construction

11 where an integrated approach to transport and active travel meets local needs and minimises negative effects on the environment; where the dominance of roads and highway clutter are reduced

12 with vibrant rural communities, where villages and market towns meet the needs of local communities and visitors; where there is great local pride in the landscape and positive local contribution to the stewardship of its valued qualities

13 that is a nationally recognised centre for responsible tourism and enjoyment of the countryside, developed and promoted in ways that are in harmony with the high environmental quality and local community, helping to underpin the broader rural economy

14 that is recognised as a vital community resource, welcoming to local residents and visitors of all backgrounds and abilities, with benefits for physical and mental wellbeing arising from access to nature and the countryside, to a tranquil environment, and to the opportunities it presents for social interaction and volunteering

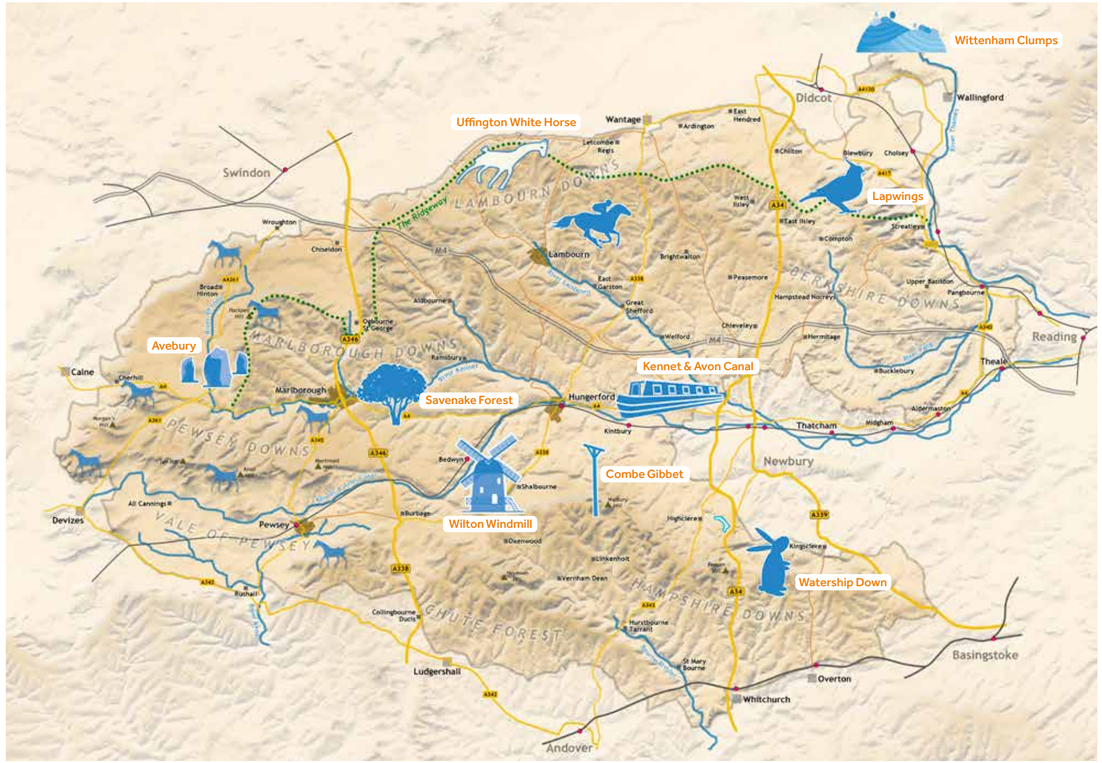
15 where there is wide public recognition of the protected status and valued qualities of the North Wessex Downs among communities in and around the National Landscape; where all responsible bodies understand and respect the protected status of the area and their active duties towards the National Landscape in their plans and proposals.

CHAPTER 1

Context & Framework



Icons of The North Wessex Downs National Landscape



Setting the Scene

1.1 The first three chapters of the 2025-30 National Landscape Management Plan present a vision and long-term ambitions for the North Wessex Downs; set out overarching principles for the Plan's implementation; summarise the priorities for this Plan period; address implementation and monitoring; suggest how all stakeholders can contribute to achieving the Plan priorities; and describe the legal and policy framework for the Plan.

1.2 This is followed by thematic chapters which describe and explain how the valued qualities for which the landscape is designated, set out in detail in the North Wessex Downs Landscape Character Assessment, relate to different themes: Landscape, Farming and Land Management, Biodiversity and Nature Recovery, Natural Resources, Historic Environment, Planning and Development, Communities, and Access, Recreation and Tourism. In each thematic chapter is a list of Key Issues relating to the theme; Priorities for the Plan period; and Policies to guide and inform delivery of the Plan and the purpose of designation.

1.3 The Management Plan is owned by the local authorities whose areas include part of the North Wessex Downs National Landscape; it is their Plan. However, its implementation is the responsibility of everyone whose policies, decisions and actions affect the natural beauty of the National Landscape and its setting.

1.4 The North Wessex Downs National Landscape Partnership has identified Partnership Goals and Strategic Objectives that support delivery of the Management Plan. These guide the work of the National Landscape staff unit on the Partnership's behalf. The governing Council of Partners monitors progress against the agreed Business Plan, which is regularly reviewed and rolled forward.

About the North Wessex Downs

1.5 From their western tip near Devizes in Wiltshire, the North Wessex Downs reach across central southern England in a broad eastward arc south of Swindon, through Oxfordshire to the western end of Berkshire. They abut the Chilterns National Landscape along the River Thames in the Goring Gap north-west of Reading, dipping south and then sweeping west along the Kennet valley, then south to encircle Newbury, encompassing the northern reaches of the rolling chalk hills of the Hampshire Downs. They then stretch back across the northern fringes of the high chalk upland of Salisbury Plain and the low-lying Vale of Pewsey.

1.6 The North Wessex Downs is the third largest National Landscape in the country. This protected landscape extends to 668 square miles / 1,730 square km, an area equivalent to a medium-sized English county. Its resident population is just over 100,000 people[1] (an average density across the National Landscape of 58.3 residents/square km); the two largest settlements inside the National Landscape boundary, Hungerford and Marlborough, have a total population of 14,702[2].In contrast, in the immediate setting of the North Wessex Downs lie the significant urban centres of Reading, Newbury, Basingstoke, Andover, Swindon and Didcot, with a combined population of 720,483[3]. 1.23 million residents live within 10 km of the National Landscape boundary[4].

1.7 Two major highways, the M4 and A34, pass through the area, aligned east-west and north-south respectively. The A4 runs straight through the National Landscape, as does the Berks and Hants railway line from London towards the south west, following, successively, the Kennet, Dun and Avon river valleys. The Great Western Railway route towards Bristol and South Wales cuts through the north-eastern extremity of the area along the Thames valley, then follows the northern boundary, outside the National Landscape but within its setting and clearly visible from the northern scarp. The South Western main line runs along the southern reaches of the National Landscape between Basingstoke and Andover.

1.8 The North Wessex Downs was designated an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) in 1972 under the National Parks and Access to Countryside Act 1949. Following the introduction of the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000, the government confirmed that the landscape qualities of National Parks and AONBs are equivalent.

1.9 In 2023 all AONBs in England and Wales became known as National Landscapes, reflecting their national importance and a consistency of approach across all the National Landscapes. The North Wessex Downs remains formally designated as an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB), and the North Wessex Downs National Landscape Management Plan is legally an AONB Management Plan.

1. Office for National Statistics: Population Estimates for National Landscapes in England and Wales by Single Year of Age and Sex, mid-2022. Available at www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/populationandmigration/lationestimates//2094populationestimatesfornationallandscapesinenglandandwalesbysingleyearofageandsexmid2021andmid2022.

1.10 The North Wessex Downs National Landscape contains all or part of 173 parishes, straddling the boundaries of two county councils, three unitary authorities and four district/borough councils. It sits on a regional divide, with roughly half of the area in [south east and half in south west England,] occupying a central position along the line of chalk-dominated landscapes from the Dorset coast to the northern edge of the Chiltern Hills.

1.11 The North Wessex Downs is one of a family of nationally protected landscapes across England comprising 34 National Landscapes and ten National Parks. Together, these finest, most outstanding English landscapes cover around 25% of the country. The importance of these designated landscapes is also recognised at international level, and the North Wessex Downs is recognised by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) as one of the UK's Category V Protected Landscapes. The IUCN defines a Category V Protected Landscape as:

> ***A protected area where the interaction of people and nature over time has produced an area of distinct character with significant ecological, biological, cultural and scenic value: and where safeguarding the integrity of this interaction is vital to protecting and sustaining the area and its associated nature conservation and other values.*** [i]

1.12 The IUCN Green List is the internationally recognised standard for well-managed protected areas. In 2022 the North Wessex Downs National Landscape Partnership embarked on an intensive process of internal review covering governance, design and planning, effective management and conservation outcomes with the aim of achieving Green List accreditation.[ii] In early 2025, the IUCN accepted the North Wessex Downs as an applicant for Green List status, piloting the standard in the UK. The North Wessex Downs National Landscape Partnership is committed to completing this process during this Management Plan period.

2. Hungerford:5,869, Marlborough 8,833, from: https://citypopulation.de/en/uk/southwestengland/wiltshire/E63005127__marlborough/

https://www.hungerford-tc.gov.uk/stats

3. Reading: 174,200 - https://www.reading.gov.uk/about-reading/borough-profile/. Newbury: 42,260 - https://citypopulation.de/en/uk/southeastengland/west_berkshire/E63005168__newbury/. Basingstoke: 185,200 - https://www.basingstoke.gov.uk/census#:~:text=The%202021%20Census%20population%20of,since%202011%2C%20approximately%2010.4%25. Andover: 50,815 - https://www.citypopulation.de/en/uk/southeastengland/admin/test_valley/E04012839__andover/. Swindon: 233,410 - https://citypopulation.de/en/uk/southwestengland/admin/E06000030__swindon/

4. ONS op. cit.







Why is this Management Plan important?

1.13 This National Landscape Management Plan presents an agreed agenda for the North Wessex Downs for the next five-year period, 2025-2030. It sets out priorities and policies for all those whose activities affect the National Landscape which support the long-term goals set out in the Vision Statement. Working together, the partners can realise these targets to the benefit of the landscapes and communities of this nationally designated, and internationally recognised, protected landscape.

1.14 Responsible local authorities are required to prepare an AONB (National Landscape) Management Plan and review the Plan no less than every five years. The North Wesse Downs Council of Partners has prepared this plan on behalf of the relevant local authorities of the National Landscape.

1.15 The Partnership comprises representatives of the constituent local authorities; the local communities; the farming and rural business community; nature conservation, heritage and recreation interests; Natural England; and the North Wessex Downs Landscape Trust.

1.16 As detailed below, *"in exercising or performing any functions in relation to, or so as to affect, land in an area of outstanding natural beauty"* all relevant authorities *"must seek to further the purpose of conserving and enhancing the natural beauty of the area of outstanding natural beauty [National Landscape]"* and not merely have regard to the purpose of conserving and enhancing the natural beauty of the area. "Relevant authorities" include all statutory bodies and all tiers of government, including parish councils and holders of public office.

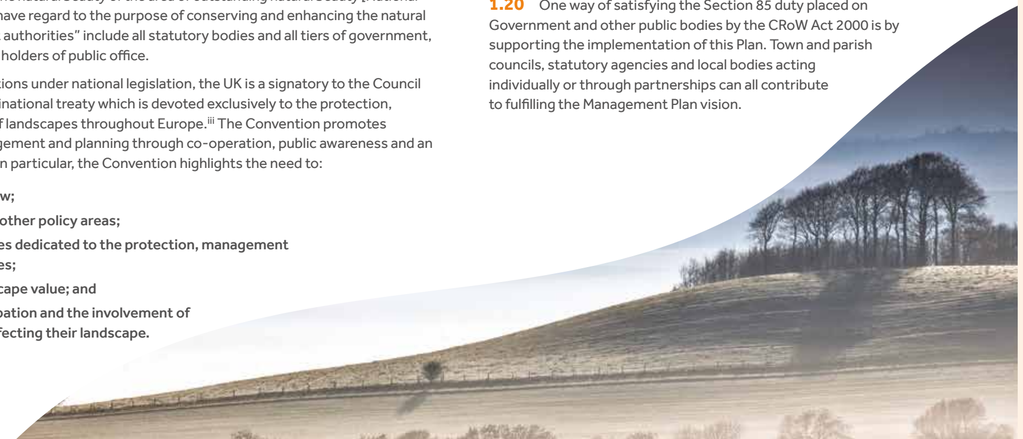
1.17 In addition to obligations under national legislation, the UK is a signatory to the Council of Europe Landscape, a multinational treaty which is devoted exclusively to the protection, management and planning of landscapes throughout Europe.[iii] The Convention promotes landscape protection, management and planning through co-operation, public awareness and an effective policy framework. In particular, the Convention highlights the need to:

- **recognise landscape in law;**
- **integrate landscape into other policy areas;**
- **develop landscape policies dedicated to the protection, management and creation of landscapes;**
- **raise awareness of landscape value; and**
- **encourage public participation and the involvement of the public in decisions affecting their landscape.**

1.18 The Convention encourages the integration of landscape into all relevant areas of policy, including cultural, economic and social policies, with a particular emphasis on the need for co-operation when administrative boundaries are crossed. The North Wessex Downs National Landscape Management Plan is a significant contribution to the UK's implementation of the Convention.

1.19 Successful implementation of this Management Plan is beyond the resources of the Council of Partners and National Landscape staff unit alone. It requires the active collaboration and participation of all those involved in its scope. This is a Plan for the North Wessex Downs in its entirety; it is not for any single organisation within it. Implementation requires the support and involvement of the many organisations and individuals who play key roles in the future of the area, many of whom have been involved in preparation of the Plan.

1.20 One way of satisfying the Section 85 duty placed on Government and other public bodies by the CRoW Act 2000 is by supporting the implementation of this Plan. Town and parish councils, statutory agencies and local bodies acting individually or through partnerships can all contribute to fulfilling the Management Plan vision.



Context and Collaboration

1.21 The North Wessex Downs National Landscape Partnership does not work in isolation: the National Landscape is part of the national network of protected landscapes that includes National Parks, National Trails and other National Landscapes. The National Landscapes Association represents National Landscapes at national level, and leads or guides collaborative initiatives. The North Wessex Downs National Landscape actively participates in ambitious collaborative programmes and initiatives that look far beyond our boundaries. Some current examples are described below.

Mend the Gap

1.22 Network Rail planned and carried out the Great Western Route Modernisation project in the mid-2010s, electrifying the Great Western main line through the Chilterns and North Wessex Downs National Landscapes. Network Rail's failure to have regard for the purposes of protected landscape designation, as required by its duty under s. 85 of the CRoW Act 2000, caused a public outcry from communities nearby and has done major harm to the Thames valley landscape shared by the two protected landscapes between Reading and Didcot. After several years of discussion which did not result in any mitigation of the landscape impact, Network Rail agreed to fund the Mend the Gap programme, which has been run jointly by the two National Landscapes and the community-led Railway Action Group since 2020.

Mend the Gap consists of two principal elements: tree/hedge planting and management to mitigate the visual impact of the electrification, and a larger landscape enhancement programme. The latter prioritises chalk grassland, arable and wetland habitat enhancements; and improved knowledge, access and enjoyment of the landscape between Reading and Didcot. The Programme has transformed the two National Landscapes' approaches to the Thames valley from viewing it as two unconnected boundary zones to a coherent, connected single landscape providing the focus for active community engagement, nature recovery and landscape enhancement. The Mend Gap programme is expected to run until 2028.

Strategic context in relation to the London global city region

1.23 The South East and East Protected Landscapes group (SEEPL) brings together the National Landscapes and National Parks which surround London. These provide the basis for an interconnected network of valuable green spaces stretching from central London across south east and eastern England, and an opportunity to collaborate at an appropriate scale to care for and promote the enjoyment of, these diverse, treasured landscapes by the growing population of the London city region.

1.24 The North Wessex Downs National Landscape Partnership is a partner in SEEPL, sharing the seven key objectives in the group's 25-year vision for the protected landscapes of the London city region to:

- **conserve and enhance their intrinsic value;**
- **recognise and increase their ecosystem value;**
- **maintain natural buffers;**
- **improve access and connections;**
- **promote appropriate jobs and industry;**
- **support physical and mental health and wellbeing; and**
- **engage stakeholders, working together.**

Big Chalk

1.25 One of the ways wildlife adapts to climate change is to move northwards to a new 'climate space'. This means that we need to think about the National Landscape's future wildlife in addition to that currently present, particularly that currently found to the south of the North Wessex Downs. Big Chalk[iv] is a hugely ambitious partnership programme that aims to improve ecological connectivity across and between the calcareous landscapes of southern England from the south coast to the midlands.

1.26 Covering 19% of England, Big Chalk has the primary objective of building a robust nature recovery network over a vast area. This will be achieved by identifying opportunities to transform these landscapes by the application of the Lawton principles on a hitherto unimagined scale. Thriving chalk landscapes can deliver an array of public goods including sustainable employment and products, carbon sequestration, water supply (to tens of millions of people) and quality, flood management and soil stabilisation. Restored species-rich landscapes can also support public health and wellbeing, giving access to beautiful open spaces and connections to our past, for example through chalk carvings, and ancient monuments and byways.

1.27 Due to their history and the character of the underlying geology, these calcareous (chalk and limestone) landscapes in the south of England are the most species-rich habitats in the UK. When combined across the whole landscape, these habitats make it the best place to allow wildlife to recover and adapt to climate change. Given the rarity of chalk geology on a world scale, this is a programme of global importance.

Legal and Policy Framework for the Management Plan

National Landscape purpose and the meaning of 'Natural Beauty'

1.28 The primary purpose of AONB (National Landscape) designation is set out in the Countryside and Rights of Way (CRoW) Act 2000 as "conserving and enhancing the natural beauty of the area". The Act elaborates on this primary purpose, stating that any reference "to the conservation of natural beauty of an area includes a reference to the conservation of its flora, fauna and geological and physiographic features."[vi]

1.29 In 2023, the CROW Act 2000 was amended by s.245 of the Levelling Up and Regeneration Act. The s.85 duty on public bodies, which had required that "a relevant authority shall have regard to the purpose of conserving and enhancing the natural beauty of the area of outstanding natural beauty" was much strengthened. The s.85 duty now requires that "a relevant authority ... must seek to further the purpose of conserving and enhancing the natural beauty of the area of outstanding natural beauty [National Landscape]".

1.30 The legislative amendments also give the Secretary of State the power to:

- **make provision through regulations about how a relevant authority is to comply with the strengthened duty, including things that the authority may, must or must not do to comply with it; and**
- **make regulations requiring protected landscape Management Plans to contribute to the meeting of any target set under Chapter 1 of Part 1 of the Environment Act 2021, including setting out how they will do so, and setting out how "any plan under section 89 relating to an area of outstanding natural beauty in England" must further the purpose of conserving and enhancing the natural beauty of that area.**







[i] (4 IUCN –officially the 'International Union for the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources'– is a global intergovernmental organisation. The IUCN maintains a database of the world's protected areas, categorised using definitions based upon management objectives.

[ii] https://iucngreenlist.org/standard/components-criteria/

[iii] (9 The European Landscape Convention (ELC) is a treaty of the Council of Europe. The UK's participation in the ELC is unaffected by its withdrawal from the European Union.

[iv] https://www.big-chalk.org/

[v] (5 Countryside and Rights of Way (CRoW) Act 2000, Section 82.

[vi] (6 CRoW Act 2000; Section 92.

[vii] (7 Countryside Commission (1991): Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty: a policy statement. CCP 356; p. 5.

[viii] (8 Natural Environment and Rural Communities (NERC) Act, 2006, Section 99.

1.31 These changes have implications for all aspects of local authorities' activity where they affect the protected landscape and its setting, requiring an active commitment to furthering the purpose of designation. Paragraph 189 of the National Planning Policy Framework complements the Duty by stating that "great weight should be given to conserving and enhancing landscape and scenic beauty in National Landscapes, which have "the highest status of protection".

1.32 Natural beauty goes well beyond scenic or aesthetic value. The natural beauty of the North Wessex Downs is a function of the relationship between people and place over time. It encompasses everything that makes the area distinctive: the area's geology and landform, its climate, soils and rivers, its wildlife and ecology; the rich history of human settlement and land use over millennia, its archaeology and buildings, cultural associations; the people who have occupied the area in the past and those who live and work here now.

1.33 This relationship is encapsulated in a policy position set out by the Countryside Agency in 1991, stating that *"In pursuing the primary purpose of designation, account should be taken of the needs of agriculture, forestry and other rural industries and of the economic and social needs of local communities. Particular regard should be paid to promoting sustainable forms of economic and social development that in themselves conserve and enhance the environment. Recreation is not an objective of designation, but the demand for recreation should be met so far as this is consistent with the conservation of natural beauty and the needs of agriculture, forestry and other uses."*[vii] More recent legislation in defining 'Natural beauty in the countryside' establishes that *"land used for agriculture or woodlands, ... as a park ... or whose flora, fauna or physiographical features are partly the product of human intervention ...* [may be] *treated as being an area of natural beauty (or of outstanding natural beauty)."*[viii]

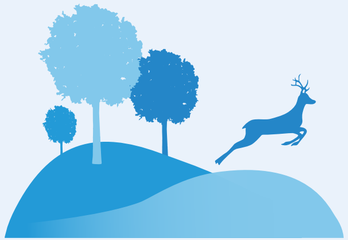
1.34 The North Wessex Downs is thus an ancient, evolved cultural landscape, managed and nurtured by people over time. Those who manage the land are central to the future of this landscape. The North Wessex Downs Partnership is committed to long-term conservation of nature with associated ecosystem services and cultural values in the protected landscape, contributing to a wider network of protected areas. It is inevitable and appropriate that this cultural landscape will continue to change and develop but this needs to be in ways that conserve and enhance its valued qualities.

North Wessex Downs National Landscape

totals

1,730km
(668 square miles)
4 COUNTIES
9 LOCAL AUTHORITIES
173 PARISHES

102,000 INHABITANTS
1.23 million within 10 km of the **NATIONAL LANDSCAPE BOUNDARY**



66 Sites of **SPECIAL SCIENTIFIC INTEREST (SSSIs)** totalling 3,330 ha

2 NATIONAL NATURE RESERVES (NNRs) at Pewsey Downs and Fyfield Down

9 Special **AREAS OF CONSERVATION (SACs)** protecting chalk grassland, wetland and woodland habitats



27,688 ha
OF WOODLAND
(just under 16% of land cover.)
About one-third is ancient woodland

Holds **9%** of the UK's remaining **chalk grassland**



The **MAIN RIVERS** flowing through the Downs are the **PANG**, the **LAMBOURN** and the **KENNET**

Chalk streams support a huge range of plants and animals like pea mussels, water voles and river water-dropwort

THERE ARE 4 RIVER CATCHMENTS IN THE NATIONAL LANDSCAPE



478 SCHEDULED MONUMENTS

15 REGISTERED PARKS AND GARDENS

1 REGISTERED BATTLEFIELD

4,069 LISTED BUILDINGS





Agriculture is the dominant land use in the National Landscape with **84%** of the **LAND CLASSIFIED AS FARMLAND**

15% of the area enjoys **PRISTINE NIGHT SKIES**

73% of the area is in the **TWO DARKEST NIGHT SKY CATEGORIES***



"Vast, dramatic, undeveloped and distinct chalk downlands, rich in wildlife and cultural heritage"

2,858 km (1,776 miles)
OF RIGHTS OF WAY

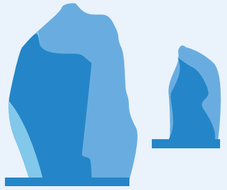
102 km (64 miles)
OF NATIONAL TRAILS





47 km (29 miles)
OF CANALS

UNESCO World Heritage Site
Stonehenge and Avebury is the **ONLY PREHISTORIC World Heritage Site** in England. Listed in 1986, it includes the world's largest prehistoric stone circle at Avebury



CHAPTER 2

Principles, Policies & Implementation



Overarching Principles

1.1 In using and implementing the Management Plan, relevant authorities and other stakeholders should apply the following Overarching Principles.

1. All change should be landscape-led, seeking to conserve and enhance natural beauty and landscape character.
2. Management and change should respect the cultural landscapes and the communities of the North Wessex Downs.
3. Decisions about future landscape change should always be informed by an understanding of the past, using tools such as historic environment characterisation.
4. No major development should take place either in the North Wessex Downs National Landscape or where it would harm the setting, except where it has been demonstrated through supporting evidence that exceptional circumstances exist which clearly override the highest level of protection.
5. Farming, forestry and other land management systems should be environmentally sustainable and nature-friendly.
6. Nature recovery should be pursued hand in hand with economically viable farming and land management.
7. Nature recovery should aim to restore ecological connectivity, contributing to the Nature Recovery Network to build and support resilient wildlife populations in the face of climate change.
8. Land management should support climate mitigation and adaptation, using nature-based solutions that deliver multiple benefits and respect landscape character.
9. The importance of engagement, outreach and landscape accessibility for all, including underrepresented communities, removing physical, cultural and perceptual barriers and creating equitable opportunities to connect with the landscape and be active partners in its stewardship, should be recognised.
10. The value of the landscape for access, education, health and well being should be realised in ways that resolve, remove and prevent conflicts between access and biodiversity and the historic environment.
11. Change should not further exceed environmental limits of natural resources, e.g. demand for water must not exceed levels that threaten the ecology of chalk streams.
12. Actions within the North Wessex Downs National Landscape should take place with an awareness of the wider context, including the landscape setting and the geography of Big Chalk.





Summary of Priorities by Theme

1.2 The Management Plan identifies a set of Priorities for the Plan period under each chapter theme. All the priorities are listed here for ease of reference, and to emphasise the interlinked nature of the thematic chapters.

Landscape Priority

1. Conserve and enhance the natural beauty, tranquillity and distinctive landscape character of the North Wessex Downs and its setting.

Farming & Land Management Priorities

1. Focus, facilitate and support landscape-scale conservation and land management initiatives that support the purposes of National Landscape designation.
2. Promote National Landscape priorities for targeting and investment in rural land management and appropriate development to take advantage of changes arising from the agricultural transition following Brexit.
3. Support the restoration of ancient woodland and creation and restoration of wood pasture, improved management of unmanaged and under-managed woodland across the North Wessex Downs, promoting multiple benefits, including landscape character, wildlife, local economy and skills, recreation and climate change mitigation.
4. Support traditional and emerging land-based enterprises and their markets that respect and promote the valued qualities of the North Wessex Downs and its setting.
5. Promote and support sustainable best practice initiatives for farming, woodland management and all country sports.
6. Encourage Government to provide agri environment support programmes (e.g. ELMS) and encourage and support farmers and land managers to take them up in ways that support National Landscape objectives.

Biodiversity & Nature Recovery Priorities

1. Collaborative action to implement the NWDNL Nature Recovery Plan, aligned with Local Nature Recovery Strategies.
2. Action to meet DEFRA targets and contribute towards 30x30, as set out in this Plan.
3. Develop an expanded and connected nature recovery network in the North Wessex Downs which helps improve resilience to the impacts of climate change and supports the movement of habitats and species throughout the landscape and beyond.
4. Foster a more equitable partnership between people and their natural environment, ensuring land use decisions respect nature, farming practices share space with nature and recreation is effectively managed to protect vulnerable habitats and species.
5. Enable landscape-scale initiatives that respond to the central position of the North Wessex Downs National Landscape within the geography of the Big Chalk.



Historic Environment Priorities

1. Increase the knowledge and enjoyment of the North Wessex Downs heritage and culture by local residents, visitors and the wider public, and inspire a greater understanding and appreciation of heritage to wider parts of society.
2. Seek new discoveries of unknown heritage assets and improve understanding of those already identified, to reveal the significance of the historic environment and cultural heritage of the National Landscape.
3. Develop a better understanding of the current condition of heritage assets of the National Landscape, beyond the Heritage Risk Register.
4. Promote wider use and understanding of Historic Landscape Characterisation to inform and guide strategic planning, development decisions, land management practices and other forces for change.
5. Secure greater protection for archaeological and historic features, sites, and their landscape settings in the face of inappropriate development or management practices, or forms of access that can cause damage.

Natural Resources Priorities

1. Action to ensure that chalk rivers and streams in the National Landscape achieve and are maintained at good ecological status including, for example, appropriate riparian planting to mitigate elevated water temperatures predicted as a consequence of climate change.
2. Collaborative landscape-scale action to mitigate and adapt to the effects of climate change, for example through nature-based solutions (NbS).
3. Develop a Climate Change Adaptation Plan for the North Wessex Downs National Landscape
4. Ensure that all landscape interventions recognise and address the implications of climate change for the valued qualities of the North Wessex Downs.
5. Secure full recognition by decision makers of the importance of the North Wessex Downs landscape for the value of its natural capital and the environmental goods and services it provides to the economy and society as a whole, including heritage, water quantity and quality, healthy soils, food production, wildlife, flood management, carbon storage, recreation, health and well-being.



The North Wessex Downs National Landscape is a visibly ancient landscape of great beauty, diversity and size

Planning & Development Priorities

1. Ensure that the formulation and implementation of planning policies across the North Wessex Downs take full account of relevant authorities' statutory duty to seek to further the purposes of the National Landscape designation, conserving and enhancing the character and the valued qualities of the North Wessex Downs and its setting.
2. Ensure that all development proposals, including allocations at Local Plan stage, are landscape-led and development is based on identified need to sustain the vitality of local communities in ways that conserve and enhance the natural beauty of the North Wessex Downs.

Communities Priorities

1. Support the development of the North Wessex Downs Landscape Trust in pursuit of its charitable purposes to promote actions which underpin the conservation and enhancement of the National Landscape.
2. Support and facilitate community-led initiatives that help deliver National Landscape purposes and Management Plan objectives.
3. Encourage an enhanced sense of respect and pride in the North Wessex Downs amongst local people and their increased participation in activities that raise the understanding and profile of the National Landscape.
4. Assist the development of connectivity, based on principles of planning and integrating multi-functional green infrastructure assets, from neighbouring urban areas and within the area, facilitating active and sustainable access to and around the National Landscape to make it easier for communities to experience and benefit from the natural beauty of the North Wessex Downs.

Access, Recreation & Tourism Priorities

1. Facilitate opportunities for more people of all backgrounds and abilities to access and enjoy the North Wessex Downs in ways that respect and promote the valued qualities of the National Landscape and its setting.
2. Greater awareness of the value and benefits of access and enjoyment of the North Wessex Downs National Landscape for public health and well being.
3. Develop a strategic framework to guide the use of funding provided to the North Wessex Downs National Landscape for access enhancements.
4. Co-ordinated promotion of the North Wessex Downs National Landscape by the tourism and recreation sector as a destination for responsible access that respects and promotes the valued qualities of the protected landscape and its setting.

Implementation

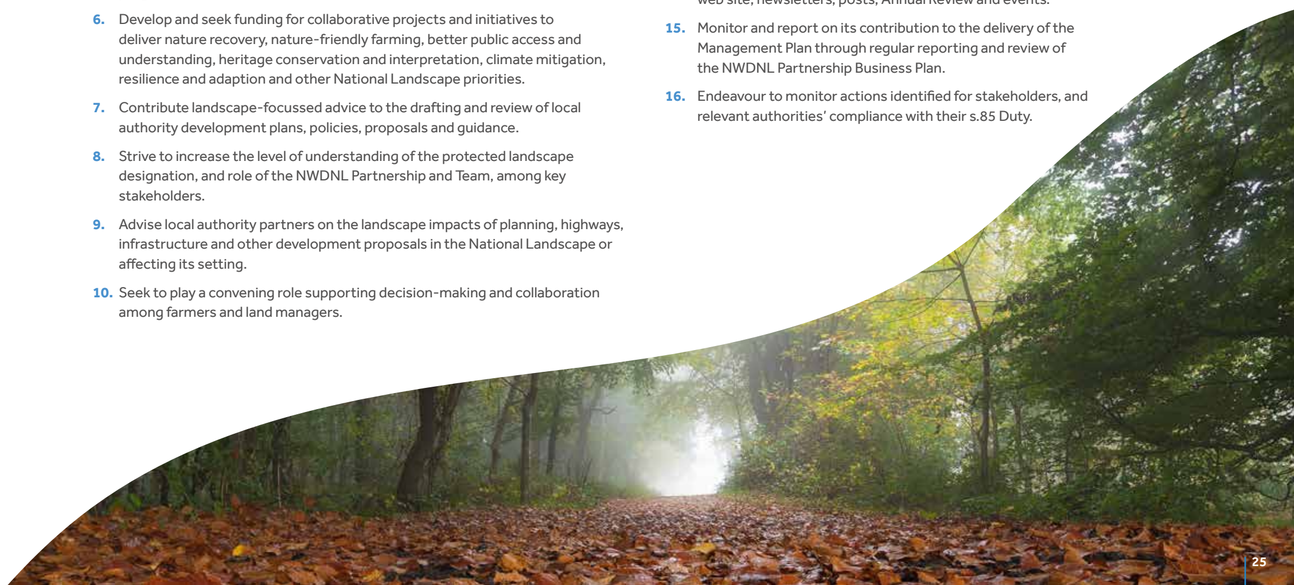
1.3 Everyone can play a role in looking after the National Landscape through the Management Plan. Some partners will be able to do more than others because of the nature of their role.

1.4 This Management Plan belongs to the North Wessex Downs National Landscape Partnership, and most of all to the local authority partners which have a statutory duty to produce it. It is not an end in itself: success requires implementation. Implementation is not the sole preserve of the NWDNL Partnership; rather, it is the responsibility of everyone whose activities affect the valued qualities of the landscape. Central among these are all the bodies which, under s.85 of the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000, as amended have a statutory Duty to seek to further the purposes for which the landscape was designated: to conserve and enhance its natural beauty.

North Wessex Downs National Landscape Partnership Commitments

1.5 The North Wessex Downs National Landscape Partnership will:

1. Promote, encourage, facilitate, enable and support implementation of the Management Plan and other activities to conserve and enhance the natural beauty of the North Wessex Downs National Landscape.
2. Support development of a shared understanding of landscape character, condition and opportunities across the National Landscape to facilitate informed decision-making.
3. Produce and disseminate supporting information, strategies, position statements and other resources to help everyone understand what their responsibilities to the National Landscape mean in practice and contribute to the purposes of designation.
4. Directly contribute to implementation of the Management Plan, guided by the North Wessex Downs National Landscape Partnership Goals, Strategic Objectives and Business Plan.
5. Conserve and enhance the National Landscape and its setting through delivery of initiatives such as Mend the Gap, Partnerships for Nature, Farming in Protected Landscapes, Access for All and other funded projects and programmes.
6. Develop and seek funding for collaborative projects and initiatives to deliver nature recovery, nature-friendly farming, better public access and understanding, heritage conservation and interpretation, climate mitigation, resilience and adaption and other National Landscape priorities.
7. Contribute landscape-focussed advice to the drafting and review of local authority development plans, policies, proposals and guidance.
8. Strive to increase the level of understanding of the protected landscape designation, and role of the NWDNL Partnership and Team, among key stakeholders.
9. Advise local authority partners on the landscape impacts of planning, highways, infrastructure and other development proposals in the National Landscape or affecting its setting.
10. Seek to play a convening role supporting decision-making and collaboration among farmers and land managers.
11. Contribute landscape-focussed advice to the drafting and review of Neighbourhood Plans and other community-led documents.
12. Advise landowners, applicants and agents on the landscape aspects of activities and proposals.
13. Play its part in regional and national collaboration among National Parks and National Landscapes, including through the Big Chalk, South East and East Protected Landscapes, and the National Landscapes Association.
14. Publicise National Landscape projects and activities through the NWDNL web site, newsletters, posts, Annual Review and events.
15. Monitor and report on its contribution to the delivery of the Management Plan through regular reporting and review of the NWDNL Partnership Business Plan.
16. Endeavour to monitor actions identified for stakeholders, and relevant authorities' compliance with their s.85 Duty.



Stakeholder Responsibilities

1.6 The following table lists some of the main stakeholders with responsibility for the protected landscape, indicates some of the opportunities for them to contribute to its conservation and enhancement, and gives examples of actions they should or could take to implement the Management Plan and, where applicable, fulfil their s.85 Duty. This is by no means an exhaustive list and we welcome suggestions for further partners or examples of how these groups can help to deliver the North Wessex Downs National Landscape Management Plan 2025-30.

STAKEHOLDERS	PRINCIPAL OPPORTUNITIES	EXAMPLES OF IMPLEMENTATION
Chambers of commerce	• Funding streams to support management of the landscape as a tourism asset • Local producers and services • NWDNL profile in tourism marketing	• Collaboration to promote NWDNL tourism • Raise the NWDNL profile in Great West Way tourism marketing • Promote the NWDNL in member information and events • Support local suppliers and networks • Develop visitor payback scheme/s that support landscape conservation and enhancement
Consultants & agents	• Awareness, understanding and recognition of the character, valued qualities and sensitivities of the NWDNL	• Raise awareness of the protected landscape and Management Plan among clients. • Take a landscape-led approach to developing and refining proposals that shows sensitivity to the heritage, natural environment, local economy and communities of the NWDNL
Educational institutions	• Awareness, deeper understanding and pride in the landscape among pupils/students and staff • Opportunities for nature recovery in school grounds management	• Engage with the North Wessex Downs landscape through the curriculum, research, collaborative projects, field trips, farm visits, outdoor classrooms, Forest Schools etc. • Manage grounds for nature • Reduce, direct and control outdoor lighting: follow the NWDNL good lighting guide • Use opportunities and resources presented by the North Wessex Downs landscape to support educational aims
Energy sector, including OFGEM, National Grid & energy companies	• Climate mitigation • Energy conservation • Landscape conservation/enhancement	• Take action to conserve and enhance the NWDNL under the s.85 Duty (CRoW Act 2000, as amended), and monitor and report on it • Adopt a landscape-led approach to infrastructure planning, design and management • Offer customers energy conservation advice and a support • Support and/or deliver undergrounding of powerlines or actions to mitigate their landscape impact • Support appropriate renewable energy generation compatible with National Landscape purposes
Farmers & land managers	• Climate change mitigation and adaptation • Enabling responsible access • Green tourism • Improved natural resource management • Landscape and nature restoration • Local food production and marketing • Nature- and heritage-friendly farming techniques • Protecting and improving soil health • Raising public awareness and understanding • Wildlife habitat management	• Consider appropriate diversification projects • Consider farm-scale renewable energy generation compatible with National Landscape purposes • Consider scope for carbon sequestration and use of nature-based solutions • Enable opportunities for permissive access • Maintain public rights of way • Offer farm visits • Protect and improve healthy soils, e.g. through regenerative farming techniques such as changes to tillage and rotations • Implement catchment-sensitive farming measures • Put land into ELMS • Reduce, direct and control outdoor lighting: follow the NWDNL good lighting guide • Set up, join or contribute to farmer-led groups and other partnership conservation initiatives • Support the suggested priorities for land management set out in this Plan • Undertake baseline farm carbon audits)

Health sector, inc. commissioning bodies, GPs, support groups	• Access to the landscape for mental and physical health and well being benefits • Access improvements • Active/public transport improvements	• Consider the NWDNL as a resource for green social prescribing • Consider conservation volunteering among health and well being options • Develop landscape health and well being projects aimed at specific groups e.g. dementia sufferers; • Promote and enable walking for health initiatives
Highways, including National Highways and local highway authorities	• Better layout and design of new and re-development • Climate change mitigation • Enabling green and active travel/access • Green tourism • Landscape restoration • Light pollution reduction • Local transport planning • Restoration or improvement of ecological connectivity e.g. removal of barriers to species migration • Road decluttering • Road noise reduction to enhance tranquillity • Sensitive rural road management • Verge management for wildlife	• Take action to conserve and enhance the NWDNL under the s.85 Duty (CRoW Act 2000, as amended), and monitor and report on it • Adopt a landscape-led approach to management of the rural minor road network, prioritising the needs of walkers, cyclists and riders • Avoid new severance of habitats and ecological networks and consider opportunities to remove existing barriers to connectivity. • Conduct signs audits and remove unnecessary highway clutter • Foster community collaboration e.g. on highway clutter, speed enforcement, public transport • Make wildflower restoration and management an aim of road maintenance and safety programmes • Respect the Valued Qualities of the NWDNL in the design and management of all highways within the National Landscape and its setting • Take opportunities for traffic noise reduction wherever possible • Use sympathetic highway designs, measures and materials in the NWDNL, including within settlements

Individuals & families	• Action on climate change Conserving and enhancing settlement character • Conserving natural resources • Heritage and nature conservation • Preventing/reducing light pollution • Protecting tranquillity • Reducing water consumption • Supporting local producers	• Buy local products and services, support local shops and businesses • Choose to walk, cycle or use public transport instead of driving • Comment on local and neighbourhood plans and planning applications • Follow the Countryside Code when out in the landscape • Generate your own energy, e.g. through roof-top solar panels Keep dogs on leads during the nesting season (March-July) • Make space for nature at home, e.g. nesting/roosting spaces for birds and bats and wildlife-friendly gardening • Participate in local conservation or heritage projects • Put a bell on your cat's collar • Reduce, direct and control outdoor lighting: follow the NWDNL good lighting guide • Reduce your personal/household carbon footprint • Save water and use less energy • Take dangerous chemicals for safe disposal - don't pour them down the drain • Use locally sourced wood fuel instead of fossil fuels
Landscape-scale conservation initiatives	• Community engagement • Climate change mitigation and resilience • Ecosystem goods and services • Landscape and nature conservation and restoration	• Consider opportunities for climate action, e.g. nature-based solutions, in project design and delivery • Engage the public, private and voluntary sectors in collaborative protection and enhancement of the landscape • Help young people and communities appreciate the benefits of the natural environment • Identify and complement local nature recovery networks

Local authorities, including planning authorities	• Access and rights of way improvement • Affordable housing provision Economic diversification Historic • Environment conservation and interpretation • Landscape and nature conservation • Maintaining settlement character • Profile of the NWDNL • Protecting dark skies • Protecting tranquillity • Public awareness and understanding • Reducing water abstraction • Valuing and supporting ecosystem goods and services.	• Take action to conserve and enhance the NWDNL under the s.85 Duty (CRoW Act 2000, as amended), and monitor and report on it • Adopt a landscape-led approach to development plans, policy and decision-making, using the support of NWDNL officers • Avoid land use changes that will lead to increased abstraction from chalk aquifers • Fulfil duties specified by the NERC Act 2006 • Impose planning conditions in support of National Landscape purposes and ensure prompt enforcement against breaches • Produce supplementary planning guidance to support National Landscape purposes • Protect and maintain rights of way • Protect wildlife habitats and species and support nature recovery • Require green travel plans for relevant developments • Resist development proposals that would fail to further National Landscape purposes • Take full account of NWDNL planning advice • Use the NWDNL Landscape Character Assessment, Management Plan and additional guidance when considering options and making decisions
Local businesses	• Dark skies • Climate change • Green tourism • Local products • Natural resources • NWDNL profile	• Minimise waste • Practise energy and water conservation • Promote green/active travel in the NWDNL • Promote the NWDNL in tourism and product marketing • Reduce, direct and control outdoor lighting: follow the NWDNL good lighting guide • Source products and services locally

Government agencies including: – Environment Agency – Forestry Commission – Historic England, National Highways – Natural England	• Supporting the valued qualities of the NWDNL • Conserving the historic environment • Facilitating landscape restoration and nature recovery • Protecting and extending tranquillity • Protecting rivers and improving water quality • Providing and supporting ecosystem goods and services • Reducing the landscape impact of infrastructure	• Take action to conserve and enhance the NWDNL under the s.85 Duty (CRoW Act 2000, as amended), and monitor and report on it • Take a landscape-led approach, respecting the Valued Qualities of the NWDNL, to: land-use planning proposals; green and blue infrastructure; use of environmental land management schemes; provision of land management advice; natural capital assessments; partnership conservation projects, e.g. farmer-led groups; provision of woodland management advice, support and marketing; preparation of River Basin Management Plans; use and review of Conservation Area Appraisals; Catchment Management Plans and the work of Catchment Partnerships; development of Route Management Strategies; and use of the Stonehenge and Avebury World Heritage Site Management Plan, where they may affect NWDNL or its setting
Non-governmental organisations including: – countryside, wildlife, heritage, river recreation trusts & groups	• Conserving settlement character • Enabling affordable housing • Landscape, heritage and nature conservation and restoration • Managing tourism • Monitoring landscape condition and change • Preventing diffuse pollution • Promoting responsible access • Protecting and extending tranquillity • Protecting dark skies • Providing ecosystem goods and services • Raising awareness of the NWDNL • Reducing water abstraction	• Conserve and enhance the Valued Qualities of the NWDNL in estate management • Enable and encourage green/active travel to sites • Feature the NWDNL in recreation marketing and management • Highlight the NWDNL priorities and activities in member/supporter communications • Partner with the NWDNL in collaborative projects • Refer to the NWDNL in public information and interpretation • Support implementation of the Management Plan in organisations' own projects and activities • Take a landscape-led approach to planning and design in the NWDNL and its setting

North Wessex Downs Landscape Trust	• Community engagement in the landscape • Education about the NWDNL • Landscape, heritage and nature conservation projects • NWDNL profile and marketing • Promotion of the landscape as a source of health and well being Protecting tranquillity and dark skies • Public awareness, understanding, pride in and care for the landscape • Tourism promotion	• Champion the natural beauty and tranquillity of the NWDNL among communities and decision-makers • Enable community projects that support National Landscape purposes • Facilitate landscape projects and activities that further the purposes of designation • Raise awareness of the NWDNL through public communications, presentations, visits, events, publications sand signage. • Support neighbourhood planning with input relating to the NWDNL
Parish & town councils	• Community identity and pride; Community understanding and engagement in the landscape • Encouraging green tourism • Conserving the historic environment • Decluttering (e.g. road signs) • NWDNL profile/marketing • Protecting and extending tranquillity • Protecting dark skies • Protecting settlement character • Supporting or doing landscape and nature conservation	• Take action to conserve and enhance the NWDNL under the s.85 Duty (CRoW Act 2000, as amended), and monitor and report on it • Adopt a landscape-led approach to parish / town / neighbourhood planning • Champion the natural beauty and tranquillity of the NWDNL among communities and decision-makers • Ensure actions and decisions that affect buildings and settlement character are informed by an understanding of historic landscape character • Initiate or support community projects that foster pride in the NWDNL and support the purposes of designation • Promote public enjoyment of the Landscape through publications (e.g. walks leaflets, web resources) • Raise awareness of the NWDNL through public communications and events • Recognise and support the role of communities in climate change mitigation and adaptation • Reduce, direct and control outdoor lighting: follow the NWDNL good lighting guide • Support and promote community transport • Support nature recovery as part of grounds management • Support local producers and businesses through local sourcing if possible

Rights of way & countryside access forums & groups	• Improving access to and within the NWDNL • Green infrastructure networks • Making links to landscape, heritage and nature conservation • Promoting green tourism • Raising the profile and marketing the NWDNL	• Consider options such as the Walkers are Welcome initiative Contribute to collaborative marketing and tourism initiatives in the NWDNL • Encourage responsible access by residents and visitors • Ensure recognition of the NWDNL in Rights of Way Improvement Plans. • Identify access-related opportunities for heritage conservation and nature recovery, e.g. scheduled monument management or wildflower verges • Identify needs and opportunities for access improvements • Include reference to the NWDNL in communications (e.g. web sites) and distribute Discover the NWDNL leaflets
Statutory undertakers, including energy, highways, railway infrastructure, telecoms & water companies	• Facilitating landscape restoration and improving ecological connectivity • Reducing the landscape impact of infrastructure • Supporting the valued qualities of the NWDNL	• Take action to conserve and enhance the NWDNL under the s.85 Duty (CRoW Act 2000, as amended), and monitor and report on it • Adopt a landscape-led approach to network planning, construction and management
Tourism sector, including Local Visitor Economy Partnerships & other marketing bodies	• Landscape/heritage/nature/farm tourism • Local products and services • NWDNL profile/marketing • Opportunities for green/active travel	• Build the NWDNL into destination marketing strategies • Consider visitor payback schemes that support landscape conservation and enhancement • Develop and support local supplier networks • NWDNL tourism promotion • Promote the NWDNL in collaborative initiatives, e.g. Great West Way • Support National Trail partnerships

Transport operators including train & bus companies	• Green travel • Improved public transport access • NWDNL profile/marketing • Sustainable tourism • Tranquillity	• Build the NWDNL into business and marketing strategies • Develop or support collaborative initiatives with local businesses and communities • Improve and promote access from public transport routes into the NWDNL • Install NWDNL signage and information e.g. at stations and on buses and trains • Support collaboration by operators with National Trail partnerships, rights of way authorities and access groups
Water sector, including OFWAT & water companies	• Improving water quality • Promoting catchment-sensitive farming • Reducing water abstraction and consumption • Supporting habitat conservation and enhancement • Tackling diffuse water pollution	• Take action to conserve and enhance the NWDNL under the s.85 Duty (CRoW Act 2000, as amended), and monitor and report on it • Build NWDNL aims into estate management • Engage with the NWDNL and local partners to develop and support collaborative projects to improve natural resource management • Inform customers about NWDNL impacts in public information and advice • Reduce, direct and control outdoor lighting: follow the NWDNL good lighting guide • Seek to further National Landscape purposes in Water Resources Management Plans • Support demand management measures • Take a landscape-led approach to abstraction licensing

"The slopes of the downs, if they have general form, are continually changing and interchanging in localities, assuming new and strange shapes, charming and surprising with their grace and exquisiteness, forever reflecting the mood of the heavens"

ALFRED WILLIAMS (1877–1930)

CHAPTER 3

Landscape



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ALFRED WILLIAMS (1877–1930)

3.1 The North Wessex Downs is a visibly ancient landscape of great beauty, diversity and size. It embraces the high, open arable sweeps of the chalk downs and dramatic scarp slopes with their prehistoric monuments and beech knolls, the moulded dip slopes, sheltered chalk river valleys; intimate and secluded wooded areas and low-lying heaths with a rich mosaic of woodland, pasture, heath and commons. The North Wessex Downs form a surprisingly remote, expansive and tranquil landscape in the heart of southern England.

3.2 The depth of history can still be seen in these landscapes, including the World Heritage Site of prehistoric Avebury; the royal hunting forest of Savernake, the Uffington White Horse, and the Ridgeway – the oldest road in England. The built environment makes a strong contribution to the beauty of the landscape, with historic towns and villages, churches, spectacular barns, manor houses with their parks and gardens, and the industrial heritage of the Kennet and Avon Canal. The Saxon name of Wessex reveals the area's literary connections, revived by Thomas Hardy and used as the setting for many of his novels. Around a century later, Richard Adams provided a vivid evocation of this area in Watership Down.



Geology, Landform and Land Use

3.3 Geology, landform and the uses that humans have made of the land have together created the distinctive and beautiful landscapes of the area. The chalk forms an arc of high ground – the northern, western and southern parts of the National Landscape, cut through by the Vale of Pewsey to the west, and including, at Walbury Hill, the highest chalk hill in southern England. From this great rim, the land generally falls down the dipslope of the chalk, to the central basin of the east-flowing Rivers Kennet, Lambourn and Pang.

3.4 The greater part of the area is underlain by chalk, resulting in the dramatic scarps and beautiful gentle rolling topography so characteristic of the North Wessex Downs. The steep scarp slopes of the chalk and Upper Greensand, with their expansive viewpoints, and the gentle rolling open chalk plateau are very obviously influenced by the underlying geology. These chalk landscapes were traditionally in sheep grazing – the wool being the source of much of England's historic wealth. However, much of the chalk grassland has since been ploughed, and the resulting extensive, open arable land is now the most frequent land use and landscape of the chalk downs. Herb-rich chalk grassland remains in fragments on the steeper scarps.

3.5 Where the chalk has a thick capping of clay-with-flints, the topography is softer, with smaller hedged fields and much greater woodland cover – a very different, enclosed and intimate, landscape from the open sweep of the downs. Overlying the chalk are patches of more recent sediments, particularly in the lower part of the basin. These contrast with the chalk scenery by producing more acidic soils, with their associated heathland landscapes.

3.6 Some of the more impressive features of the landscape are the dry valleys or coombes, found across the chalk plateau and often forming deep rounded valleys. They are the result of torrents of water flowing over the surface of the chalk during cold periods when permafrost (frozen ground) made the chalk impermeable. The coombes are often associated with terrace features along the valleys, such as those at White Horse Hill in Oxfordshire. These result from the movement downhill of frost-shattered chalk during times of partial thaw. Large amounts of material moving down

the slope of the valley can accumulate in the valley bottom, forming a deposit known as head. Sarsen stones are one of the most identifiable and well-known features of the North Wessex Downs, forming the great stone circle and avenues at Avebury and the fields of 'grey wethers' (because they look like sheep) at Fyfield Down. Sarsens are silica-cemented sand or pebble deposits, often moved by natural processes a considerable way from their source.

3.7 Whilst many of the chalk valleys are dry, some have characteristic 'bournes', generally dry, but flowing when the ground water is high. England has 85% of the world's chalk streams[1] and a large proportion of this resource is located within or near the North Wessex Downs. These have a rich and highly characteristic ecology,and frequently support rich biodiversity.

3.8 Settlement is also strongly related to the underlying physical setting. The high, dry chalklands have no water to support settlement, so have remained open, remote, and tranquil, with farmsteads and villages on the spring lines and in the more sheltered and fertile valleys. Traditional building materials include bricks from local clays, flints, Melbourn Rock, Chalk Rock (not the soft chalk), cob, sarsens, thatch, and timber from the forests.

3.9 Designation as a National Landscape recognises the character, value and quality of the North Wessex Downs. The National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF), updated in December 2024, gives the highest status of protection to the overall diversity of landscape and scenic beauty of the area[2]. This means that these areas are given special consideration in planning decisions. The North Wessex Downs are of high scenic quality and with their wildlife and cultural heritage an integral part of their character and value. Although almost entirely a chalk landscape, the character differs markedly across the National Landscape, depending on local surface geology, soils, landform, land use, vegetation and settlement patterns. The greatest contrast, for example, is between the open arable chalk downs and the acid heathlands of the lower river valleys.

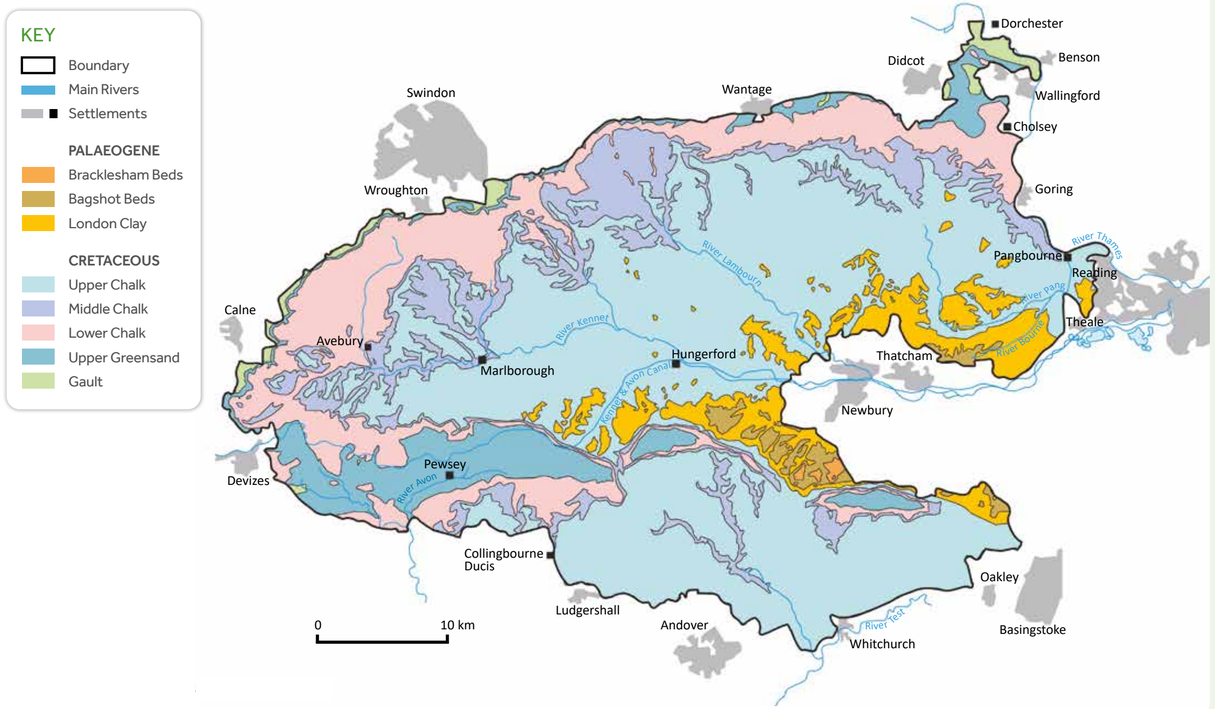
3.10 Natural England has set out a landscape character assessment (LCA) methodology to formally identify what it is that makes one landscape different from another. The landscape character assessment for the North Wessex Downs identifies the overall diversity of the landscape, recognising eight 'Landscape Types' across the National Landscape, each with its own distinct sense of place. These eight Landscape Types can be further subdivided into Landscape Character Areas: there are a total of 33 Character Areas across the National Landscape. Landscape character assessment draws out the valued qualities of the landscape, traces its evolution over the centuries and identifies the main issues that will need to be addressed to conserve its special character, its outstanding qualities and its natural beauty.

[1] CaBA: https://catchmentbasedapproach.org/learn/chalk-stream-strategy/ Retrieved 12 June 2025

[2] Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government: National Planning Policy Framework (2024), paragraph 189. Available at https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-planning-policy-framework--2. Retrieved 12 June 2025.

Figure 3. The geology of the North Wessex Downs National Landscape.

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North Wessex Downs National Landscape Types



Landscape Type: *Open Downland*

3.11 Open Downland extending from Roundway Down near Devizes to Lardon Chase overlooking the Thames at Streatley is dissected by dry valleys and long steep scarps, with limited tree cover and a sense of remoteness and tranquillity.

3.12 The Open Downland forms the backbone of the North Wessex Downs as an elevated plateau of the hard Middle and Upper Chalks. The landscape is of open, smoothly rounded downland dissected by dry valleys and long sinuous steep scarps, and is devoid of surface water. Tree cover is limited to distinctive Beech clumps crowning summits and occasional linear shelter belts.

3.13 This is a remote, tranquil landscape of panoramic views where the sky forms a key part of the landscape, including the effect of cloud shadows on the ground and the wind creating swells through the crops. The dominant land use is of vast sweeping arable fields with small remnant patches of chalk grassland on steeper slopes. Settlement is extremely sparse and limited to scattered farmsteads and racing stables.



Landscape Type: *Downland with Woodland*

3.14 This landscape is distinctly different from the Open Downland. It is of lower elevation and has a thick capping of clay-with-flints over the chalk. It has softer contours and considerably greater woodland cover.

3.15 The scale is smaller, with field patterns a mixture of small irregular medieval enclosures and larger regular Parliamentary enclosures.



Landscape Type: *Wooded Plateau*

3.16 Centred on Savernake Forest and West Woods, the Wooded Plateau consists of extensive tracts of semi-natural ancient woodland, wood pasture with majestic veteran trees, and 18th and 19th Century Beech plantations, as well as more recent coniferous plantations.

3.17 Centred on the woodland tracts of Savernake Forest and West Woods, the extent of this largely wooded area reflects the bounds of the medieval royal hunting forest of Savernake, established by the time of the Domesday survey. Throughout this gently dipping plateau, a thick covering of clay-with-flints and Tertiary deposits mask the solid chalk and results in damp and heavy soils.

3.18 Today, reflecting its origins as a royal hunting forest, the countryside remains undeveloped, with settlement limited to villages in the valley of the River Dun – Great and Little Bedwyn.



Landscape Type: *High Chalk Plain*

3.19 At the northernmost tip of Salisbury Plain, the open rolling landform of the High Chalk Plain creates a bleak, spacious landscape under arable production and devoid of settlement, with long views and a strong sense of remoteness and isolation.

3.20 A dramatic escarpment forms the northern boundary, as at Pewsey Hill and Fyfield Down, and provides panoramic views across the Vale of Pewsey to the north.



Landscape Type: *Downs Plain and Scarp*

3.21 The distinctive northern Downs Plain and Scarp plunges down from the chalk plain to the Vale of White Horse, creating a dramatic recognisable horizon when viewed from the north.

3.22 The landscape of the Downs Plain and Scarp extends along the entire length of the northern boundary of the North Wessex Downs. The plain is formed by the eroded surface of the Lower Chalk, creating a low level surface extending as a wide ledge at the foot of the high Open Downland. .

3.23 This area is characterised by some of the most emblematic features of the North Wessex Downs: The Ridgeway, the oldest road in England – running along the top of the scarp; the Uffington White Horse on the scarp face; and Avebury on the open Downs Plain, forming part of the Stonehenge and Avebury World Heritage Site.

3.20 The Downs Plain is characterised by vast arable fields, lack of surface water and a general absence of settlement. Conversely the dramatic scarp slope, cut by springs, creates a convoluted edge alternately under woodland and pasture, including significant areas of remnant chalk grassland. 3.24 This is a landscape that feels as though it has hardly changed over the centuries, although it is increasingly affected by development at its foot, outside the National Landscape boundary.



Landscape Type: *Vales*

3.25 The Vales of Pewsey and sections of the Thames Valley floor adjoining the Chilterns National Landscape offer productive loamy and alluvial soils where springs issue from the chalk and compact settlements contrast with scattered farmsteads.

3.26 The Vale of Pewsey separates the two main upland chalk blocks that dominate the North Wessex Downs. The towering shapes of the adjacent chalk scarps contain and enclose this Greensand vale. Numerous springs issue from the chalk and Greensand boundary where the water table comes to the surface, their streams meandering across the Vale floor.

3.27 Rich loamy and alluvial soils create a productive agricultural landscape with a mix of arable, orchards and pasture now replacing a once predominantly pastoral scene important for dairying – hence the saying 'chalk and cheese', identifying the very different landscapes of the downs and the vale. The concentration of settlements is a defining feature of the Vale, including compact nucleated villages and hamlets, with widespread scattered farmsteads. The Vales character type also occurs at the north-eastern edge of the North Wessex Downs, with the sections of the Thames valley floor that lie within this National Landscape. The eastern part of the Thames valley floor here lies within the adjoining Chilterns National Landscape.



Landscape Type : *River Valleys*

3.28 The River Valleys of the Kennet, Lambourn, Pang and Bourne that cut through the chalk uplands form very distinct linear landscapes, characterised by a rich mix of grazed pastures, water meadows, wetland and woodland. The valleys are enclosed by steeply rising slopes, limiting views and creating an intimate and enclosed character.

3.29 Historically, the main settlements of the chalk were concentrated in these river valleys, as the only source of accessible water in an otherwise dry downland landscape. These settlements took a long linear form, following the bottom of the valley, and this remains the dominant pattern to this day. The chalk uplands (in other character areas) are also cut by numerous dry valleys, which sometimes contain ephemeral 'winterbournes' only flowing when the chalk water table rises to the surface during the winter and early spring.



Landscape Type : *Lowland Mosaic*

3.30 The Lowland Mosaic is the lowest part of the 'bowl' curving around Newbury and the lower Kennet valley. This landscape, of largely Medieval origins, has a varied geology of clays, silts and sands giving rise to a diverse mix of soils and, in turn, a mosaic of ancient semi-natural woodlands, plantations, remnant heathland and more open farmland areas where sunken lanes heighten the sense of seclusion.

3.31 This is a small-scale and intimate landscape, where lanes are frequently overhung by deep grassy and wooded banks, heightening the sense of seclusion. There are some limited longer views, as at Bucklebury Upper Common. The network of ancient semi-natural woodland, connecting hedgerows, areas of parkland, including wood pasture and veteran trees, create considerable ecological interest.

3.32 Former mediaeval deer parks are a particular feature, as at Englefield, Highclere and Hampstead, with a number of these having been re-fashioned in the 18th Century as formal designed landscapes. This is one of the most densely inhabited areas of the North Wessex Downs, with large manor houses, a network of hamlets, and lines of houses and villages that have grown along the network of lanes.

KEY

1 OPEN DOWNLAND	
1A	Marlborough Downs
1B	Lambourn Downs
1C	Horton Downs
1D	Blewbury Downs
2 DOWNLAND WITH WOODLAND	
2A	Brightwalton Downs
2B	Ashampstead Downs
2C	Lambourn Wooded Downs
2D	Walbury Hill – Watership Down Scarp
2E	Chute Forest – Faccombe
2F	Litchfield Downs
2G	Hannington Downs
3 WOODED PLATEAU	
3A	Savernake Plateau
4 HIGH CHALK PLAIN	
4A	Salisbury Plain
5 DOWNS PLAIN AND SCARP	
5A	Avebury Plain
5B	Chiseldon – Wanborough Plain
5C	Hendred Plain
5D	Moreton Plain
5E	Clyffe Pypard – Badbury Wooded Scarp
5F	Uffington – Letcombe Open Scarp
6 VALES	
6A	Vale of Pewsey
6B	Shalbourne Vale
6C	Wanborough Vale
6i	??????
6Di	Thames Floodplain – Benson
6Dii	Thames Floodplain – Moreton
6Diii	Thames Floodplain – Streatley and Basildon
7 RIVER VALLEYS	
7A	Kennet Valley
7B	Lambourn Valley
7C	Bourne Valley
7D	Pang Valley
8 LOWLAND MOSAIC	
8A	Hermitage Wooded Commons
8B	Winterbourne Farmland
8C	Wickham Wooded Heath
8D	Hungerford Farmland
8E	Highclere Parklands
8F	Ewhurst Parklands

Figure 4. Landscape Character Types and Areas in the North Wessex Downs National Landscape.

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The Landscape: Key Issues

Key issues with the potential to have significant influence on the National Landscape's Valued Qualities:

a) Intense pressure for development throughout the National Landscape and its setting that threatens the character and quality of its landscape and risks merging of small settlements, expansion and encroachment by larger settlements, renewable energy and other infrastructure, and changes to the scale and nature of development boundaries.

b) The potential for development beyond the National Landscape boundary, in the setting, to harm the protected landscape visually or in other ways, undermining the valued qualities of landscape character areas.

c) The need to achieve progress towards extremely ambitious national and North Wessex Downs targets for nature recovery.

d) The challenges and opportunities relating to the National Landscape's role in effecting climate change mitigation and adaptation.

e) The need for viable agriculture, forestry and equine management to continue, and to contribute more to National Landscape purposes.

f) Availability of sufficient resources for management and understanding of archaeological sites.

g) The need to manage the Ridgeway National Trail and other rights of way to maximise enjoyment by responsible users protect wildlife and cultural heritage and minimise conflicts.

h) The dominance of roads, in particular the impact of traffic noise, external lighting, road signs, insensitive materials and clutter on landscape character and people's experience of the landscape as they travel through it.

i) The need to protect remaining dark sky areas and extend them by reducing light pollution, minimising and controlling external lighting in the landscape.

j) The need for the landscape to be adaptable and resilient, conserving and enhancing natural beauty in the face of ongoing physical, economic and cultural change.

k) The need to maintain, connect and extend chalk grassland habitat wherever possible.

l) The need to conserve and enhance the remoteness and expansive openness of the downland landscape.

m) The need to conserve and enhance the remote, secluded and relatively undeveloped character of more enclosed and intimate landscapes, including the character of the lanes.

n) The need to ensure woodland creation, new hedges, agro-forestry and other tree planting respect and reinforce landscape character and nature recovery priorities, and the need for appropriate woodland management, including the viable use of timber products..

o) The need to encourage restoration of wood pasture landscapes, husbandry and ecology and ensure future veteran tree succession.

p) The need to maintain the pattern of discrete villages set within a quiet rural landscape, ensuring that interconnectivity with the surrounding landscape is maintained and views to the surrounding dramatic scarps are undamaged.

q) The need to ensure continued improvement of water quality and water resources in chalk streams and rivers, supporting river managers and riparian landowners in river restoration and enhancement projects for wildlife, fisheries and flood management.

r) The need to maintain and enhance and restore adjacent seasonal flood meadows, grazed pastures, fen, damp woodlands and historic parkland.

s) The need to conserve and enhance the small-scale, secluded and rural character of the lowland mosaic, including the fragile lowland heaths.

t) The need to protect and enhance historic sites, buildings and landscapes and their setting.

u) The need to protect visual amenity, in particular significant views and panoramas within, from and towards the protected landscape.

v) The significant impact on the characteristic habitats in the National Landscape resulting from climate change, including increased extreme weather events, risk of wild fires and a potential increase in pests and diseases.

The Landscape: Priority

P.01 Conserve and enhance the natural beauty, tranquillity and distinctive landscape character of the North Wessex Downs and its setting.

The Landscape: Policies

LA 01 Encourage all partners and other stakeholders to seek to further National Landscape purposes across all relevant policies, programmes, activities and decision..

LA 02 Recognise and respond to the main factors that threaten the valued qualities of the National Landscape: e.g. built development; light pollution; water abstraction; agricultural practices including diffuse pollution of watercourses; climate risk; lack of woodland management; damage to historic sites; and poorly managed access, seeking to avoid, minimise, mitigate and reverse them whenever possible.

LA 03 Use the North Wessex Downs Integrated Landscape Character Assessment to inform policy and decision making across the National Landscape and its setting.

LA 04 Support and promote a landscape-led approach across all sectors that conserves and enhances the character and qualities of the North Wessex Downs landscape.

LA 05 Support and encourage efforts to conserve and interpret the rich heritage of the North Wessex Downs.

LA 06 All development in or affecting the setting of the National Landscape should conserve and enhance the character, valued qualities and heritage of the North Wessex Downs landscape.





Farming & Land Management



Overview:

- A landscape under the influence of **agricultural management** with typically large farmed estates, over 50% of which are currently engaged in agri-environment agreements.
- **Varied field patterns:** the open downlands are characterised by large regular fields, largely the product of 18th Century parliamentary enclosure, with more recent boundary removals creating vast fields, as on the Marlborough Downs. By contrast, the Vale of Pewsey in the south west of the National Landscape is the product of Medieval clearance which created numerous, small, irregularly-shaped fields or assarts.
- A growing forestry sector and different **types of woodland**, many with public access. Although oak and, historically, ash are the main forest canopy species, there is a wide range of stand types including hornbeam coppice, oak/ash stands, hazel/oak stands, and birch and ash/wych elm coppice. The long-term impact of ash die-back on the landscape is still unclear.
- **Equestrian activity**, including the 'Valley of the Racehorse' in the Lambourn area that attracts visitors and businesses.
- Significant land management for **field sports**, including highly valued game fishing which supports the native brown trout.





> "I like to look at the winding side of a great down, with two or three numerous flocks of sheep on it, belonging to different farms; and to see, lower down, the folds, in the fields, ready to receive them for the night."
>
> WILLIAM COBBETT (1763-1835)

Farming and Land Management in the North Wessex Downs

3.1 Farmland and woodland dominate the landscape of the North Wessex Downs. Changes in these land uses have a major influence on the natural beauty of the area. Additionally, equine activities and field sports are significant in terms of land use and management. Land-based enterprises play a significant role in acting as stewards of the landscape and contributing to an economic balance for communities.

Agriculture

3.2 With 84% of the North Wessex Downs classified as farmland, of which in 2024 about 53% was under arable cultivation[1], agriculture is the dominant land use and the major influence on landscape character and quality. In 2024, the agricultural workforce totalled 2,346.

3.3 Annual farm census statistics since 1990 indicate land in the National Landscape in agricultural management appears to be fairly stable, with a slight net loss over time. This could be due to development but also changes in holding distributions may represent a move to other land uses not classified as agricultural. The Total number of farms has slightly increased, by 4% over the last five years. 43% of farms in the NWD exceed 100 ha in size, nationally over 50% of farms are larger than 100 ha. There has been a significant increase of 18% in the number of farms between 20-50 ha over the last five years. DEFRA defines farm types for a holding as the crop or livestock enterprise (or group of enterprises) that contributes more than two thirds of the total standard gross margin for the holding. The North Wessex Downs has seen a 33% increase in horticultural crops over the last 5 years. Statistical data from DEFRAs survey of Agriculture and Horticulture 2024 indicates that most farms fall in the 'cereals' and 'lowland grazing livestock' categories.

3.4 Sustainable agriculture can help to protect and enhance the natural resources that have created the rich diversity and natural beauty of the North Wessex Downs. Supporting farmers in adopting Environmental Land Management Schemes (ELMS) and other agri-environment approaches and working with farmer-led groups are vital strategies for securing landscape management, as demonstrated through the DEFRA-funded Farming in Protected Landscapes programme.

3.5 Analysis of trends indicates a decline in livestock farming and greater sensitivity of arable production to prices of inputs. **Total cattle numbers have fallen by 14%. Sheep by 22% - however poultry has risen by 84% in the last 10 years.**[2] In some instances the reduction of numbers could be due to efficiencies. For example, by harnessing new technologies with support from the Farming Equipment and Technology Fund, dairy farmers are able to reduce herd size while maintaining or even increasing production. The Fund has also supported sheep farmers in subsidising electronic identification (EID) readers, allowing farmers to better identify unproductive ewes and remove them from flocks. There have also been positive changes driven by the implementation of targeted agri-environment schemes.



3.6 'Conventional' farming is predominant in the National Landscape. There are also a number of organic farms and some biodynamic farms. The closure of Elm Farm Organic Research Centre during the last Management Plan period was a significant loss to the area. There is an increasing interest in 'regenerative agriculture', which promotes minimising soil disturbance, maximising crop diversity, keeping the soil covered, maintaining a living root system and integrating livestock.

3.7 The evolution of ELMS (Environmental Land Management Schemes) and other agri-environment measures is a key driver to help deliver conservation for wildlife, soils and water quality. Over half of the North Wessex Downs farmed land is entered into one or more of the schemes and there is a strong commitment by farmers to utilise these schemes. Farmers' willingness to apply for funding and deliver public goods that support National Landscape aims has also been demonstrated by the Farming in Protected Landscapes programme (FiPL), with land managers covering more than 54% of the farmed landscape having engaged with the programme by March 2025. The need for farmers to deliver 'public goods for public money' has also required farmers to respond more readily to world market conditions. Fluctuations in commodity prices and input costs are increasing uncertainty for future arable profitability. There is a risk that such market influences could thwart initiatives designed to improve natural resource protection and environmental enhancement. An example in the North Wessex Downs has been the difficulty in promoting arable reversion to chalk grassland under higher-level stewardship schemes in the context of fluctuation in cereal prices.

3.8 Environmental Land Management Schemes (ELMS) have been designed to support the rural economy while achieving the goals of the Government's Environmental Improvement Plan and a commitment to net zero carbon emissions by 2050[3]. Climate change is likely to be a key consideration in terms of the types and varieties of viable crops that are grown in on the North Wessex Downs in the future. Farmers and landowners also need to consider flood mitigation and, where possible, consider adopting natural flood management, which is also being supported through ELMS. At the other extreme, planning for increasing water scarcity is likely to require greater water storage capacity on-farm. There are implications for sowing dates, irrigation, pests, diseases, water availability and soil erosion. Increased productivity needs careful management to maintain landscape character and realise the opportunities to expand wildlife habitats. There may also be diversification into novel crops and farming systems, or change of use from agriculture to other land uses, such as equestrian businesses and leisure.

3.9 Soils are increasingly being recognised as one of our most valuable resources (see the Natural Resources chapter). Farmers and land managers being encouraged, through ELMs, to preserve and protect soils as much as possible, for example through incorporating herbal leys to ensure the soil is covered at all times, while adding organic matter. Minimum or no tillage to limit soil disturbance is also being supported through other grants, such as the Farming Equipment and Technology Fund. Through increasing soil organic matter, soils can sequester more carbon, reduce nitrogen inputs and help farmers/land managers mitigate against climate change issues such as flooding and periods of drought.[4] Private finance companies are also emerging, further supporting efforts to increase soil organic matter for carbon credits.

3.10 Since around 2017, there has been an explosion of interest and activity relating to collaborative farmer-led groups (also known as farmer clusters) in and around the North Wessex Downs National Landscape. From two - the pioneering Marlborough Downs Space for Nature and the Pewsey Downs Farner Group, by 2025 the number had grown to at least 13 active groups in the area. Several of these have been set up with the support and encouragement of the National Landscape and most have received National Landscape funding to develop and deliver their aims. By collaborating among themselves and with other groups, these farmer and land managers can achieve benefits, e.g. for nature recovery, on a genuinely landscape scale.

[1] Total cereals + all other arable crops

[2] https://www.gov.uk/government/statistical-data-sets/structure-of-the-agricultural-industry-in-england-and-the-uk-at-june

[3] The Climate Change Act 2008 (2050 Target Amendment) Order 2019, SI 2019/1056

[4] Reference Soil Association: Soil Association (2019). To plough or not to plough: Policy briefing.

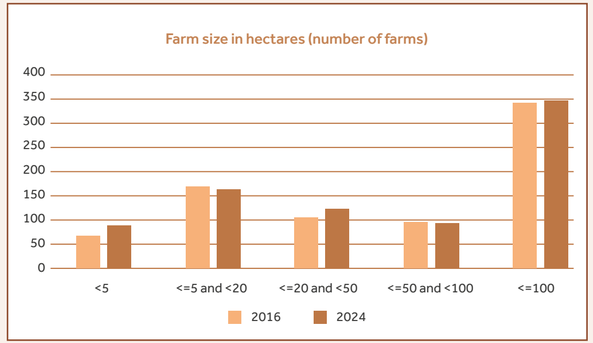


Table 1: Number of Farms by Type

Total holdings	Farm types (number of farms)						
	Cereals	General Cropping	Horticulture	Specialist Poultry	Dairy	Grazing Livestock (lowland)	Mixed
818	289	154	12	16	23	258	54

Table 2: Number of Farms by Size of Holding

Total holdings	Farm size in hectares (number of farms)				
	<5	<=5 and <20	<=20 and <50	<=50 and <100	<=100
818	90	162	124	95	347



% change is available from Chapter 3 Statistics JS.



Trees and Woodland

3.11 Trees, woodland, wood pasture and hedges are a valuable and important feature of parts of the North Wessex Downs landscape. The Forestry Commission's National Forest Inventory data show that the area of woodland within the North Wessex Downs stands at 21,190.28ha (12.57% of the total National Landscape area). Broadleaf trees dominate, at just over 70% of all woodland.well over a third 8,823.9 ha, or 41.8% is Ancient Woodland, of which 3,908 ha, or 18%, is Plantation on Ancient Woodland sites (PAWS). Despite an increasingly healthy market for timber and wood fuel, much woodland in the National Landscape still suffers from a lack of management, often due to difficulty of access. The ageing beech woods no longer produce significant volumes of timber and are more valuable as places for recreation than as a productive part of the rural economy. The continued promotion of wood as a renewable fuel may stimulate improved management of some woodlands. There are now ELMS options that include woodland management plans, as well as the availability of grants to assist with some of the associated cost of ash die-back.

3.12 The National Forest Inventory indicates that managed woodland within the National Landscape recorded as being managed has continued to increase from 50% in 2013, 62% in 2017,to 66% in 2024. This is a positive change which probably reflects the increasing demand for wood fuel in particular. The timber quality of much of the woodland area within the National Landscape is not high; many of the woods are extremely small, and a number of them comprise crops for which there is no longer



a viable market. Consequently, the economics of forestry operations are problematic. There is a role for energy production in helping to manage small woods. Previously, progress was made in supporting the North Wessex Downs forestry sector through initiatives such as the EU-funded LEADER programme, but since that ended there has been less activity.

3.13 Owing to the landscape, heritage and biodiversity characteristics for which much of the North Wessex Downs is designated, scope for new woodland planting varies greatly across the area depending on local landscape character and the associated valued qualities. Some Landscape Character Types and Areas are not suitable for significant expansion of tree cover. However, in suitable areas there is significant scope for more trees and shrubs in the landscape, including: extending, buffering and linking ancient woodland habitat, hedge restoration, increasing the population of large hedge trees, management of scrub as part of an open habitat mosaic, reintroduction of important species such as disease-resistant elm, restoration and creation of wood pasture habitat, promoting new generations of veteran trees, riparian planting for shade in response to higher temperatures, and sensitively located and designed agro-forestry. Any new planting should meet the objectives of the North Wessex Downs National Landscape Nature Recovery Plan and tree guidance. The priority is to maintain and improve management of existing woodland, particularly that designated for its nature conservation interest and all ancient and semi-natural woodland. New woodland can act as a buffer to protect this resource and create wildlife corridors between woods, and which may in turn benefit natural flood management and water quality. The National Landscape Partnership encourages woodland owners to produce management plans in accordance with the UK Forestry Standard.

3.14 The dangers to trees from pests and diseases are growing, with ash die-back (Hymenoscyphus fraxineus, also known as Chalara) and oak processionary moth (*Thaumetopoea processionea) being two recent examples. Ash die-back is likely to have a major impact in woodland across England, including in the North Wessex Downs, and it will be prudent to consider promoting measures to mitigate the consequences of the loss of this important tree species for wildlife and the landscape. Damage to woodland from* increasing deer populations and from squirrels is an ongoing problem, especially since it makes growing native broadleaved trees for timber difficult in spite of strong market demand. Overgrazing by deer can also dramatically reduce the value of woodland for other wildlife. This highlights the need for collaborative landscape-scale protection of woodland.

3.15 Climate change may lead to frequent drought and reduced summer rainfall, which could significantly impact the woodland of the North Wessex Downs. For instance, beech trees, which have shallow roots and struggle in dry soils, are likely to decline. In contrast, small-leaved lime trees, which require warmth to set seed, may thrive and become more prevalent. Veteran trees of all species are more likely to be felled by storm force winds. However, in woods the impact of these storms can be positive, creating glades that species adapted to sunlight can occupy. The impact of higher autumn and winter rainfall may be partly mitigated by planting, for example reducing soil run-off to rivers by hedge planting and management to interrupt overland flows. The recreational value of woodland may increase as people seek shade in the hottest months.



Racing and Equestrian

3.16 Horse owning and riding is a popular activity across the south of England. The North Wessex Downs is recognised as a nationally important horse-racing centre, second only to Newmarket, and the Lambourn area and other racing yards in the National Landscape make a significant contribution to the local economy. The non-racing equestrian sector is estimated to have contributed £5 billion of consumer spending to the national economy in 2023 (statistics-0225.pdf), an increase from £4.3bn in 2015. The contribution of the non-racing equestrian sector in Hampshire, an area part covered by the North Wessex Downs National Landscape, was estimated at £330 million supporting many small businesses in the county (source: Hampshire Countryside Access Forum Equestrians-in-Hampshire.pdf). It should also be noted that:

- **the input of the non-racing equestrian sector in West Berks in 2022 has been estimated at £38 million per annum, but we believe this has not been published;**
- **in a report dated 2019[5], the racing sector in the Lambourn Valley was estimated to contribute £23 million per annum.**

3.17 The North Wessex Downs is home to a range of important non-racing equestrian events, such as the annual Barbury Horse Trials. While there are no statistics to quantify horse ownership and riding in the National Landscape, it is evident that the network of bridleways and routes linked to The Ridgeway National Trail are popular and well-used.

3.18 How horses are cared for and the developments associated with keeping and training horses can have a significant impact on the character and quality of the National Landscape, and horse owners have an important role to play in maintaining the natural beauty of the North Wessex Downs. The North Wessex Downs Farming in Protected Landscapes (FiPL) programme has included well-received events providing advice to help ensure equine care and management makes a positive contribution to the landscape.

[5] *https://jockeyclubestates.co.uk/news/report-highlights-the-value-of-the-valley-of-the-racehorse*

Farming and Land Management: Key Issues

Key issues with the potential to have significant influence on the National Landscape's Farming and Land Management Valued Qualities:

a) The need to manage resources to achieve sustainable consumption and production.

b) Potential for significant investment of public funding to promote diversification and micro-enterprise in the land management sector that aligns with National Landscape objectives.

c) the need for support and co-operation from famers and land managers to achieve nature recovery in the North Wessex Downs.

d) The need to sustain and expand collaborative action among farmers to achieve National Landscape objectives.

Agriculture

e) Opportunities are continuing to arise to invest in the conservation and enhancement of the National Landscape, for example through agri-environment measures such as Environmental Land Management Schemes (ELMS) to deliver public goods with public funds. Private funding opportunities are also beginning to emerge.

f) Market forces and major policy changes, such as demand for increased food security or biofuels, resulting in uncertainty regarding land management, influencing the mix of farming types and farm sizes.

g) Impacts of changes in farming technology, and energy and fertiliser prices.

h) Shortage of livestock needed to graze downland pasture.

i) Harnessing demand for locally produced food and drink in line with National Landscape objectives, with increasing interest in producing and marketing local food in the North Wessex Downs.

j) Climate change risk (increasingly identified by farmers in the North Wessex Downs as a key threat and opportunity for the future) and the opportunities for land managers to invest in climate change adaptation and mitigation. Flooding continues to have a significant impact on land management, with crops becoming waterlogged.

k) Potential for improved availability, co-ordination and consistency in the provision of agricultural land management advice to achieve National Landscape objectives.

l) Poor agricultural land management practices, including in livestock grazing and arable production, resulting in flooding from surface water run-off and detrimental impacts on watercourses from nutrient run-off and silt pollution, sometimes as a result of livestock damage to river banks.

m) Soil management plays a key role in sustaining the landscape, with best practices in maintaining, conserving and improving soils crucial in mitigating against climate change and providing long term sustainability for arable production.

n) Risk to agriculture from diseases such as bovine tuberculosis, avian influenza and bluetongue.

Trees and Woodland

o) Scope for more and better management of woodland in the National Landscape, especially smaller woods, to improve habitat for wildlife and provide an economic return.

p) Risk of harmful impacts on wildlife, archaeology and recreation from increasing exploitation of woodland to meet demand for timber, if not done in an environmentally sensitive way.

q) Opportunities for better co-ordination of forestry with agricultural land management under new environmental management schemes.

r) Widespread threats from pests and disease (e.g. Phytophthora and Chalara).

s) Rising deer numbers inhibiting the natural regeneration of some woodland and suppressing the ground flora. Deer Management Groups are helpful but are insufficient on their own to control deer numbers.

Racing and Equestrian

t) Small-scale changes to the smooth, rolling landform around new buildings, which cumulatively have an adverse effect on the character of the National Landscape.

u) Opportunities to support the racing industry, ancillary businesses and local communities through diversification, e.g. in responsible tourism.

v) Need to avoid soil erosion, overgrazing and loss of biodiversity arising from the creation of new fields and paddocks on open chalk downland by promoting opportunities for landscape enhancement through equine habitat management, such as creation of wildflower-rich grassland.

w) Change in landscape character by the replacement of hedgerows with fencing, leading to the suburbanisation of landscape.

x) Pressure to widen and straighten minor roads and tracks to improve vehicle access, leading to erosion of landscape character and sense of place.

y) Loss of integrity of historic settlements/ hamlets/farmsteads.

Farming and Land Management: Priorities

1. Focus, facilitate and support landscape-scale conservation and land management initiatives that support the purposes of National Landscape designation.
2. Promote National Landscape priorities for targeting and investment in rural land management and development to take advantage of changes arising from the agricultural transition following Brexit.
3. Support the restoration of ancient woodland and creation and restoration of wood pasture, improved management of unmanaged and under-managed woodland across the North Wessex Downs, promoting multiple benefits, including landscape character, wildlife, local economy and skills, recreation and climate change mitigation.
4. Support traditional and emerging land-based enterprises and their markets that respect and promote the special qualities of the North Wessex Downs and its setting.
5. Promote and support sustainable best practice initiatives for farming, woodland management and all country sports.
6. Encourage and support farms/estates to take up ELMS and other agri-environment measures in ways that support National Landscape objectives.





Farming and Land Management: Policies

FLM 01	Encourage national, regional and local land management policies to be consistent with the purpose of National Landscape designation.
FLM 02	Encourage and support farmer-led groups and other joint working, and expansion/replication of existing landscape-scale nature recovery and land management projects, both within and beyond the National Landscape, to assist in the delivery of National Landscape and Big Chalk objectives.
FLM 03	Support sustainable farm diversification and multi-purpose woodland management where it achieves National Landscape objectives and accords with planning policy.
FLM 04	Support efforts to identify future land use options that are best able to assist farm viability and reflect the environmental objectives of the National Landscape.
FLM 05	Support local markets for local produce and the development of local supply networks.
FLM 06	Encourage management of sites in public and tenanted ownership within the North Wessex Downs to be examples of best practice in the delivery of National Landscape objectives.
FLM 07	Support and promote efforts across the North Wessex Downs to reduce invasive, non-native species or unsustainable populations of species where these threaten the biodiversity and sustainable management of woodland, watercourses and other habitats.
FLM 08	Encourage the active and environmentally sensitive use of woodland resources for viable products, helping to enhance biodiversity.
FLM 09	Support and help guide publicly funded investment in rural development.
FLM 10	Support investment in new agricultural infrastructure and redevelopment of farm buildings where it increases the sustainability of local businesses and aligns with National Landscape purposes.
FLM 11	Encourage awareness of the special qualities of the National Landscape among local businesses to help them understand and embrace their responsibilities alongside running a profitable enterprise.
FLM 12	Support improved availability, quality, co-ordination and consistency in provision of land management advice across the National Landscape.
FLM 13	Support efforts to identify and develop the skills required to care for the landscape and its valued qualities, with opportunities for all to acquire such skills.
FLM 14	Encourage and support the local provision of practical training in traditional land management and the skills necessary to deliver enhanced rural land management and business diversification with clear landscape benefits.
FLM 15	Encourage good agricultural land management practices and adherence to good practice to contribute to resource protection, such as healthy soil management, preventing flooding from surface water run-off and safeguarding watercourses from nutrient run-off and silt pollution.
FLM 16	Support the provision of advice on integrated management of grassland to enhance biodiversity as part of equine land management practices.
FLM 17	Support initiatives such as better routes to market, working with game processors, to achieve sustainable deer populations across the National Landscape through collaborative measures and other stakeholders.
FLM 18	Encourage and support landowners to develop whole estate plans where suitable to enable long-term, integrated landscape management.
FLM 19	Encourage and support farmers and land managers to adopt practices that sequester carbon, minimise soil carbon loss and support climate mitigation and adaptation through nature-based solutions aligned with National Landscape purposes.

Farming and Land Management Support: Priorities for funding and advice by Landscape Character Type

3.22 National Landscape Management Plans have a role to play as the framework within which publicly and privately funded support mechanisms and other land management initiatives can be focussed and adapted to conserve and enhance the natural beauty of the designated landscapes and their settings. The North Wessex Downs National Landscape Management Plan provides the lens through which national objectives for farming and nature recovery can be applied to the landscapes and valued qualities of the North Wessex Downs

3.23 To support this role, the priorities set out in the following Table identify broad priorities for environmental land management in the North Wessex Downs National Landscape and its setting.

3.24 The first column in the Table sets out a series of generic measures which could apply to more than one Landscape Character Type; subsequent columns set out measures which are aimed specifically at each of the eight Landscape Character Types (as described in Chapter 2).



Priorities for farming and land management support to conserve and enhance the valued qualities of the National Landscape by Landscape Character Type

Generic aims applicable to more than one Landscape Character Type in the National Landscape	Aims specific to National Landscape Character Types	
	Open Download	Download with Woodland
• Support a landscape-scale approach to restoring, managing, buffering, extending and connecting currently fragmented, locally characteristic habitats. These include species-rich chalk grassland, arable field habitats, wet pasture and native riparian woodland in river valleys, heathland and common land, chalk rivers and streams, traditional orchards, ancient woodland (especially Plantations on Ancient Woodland Sites) and wood pasture. • Protect archaeological sites and features, including through removal from cultivation, reducing cultivation depth, scrub management, sympathetic woodland management and protection from livestock damage as necessary. • Adopt catchment-sensitive farming techniques across chalk river and stream catchments to reduce both diffuse and point-source pollution, minimise sediment run-off into watercourses and improve water quality.	• Restore and enhance unmanaged relict grassland and encourage greater diversity though sympathetic management, e.g. small areas of scrub/grassland mosaic. • Maintain, and enhance existing chalk grassland habitats. • Maintain and enhance the value of arable land and chalk grassland for priority farmland bird and arable plant species e.g. through spring sowing and winter stubbles, nesting plots, uncropped headlands, unsprayed field margins, pollen, nectar and seed mixes. Create and maintain wildlife corridors (e.g. buffer strips, beetle banks, track and byway verges), wherever possible linking a range of different habitats. • Increase the diversity of semi-improved permanent grassland, especially where adjacent or close to unimproved grassland.	• Restore and enhance unmanaged relict grassland and encourage greater diversity though sympathetic management, e.g. small areas of scrub/grassland mosaic. • Maintain, and enhance existing chalk grassland habitats. • Maintain and enhance the value of arable land and chalk grassland for priority farmland bird and arable plant species e.g. through spring sowing and winter stubbles, nesting plots, uncropped headlands, unsprayed field margins, pollen, nectar and seed mixes. Create and maintain wildlife corridors (e.g. buffer strips, beetle banks, track and byway verges), wherever possible linking a range of different habitats. • Increase the diversity of semi-improved permanent grassland, especially where adjacent or close to unimproved grassland.
• Restore and maintain a coherent network of habitat corridors though sympathetic management of, in particular, the huge ecological resource represented by road verges and banks, public rights of way and National Trails across the National Landscape, harnessing their potential to form links between wildlife sites and other important habitat patches. • Facilitate responsible public access to the landscape in places and in ways that are compatible with maintaining and promoting the valued qualities of the National Landscape. • Encourage and support more wildlife-friendly management of public and private open spaces, including recreation, sports and school grounds, parks, playgrounds, golf courses, greens, allotments and commons.	• Extend, link and buffer chalk grassland habitats e.g. through targeted arable reversion (linking existing grassland areas along ridgelines in particular), wildflower restoration of semi-improved grassland, scrub management and removal of inappropriate woodland planting. • Maintain the open, expansive, open landscape character by avoiding new tree and hedge planting, including small areas which can cumulatively erode the valued qualities of openness and sweeping views. • Protect archaeological sites and features, including through removal from cultivation, reducing cultivation depth, scrub management and protection from livestock damage as necessary. • Wherever possible create and maintain wildlife corridors (e.g. buffer strips, track and byway verges) across intensively managed arable and grassland, linking a range of different habitats including unimproved and semi-improved grassland and woodland. • Support specific advice and options for sympathetic management of land used to keep and train racehorses to enhance its value for wildlife.	• Extend, link and buffer chalk grassland habitats e.g. through targeted arable reversion (linking existing grassland areas along ridgelines in particular), wildflower restoration of semi-improved grassland, scrub management and removal of inappropriate woodland planting. • Maintain the open, expansive, open landscape character by avoiding new tree and hedge planting, including small areas which can cumulatively erode the valued qualities of openness and sweeping views. • Protect archaeological sites and features, including through removal from cultivation, reducing cultivation depth, scrub management and protection from livestock damage as necessary. • Wherever possible create and maintain wildlife corridors (e.g. buffer strips, track and byway verges) across intensively managed arable and grassland, linking a range of different habitats including unimproved and semi-improved grassland and woodland. • Support specific advice and options for sympathetic management of land used to keep and train racehorses to enhance its value for wildlife.

Aims specific to National Landscape Character Types

Wooded Plateau

- Conserve and enhance the intimate mosaic of woodland, farmland and hedges that surrounds and connects Savernake Forest and West Woods.
- Manage existing ancient woodland sympathetically to increase structural diversity e.g. by restoring coppice, controlling deer numbers and promoting natural regeneration.
- Restore Plantations on Ancient Woodland Sites (PAWS) to conserve and enhance local landscape character and biodiversity.
- Conserve existing veteran and ancient trees with careful management and support succession of veteran tree habitat for lichens and invertebrates in particular, (e.g. by pollarding, including creation of maiden pollards) and identification and management of future veterans).
- Restore, conserve and enhance designed landscapes, other historic parkland and wood pasture.
- Encourage restoration of historic hedge boundaries and restore and enhance existing boundaries through sympathetic hedge management, creation of buffer strips and promotion and management of hedgerow trees.
- Restore, expand/link and sympathetically manage remaining areas of heathland.

High Chalk Plain

- Maintain, and enhance existing chalk grassland habitats.
- Restore and enhance unmanaged relict grassland, encouraging greater diversity though sympathetic management.
- Increase the diversity of semi-improved permanent grassland, especially where adjacent or close to unimproved grassland.
- Extend, link and buffer chalk grassland habitats (e.g. through targeted arable reversion, scrub management and removal of inappropriate woodland planting).
- Maintain and enhance the value of the mosaic of arable land and chalk grassland for priority farmland bird and arable plant species (e.g. through spring sowing and winter stubbles, nesting plots, uncropped headlands, unsprayed field margins, pollen, nectar and seed mixes). Create and maintain wildlife corridors (e.g. buffer strips, beetle banks, track and byway verges), wherever possible linking a range of different habitats.

Downs Plain and Scarp

- On the Plain, encourage restoration of historic hedge boundaries and enhance existing boundaries through sympathetic hedge management, creation of buffer strips and promotion and management of hedgerow trees.
- On the Plain, consider opportunities for sympathetic, small-scale tree-planting integrated within a network of well-managed hedges.
- On the Plain, improve the value of the arable landscape for priority farmland birds, pollinators, arable plants and other wildlife (e.g. through spring sowing and winter stubbles, nesting plots, uncropped headlands, unsprayed field margins, pollen, nectar and seed mixes). Create and maintain wildlife corridors (e.g. buffer strips, beetle banks, track and byway verges) wherever possible linking a range of different habitats.
- Along the Scarp, maintain and enhance the diversity and wildlife value of the farmland/woodland/chalk grassland/historic parkland mosaic.
- Along the western Scarp, promote sympathetic management of the varied and distinctive linear wooded hangers and wooded combes.
- Conserve, enhance and restore the ecological value of drove roads and tracks linking to Open Downland through sympathetic management of banks and verges.
- Support realisation of the potential for The Ridgeway National Trail to serve as a conservation corridor through the landscape, encouraging ecological enhancement of land adjacent and close to The Ridgeway.
- Conserve and enhance the monumental landscape of the Avebury World Heritage Site and its setting, including through targeted arable reversion, increasing the diversity of semi-improved permanent grassland, scrub management and removal of inappropriate woodland planting.



CHAPTER 5

Biodiversity & Nature Recovery



Overview:

Designated wildlife sites that are home to rare habitats and species, including:

- A nationally significant area of chalk grassland including rare flora such as field fleawort, bastard toadflax, musk orchid and burnt orchid, early gentian, chalk eyebright, Chiltern gentian, dwarf mouse ear, tuberous thistle and round-headed rampion; invertebrates such as the wart-biter cricket and important butterfly populations including: Adonis blue, silver studded blue, marsh fritillary, chalkhill blue, small blue, silver spotted skipper and Duke of Burgundy fritillary.
- Substantial areas of broadleaved woodland and wood pasture, including a significant concentration of ancient woodlands, which provide roosting and/or feeding sites for bats species including Bechstein's bat, barbastelle, greater horseshoe bat and noctule; long rotation hazel coppice provides important habitat for mammals such as dormice; concentrations of calcareous bluebell woods; and a number of nationally scarce moss species.
- Rare chalk streams and rivers with a high diversity of aquatic plants, and invertebrate species including those that are nationally scarce, such as the white-clawed crayfish; supporting nationally and locally scarce bird species; mammals including otters and nationally declining water voles; and healthy fish populations including brown trout, salmon, grayling, perch, chub and dace.
- Arable habitats which are home to rare and colourful arable wildflowers, such as dense-flowered fumitory, slender tare and shepherd's needle, which are dependent on a regular cropping regime. Arable land use also provides feeding and breeding habitat for a number of rare and declining farmland birds including skylarks and stone-curlews.
- A rich mosaic of associated wetland habitats creating distinctive valley landscapes including fens, floodplains, water meadows, carr and wet woodland. As an example, the Red Data Book plant summer snowflake survives in seasonally flooded woodlands along the Kennet Valley.
- Opportunities for landscape scale conservation projects, working across a significant area and administrative boundaries.





The Ecology of the North Wessex Downs

4.1 The breadth of ecological diversity in the North Wessex Downs reflects its varied landscape character, shaped by centuries of human influence and active management. The area includes seven Special Areas of Conservation (SACs), which are part of the Natura 2000 ecological network, established under the EU Habitats Directive to protect habitats and species threatened at a European level. The Pewsey Downs SAC is also a National Nature Reserve. It has an outstanding chalk grassland flora and fauna, including nationally important populations of rare species, such as the endemic early gentian. The North Wessex Downs contains 66 Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs) covering 3,344 hectares, which is approximately 1.9% of the area. An estimated 19,772 ha, or 11.4% of the National Landscape, is classed as Priority Habitat. Nearly three-quarters of this, an estimated 14,459 ha, is deciduous woodland[1].

4.2 The most important habitats for nature conservation in the North Wessex Downs are the remnant areas of chalk grassland; semi-natural broadleaf woodland and wood pasture; chalk rivers, streams and associated wetlands, including wet woodland; and arable farmland managed for conservation.

4.3 Other significant habitats within the National Landscape include remnant heathlands on river gravel deposits in the east, such as Bucklebury Common, areas of semi-natural acidic grassland around Inkpen, lowland dry acid grassland and lowland meadow habitats around Highclere, and the wide grassy verges of the droveways crossing the Downs. Locally, the hedgerow network, springs, remnant watercress beds, road verges and dew ponds serve as important refuges and habitats. Chalk cuttings have magnificent displays of primroses and cowslips each year. This habitat mosaic is especially important for bats, as some species commute 20 to 30 kilometres from their roosts in old trees or outbuildings to forage across insect-rich habitats like wetlands, farmland, wood pasture and grassland.

Chalk Grassland

4.4 Chalk grassland is among the UK's most biologically rich and diverse habitats, with over 40 species of flowering plants found in just one square metre of high-quality turf. Approximately 9% of the UK's chalk grassland is located within the North Wessex Downs. The chalk grassland in the area supports significant populations of the early gentian, a scheduled protected species and one of Britain's few endemic plants. Unimproved chalk grassland is crucial for the survival of many scarce invertebrate species such as the wart-biter bush cricket and the internationally threatened marsh fritillary butterfly. Other scarce chalk grassland butterflies include the Adonis blue, Duke of Burgundy, chalkhill blue and small blue. This habitat also supports good populations of skylarks.

4.5 Twenty-nine SSSIs within the North Wessex Downs feature chalk grassland, covering a total of 1,421 hectares, which is nearly half of the total SSSI area and 0.8% of the National Landscape. Additionally, 249 Local Wildlife Sites (LWS) include a chalk grassland component, covering 2,163 hectares (1.3% of the National Landscape). However, the exact area of chalk grassland within the LWS network is not known. Other, non-statutory, identified sites such road verges also hold chalk grassland habitat.

4.6 Nationally, chalk grassland areas have significantly diminished from their extent in the 1900s. In the North Wessex Downs, chalk grassland declined by 32% between 1968 and 1998. The remaining chalk grassland areas are becoming increasingly fragmented. Currently, small, isolated blocks are mainly confined to steep scarp slopes, dry valleys, and pastures around archaeological sites. The total area of lowland calcareous grassland in the North Wessex Downs is estimated at 3,942 ha[2]. It is estimated that the Berkshire and Marlborough Downs National Character Area, covering about two-thirds of the National Landscape, supports at least 1,250 hectares, which is approximately 3-5% of England's total estimated area of lowland calcareous grassland.



Woodland

4.7 The National Forest Inventory shows 21,109 ha of the North Wessex Downs as wooded[3], Tree and canopy cover outside woodland is estimated to cover a further 6,579 ha[4], making a total of 27,688 ha, or just under 16% of the National Landscape area. Of this, 8,824 ha is estimated to be ancient woodland (including plantations on ancient woodland sites)5. According to the Woodland Trust, the North Wessex Downs contain two nationally important major concentrations of ancient woodland, centred on the Berkshire and Marlborough Downs and the Hampshire Downs; and areas of forest such as Savernake.

4.8 In the North Wessex Downs National Landscape:

- **less than 0.1% of the total woodland area is designated as a National Nature Reserve;**
- **0.5% is designated as Special Areas for Conservation (SAC);**
- **7.5% is designated as Site of Special Scientific Interest;**
- **42.3% is designated as a Local Wildlife Site.**



4.9 The diverse woodland types that make up these ancient woodlands include significant areas of wood pasture. They support a wide range of species, including woodland birds and important roosting sites for a number of bat species. Of particular importance is the calcareous woodland that supports a range of rare plants including herb paris and green hellebore and provides home to substantial populations of native bluebells (for which Britain has a global responsibility, supporting about half the world's bluebell population).

Chalk Rivers and Streams

4.10 The spring-fed chalk streams and rivers of the North Wessex Downs support an extremely diverse range of plant and animal communities. Pea mussels and internationally rare floating vegetation of river water-dropwort can be found along their reaches. In turn, the rivers irrigate adjacent areas creating the distinctive valley landscape with its remnant fens and water meadows. The summer snowflake, a Red Data Book species, survives in seasonally flooded sites along the River Kennet. In recognition of their outstanding nature conservation value the Lambourn, Kennet and Hampshire Avon rivers are all designated SSSIs, while the Lambourn, the Hampshire Avon, and the Kennet and Lambourn Floodplain – a series of discrete sites supporting the globally vulnerable Desmoulin's whorl snail – are Special Areas of Conservation.

Enclosed Farmland

4.11 Arable cultivation is the dominant land management activity in the area. The North Wessex Downs support a wide range of nationally and regionally important species associated with arable farmland and adapted to colonise land disturbed through tillage. They include farmland birds like stone-curlew and tree sparrow; rare arable plants such as corn buttercup and shepherd's needle; and mammals such as brown hare and harvest mouse. Many of these species are listed as Species of Priority Importance under Section 41 of the Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act 2006 and are targets for the Government's strategy to implement commitments under the global Convention on Biological Diversity. An Arable Biodiversity Strategy has been prepared for the NWDNL to help conserve and enhance the nationally important arable biodiversity found within the North Wessex Downs.

4.12 Although the downs are essentially a large-scale landscape, traditional areas of mixed farming, responding to the underlying geology, have resulted in a range of habitats (grassland, scrub and arable lands) co-existing in close proximity. This complex of interlinked habitats provides some of the most favourable conditions for the characteristic birds and mammals of the North Wessex Downs, including brown hare, skylark, lapwing, tree sparrow, corn bunting, linnet and grey partridge. Increased cover, nesting opportunities and a wider abundance of food supply occur where arable margins meet up with wildflower and insect rich downland and scrub. This supports an important community of ground-nesting birds and other species typical of arable and unimproved grassland which has been lost from many areas of arable farmland.

4.13 Changes to climate will alter the composition of the natural communities that are characteristic of chalk downland, woodland, streams and arable fields. Diverse natural communities of plants and animals are most likely to survive on soils and in streams with low nutrient status and in large patches of habitat. Given the pressures of climate change and the need to protect and enhance a nature recovery network that enables species migration, habitat corridors along rights of way and habitat networks are of increasing value.



Nature Conservation and Recovery

4.14 A review of England's wildlife sites and its ecological network, chaired by Sir John Lawton and published in 2010, identified Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty as having great potential 'to establish a coherent and resilient ecological network'. The key message from this report, which was adopted in policy through the 2011 Natural Environment White Paper, was that to safeguard the country's wildlife habitats and species it was essential to 'make space for nature'. It advocated that this could be most readily achieved by making existing sites that are important foar wildlife 'bigger, better, and joined up' and by creating more such sites. The aim of this is to create a sustainable, resilient and more effective ecological network for England.

25-Year Environment Plan

4.15 The UK Government Department of Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) published a 25-Year Environment Plan (25YEP) in 2018. Among the commitments made in the Plan were to commission a review of protected landscapes and develop a nature recovery network[6].

The 25YEP set out 10 goals for the environment:

- **GOAL 1:** Thriving plants and wildlife
- **GOAL 2:** Clean air
- **GOAL 3:** Clean and plentiful water
- **GOAL 4:** Managing exposure to chemicals and pesticides
- **GOAL 5:** Maximise our resources, minimise our waste
- **GOAL 6:** Using resources from nature sustainably
- **GOAL 7:** Mitigating and adapting to climate change
- **GOAL 8:** Reduced risk of harm from environmental hazards
- **GOAL 9:** Enhancing biosecurity
- **GOAL 10:** Enhancing beauty, heritage and engagement with the natural environment

Environmental Improvement Plan

4.16 The Environment Act 2021 commits the Government to refresh the 25 Year Environment Plan every five years. The first review was published as the Environmental Improvement Plan in January 2023. This retained the 10 Goals set out in the 25YEP and set out an "apex goal" of improving nature, which is supported by all the other goals. Following the General Election in 2024, the Government initiated a review of the Environmental Improvement Plan.

4.17 In January 2024, DEFRA published the Protected Landscapes Targets and Outcomes Framework (PLTOF), which outlines the targets from the Environmental Improvement Plan that Protected Landscapes bodies, relevant authorities and partners are expected to prioritise. These include Goals 1, 7 and 10 on the previous page.

0.00004.18 Some targets are action focused, while others set a clear numerical target for how much Protected Landscapes are expected to contribute as areas to the national targets. The paper adds that "targets should be seen as a minimum contribution rather than a limit on a Protected Landscape's ambition".

4.19 It is important to emphasise that the PLTOF states: "The targets are for the Protected Landscapes as places (the geographic area covered by the designation). Action will be coordinated by Protected Landscape bodies through their statutory management plan. It will be the responsibility of all stakeholders, partners and land managers in the area to support their delivery" and that "the framework will empower Protected Landscape bodies, relevant authorities, farmers, land managers and other organisations to work together in planning and targeting resources and activity.[7]"

30 by 30

4.20 In 2019, under the umbrella of the National Landscapes Association, the family of National Landscapes launched the Colchester Declaration. This is a formal commitment to redress declines in species and habitats within the context of a wider response to climate change. The commitments include that, by 2030:

- **at least 200,000 ha of Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs) in National Landscapes will be in favourable condition;**
- **at least 100,000 ha of wildlife-rich habitat outside of protected sites will have been created/restored in National Landscapes; and**
- **at least 36,000 ha of new woodland will have been planted or allowed to regenerate in National landscapes following the principle of the right tree in the right place.**





4.21 National Landscapes also pledged to publish Nature Recovery Plans with priorities in their areas for achieving these national commitments.

4.22 The independent Landscapes Review was commissioned by the Government as an action from the 25YEP and chaired by Julian Glover. The Glover Review recommended that "National landscapes should form the backbone of Nature Recovery Networks – joining things up within and beyond their boundaries", and that they "should be at the centre of coordinated action to integrate effective ecological networks with landscape objectives and other uses, including farming, education, recreation, tourism and the provision of other ecosystem services."

4.23 Internationally, the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework was adopted in 2022 at the 15th meeting of the Conference of the Parties (COP 15) to the UN Convention on Biological Diversity. This Framework supports the achievement of the UN Sustainable Development Goals and sets out targets for 2030 and Goals for 2050. The UK is a signatory to the Convention and has adopted the target to conserve 30% of land, waters and seas 2030, often referred to as 30 by 30.

4.24 In a document published in October 2024, the Government stated that "Delivering the UK's 30 by 30 target on land in England requires urgent and significant action to drive nature's recovery. This will require a strategic approach, to address the scale of action needed, and ensure a diverse and well-connected network of 30by30 areas. This approach also supports our wider objectives for nature's recovery, food security, and beyond.[8]"

4.25 It is expected that the primary focus of T1 will be enhancement, restoration and creation of species-rich calcareous grassland, which is the top priority habitat in the NWDNL Nature Recovery Plan. Other contributions will come from chalk stream restoration, floodplain meadows and grazing marsh and lowland fen, arable field margins and other in-field measures, restoration of Plantation on Ancient Woodland Sites (PAWS), and heathland restoration/creation. At the time of writing, information for the area of wildlife-rich habitats within the North Wessex Downs National Landscape outside protected sites (Target T1) was not yet available.

Protected Landscapes Targets and Outcomes Framework: Apportioned EIP Targets for the North Wessex Downs National Landscape

National Target	North Wessex Downs National Landscape	
	Increase (ha) by 2030	Increase (ha) by 2042 (T1) by 2050 (T8)
T1 Restore or create more than 250,000 hectares of a range of wildlife-rich habitats within Protected Landscapes, outside protected sites by 2042 (from a 2022 baseline of 0).	3,000	14,000
T8 Increase tree canopy and woodland cover (combined) by 3% of total land area in Protected Landscapes by 2050 (from a 2022 baseline of 0).	400	1,750

4.26 Target T8 is more challenging in terms of landscape character, given almost 16% of the landscape already has tree canopy or woodland cover and important landscape character types such as Open Downland are not suitable for new woodland planting. Constraints include the open character of much of the designated landscape; the impact planting would have on historic monuments and landscape character; conflicts between tree-planting and priority habitats and species such as calcareous grassland, arable wildflowers and ground-nesting birds; and the loss of productive arable land. However, because the target goes beyond conventional afforestation, relating instead to all kinds of tree canopy cover, there is significant scope for well-considered expansion without conflicting with landscape character and the area's valued qualities. In particular, there are opportunities buffering and linking ancient woodland sites, restoration and creation of wood pasture landscapes, restoring and creating new traditional orchards, promoting many more large hedgerow trees, street trees within settlements and sensitively designed agro-forestry, It should be noted that the canopy will take some years to develop and the relatively low target for 2030 should be read with the understanding that a larger area will need to be addressed by then for the 2050 target to be met.

4.27 It should be noted that some of the 10 targets are not applicable to the North Wessex Downs National Landscape, while others require further guidance and clarification from DEFRA.

Nature Recovery Plan

4.28 Through the Colchester Declaration we pledged to produce a Nature Recovery Plan for the North Wessex Downs. The North Wessex Downs National Landscape Nature Recovery Plan[9] was informed by wide consultation and launched in 2023.

4.29 The Nature Recovery Plan sets out the National Landscape Partnership's priorities for nature, working with partners, stakeholders and community groups. It is not intended to be exhaustive, but sets out the status of key habitats and identifies species occurring within the National Landscape that are of particular significance. It identifies actions, targets and practical opportunities to reverse the declines and losses we have witnessed over recent decades.

4.30 The biggest current threat to our habitats and species is climate change. The Nature Recovery Plan, informed by the Climate Change Adaptation Manual 2020, identifies habitat vulnerability to climate change and suggests measures that will help our key habitats to be more resilient in the face of increasing global temperatures and changing weather patterns. Other threats include intensive agriculture, intensive game shooting, urbanisation, pollution and the spread of invasive non-native species.

4.31 In tandem with an urgent need to tackle climate change and other threats, we need to do more to allow nature and wildlife to recover and to support natural processes to function. Ill-considered actions to sequester carbon and mitigate climate change can have an adverse impact on biodiversity, as well as the landscape character and natural beauty for which the National Landscape is designated. Nature recovery must be planned, hand in hand with climate change actions, in ways that conserve and enhance the area's natural beauty in line with its national and international status as an IUCN Category V Protected Landscape.

4.32 The North Wessex Downs National Landscape Partnership encourages activities that:

- **improve the quality of current sites by better habitat management;**
- **increase the size of current wildlife sites;**
- **join, or enhance connections between, sites, either through physical corridors or through 'stepping stones';**
- **create new sites;**
- **reduce the pressures on wildlife by improving the wider environment, including through buffering wildlife sites.**

4.33 These actions are designed to help establish a Nature Recovery Network that meets the needs of wildlife and people today, and one that is more resilient to the future pressures, including climate change. There are trade-offs between these actions: the more we do to improve the quality of existing sites or to enhance the wider environment, the less we will need to do to create new sites. Our actions need to be adaptive, adjusting to what works as we progress.

Biodiversity Duty on Public Authorities

4.34 The Environment Act 2021 strengthened the biodiversity duty on public authorities. The duty requires them to consider what they can do to conserve and enhance biodiversity, agree policies and specific objectives based on their consideration, and act to deliver their policies and achieve their objectives.

Local Nature Recovery Strategies

4.35 Under the Environment (Local Nature Recovery Strategies) (Procedure) Regulations 2023, the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs sets out the requirement for Local Nature Recovery Strategies (LNRSs). The Government has appointed 48 responsible authorities to lead on preparing LNRSs for England. There are four LNRSs covering parts of the North Wessex Downs National Landscape: Berkshire, Hampshire, Oxfordshire and Wiltshire, including Swindon. Each LNRS must agree priorities for nature recovery and propose actions in the locations where it would make a particular contribution to achieving those priorities. Every strategy must contain a) a habitat map of the most valuable areas for wildlife, b) a list of opportunities to improve nature in the future and c) a written statement of biodiversity priorities. Responsible authorities are expected to work with other organisations and partners in their area to agree what should be included in their LNRS. At the time of writing the LNRSs are at various stages of development. The priorities in the NWDNL Nature Recovery Plan have informed the preparation of the LNRSs. It will be important to ensure that the agreed LNRSs reflect the Nature Recovery Plan for the NWDNL and that the latter is aligned with and complements the LNRSs. The North Wessex Downs National Landscape will act as a delivery partner, convening partners, encouraging collaborative action across the National Landscape, developing projects and facilitating or supporting delivery.

National Planning Policy and Legislation

4.36 The National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) sets out measures to conserve and enhance the natural environment, including protecting and enhancing sites for biodiversity, minimising impacts on and providing net gains for biodiversity including by establishing coherent ecological networks. Further, it makes clear that Local Plans should "take a strategic approach to maintaining and enhancing networks of habitats and green infrastructure and plan for the enhancement of natural capital at a catchment or landscape scale across local authority boundaries. Green infrastructure is a "network of multifunctional green space, urban and rural, which is capable of delivering a wide range of environmental and quality of life benefits for local communities" and it helps address and mitigate the impacts of climate change, providing for recreation, biodiversity, health and wellbeing. On a detailed level, the NPPF highlights the importance in development of incorporating features which support priority or threatened species such as swifts, bats and hedgehogs.

4.37 The Environment Act 2021 created a new biodiversity net. gain (BNG) condition for planning permissions. All applicable developments are now required to leave the natural environment in a measurably better state than it was before. A biodiversity metric is used to calculate the BNG of a development. As an incentive to focus nature recovery actions in the most strategic locations, development projects that create, enhance or recover habitat in locations which are mapped in a Local Nature Recovery Strategy (see below) are given a higher biodiversity value than they would receive elsewhere.

Recording

4.38 The Biological Record Centres and Historic Environment Records Centres serving the North Wessex Downs play an important role as the main repositories for information on the biodiversity and cultural heritage of the National Landscape and its setting. In addition to gathering data and evidence from specialists, there is scope for greater use of citizen science, engaging the public in biological recording/monitoring of key species and habitats, including the presence of invasive non-native species.

"At length the snow ceases and the wind drops to a whisper; then over the hill-top the lapwings start up again and wheel in phantom flight, shrieking their weird night call."

EDWARD THOMAS (1878-1917)



Biodiversity and Nature Recovery: Key Issues

Key issues with the potential to have significant influence on the National Landscape's Biodiversity and Nature Recovery Valued Qualities:

a) Recording – significant gaps in our understanding of the distribution and abundance of habitats and species across the National Landscape and how to manage it most effectively for biodiversity.

b) Habitat fragmentation degrading ecosystem functionality. Dispersal and colonisation potential of wildlife populations is constrained, leading to loss of genetic diversity and risk of local extinctions.

c) Climate change - impacts of flooding, winterbournes, watercourses, carbon sequestration, vulnerable habitats, changes in the climatic range of species (both losses and gains). The resilience and response of species, such as shifts in distribution, will be strongly influenced by habitat availability and connectivity.

d) Continuing uncertainty over future UK land management patterns, in particular the future role of protected landscapes in farming and the potential for environmental land management schemes (ELMs) to deliver significant biodiversity improvements across the farmed landscape, and retain improvements secured through past land management support schemes.

e) Direct and indirect effects of agricultural intensification and land management changes having continued negative impacts on farmland habitats and species.

f) Lack of management and other pressures leading to the loss and degradation/decline of priority habitats and species.

g) Nesting success and productivity is often insufficient to reverse declines or even to sustain current populations of many ground-nesting birds.

h) Negative impacts of invasive non-native species on native wildlife and habitats.

i) Economic fragility of low input/extensive farming systems and cost of replacement infrastructure (fencing, water supplies etc.) leading to loss or deterioration of semi-natural habitats through poor management.

j) Need for grazing - lack of livestock to manage remaining areas of semi-natural chalk grassland and restored or newly created grassland, movement restrictions, recreational pressure, bovine tuberculosis testing and movement regulations.

k) Degradation and loss of river and wetland habitats through inappropriate management, development, increasing water demand, pollution, eutrophication, past human engineering, shading and climate change.

l) Lack of or poor management of much woodland, including ancient woodland, and hedges causing a decline in biodiversity.

m) Existing green infrastructure network - erosion of lane and byway verges by increased traffic use and larger vehicles, lack of resources and management to maintain biodiversity and secure enhancements.

n) Change from the use of grass gallops (some of which retain remnant areas of chalk grassland) to artificial surfaces in the racing industry.

o) Increased recreational pressure, with dog-worrying of livestock, disturbance to vulnerable ground-nesting birds, and erosion of chalk grassland and other fragile habitats..

p) Development within the NWDNL and its setting - direct loss of habitat and wildlife and creation of obstacles to nature recovery networks through built development, and indirect impacts, e.g. increased recreational pressure from bigger human population, increasing population of domestic pets, domestic lighting affecting invertebrates and bats.

q) Pesticides in the environment adversely impacting terrestrial and aquatic invertebrates (inc. pollinators).

r) Lack of reliable, coherent long-term resources necessary to recover nature at scale, e.g. to meet 30x30 challenge.

s) Dearth of experienced and skilled advisors with agri-ecological skills to advise farmers and land managers.

t) Threat of smaller, family farms that may support more biodiversity having to be sold and absorbed by bigger, highly commercial agri-businesses.

u) Green finance and markets still evolving with challenges for farmers and landowners to understand opportunities and find trustworthy viable partners.

v) Nature poverty, people not having, or not understanding how to have, access to nature.

w) Plastics polluting the environment especially streams/rivers, including micro plastics and plastics used in farming.

Biodiversity and Nature Recovery: Priorities

1. Collaborative action to implement the NWDNL Nature Recovery Plan, aligned with Local Nature Recovery Strategies.
2. Action to meet DEFRA targets and contribute towards 30x30, as set out in this Plan.
3. Develop an expanded and connected nature recovery network in the North Wessex Downs which is resilient to the impacts of climate change and allows the free movement of habitats and species throughout the landscape and beyond.
4. Foster a more equitable partnership between people and their natural environment, ensuring land use decisions respect nature, farming practices share space with nature and recreation is effectively managed to protect vulnerable habitats and species.
5. Enable landscape-scale initiatives that respond to the central position of the North Wessex Downs National Landscape within the geography of the Big Chalk.







Biodiversity and Nature Recovery: Policies

BNR 01 Support the delivery of NWDNL Nature Recovery Plan priorities and targets in the Protected Landscapes Targets and Outcomes Framework. To ensure effective management of all priority habitats and species in the National Landscape.

BNR 02 Resist proposals which will lead to the direct or indirect degradation or loss of nationally or locally designated wildlife sites, priority habitats or populations of protected and priority species.

BNR 03 Encourage a co-ordinated and consistent approach by Local Nature Recovery Strategies to nature recovery networks, aligned with North Wessex Downs priorities, across the National Landscape and its setting.

BNR 04 Support farmers and land managers in restoring, creating and maintaining a resilient network habitats with thriving populations of key species, guided by the Nature Recovery Plan and LNRS priorities.

BNR 05 Support efforts to understand and respond to the localised impacts of climate change on vulnerable habitats and species within and surrounding the North Wessex Downs, to improve resilience and adaptation.

BNR 06 Encourage and support landscape-scale action for habitat management, restoration and creation.

BNR 07 Support and encourage actions to enable grazing on all the main grassland areas of the National Landscape.

BNR 08 Support the development of initiatives to safeguard and develop habitat corridors and ecological networks throughout the National Landscape, and in particular to enhance the ecological value of road verges and similar linear features such as public rights of way and National Trails.

BNR 09 Support Catchment Partnerships and other key stakeholders including water companies to promote and deliver projects to conserve, restore and enhance chalk streams, rivers and other waterbodies to achieve good ecological status.

BNR 10 Encourage and support restoration of Plantations on Ancient Woodland Sites and protection and management of woodland generally for nature recovery, as well as its recreational, carbon storage and economic value.

BNR 11 Encourage the greater connection between people and the natural environment, promoting responsible access to nature in appropriate locations, and effectively communicate its value to people.

BNR 12 Support the County Biological Record Centres and Historic Environment Records Centres serving the North Wessex Downs as the main repositories for information on the biodiversity and cultural heritage of the National Landscape and support initiatives to engage the public in biological recording/monitoring.

BNR 13 Support research, including to understand the causes of declines in key species such as ground-nesting birds and support appropriate action to rebuild populations, and use of tools such as citizen science to monitor the impact of habitat restoration and improved management practices in the National Landscape.

BNR 14 Secure maximum biodiversity gain and protection of ecosystem goods and services through innovative use of emerging environmental mechanisms including Environmental Land Management schemes, natural capital, carbon markets, biodiversity net. gain etc.

BNR 15 Resist proposals which have a likely significant effect (either alone or in combination with other plans and projects) upon a European designated site unless it can be ascertained following an appropriate assessment that they will have no significant adverse effect on the integrity of the site concerned.

BNR 16 Realise the potential for actions that align nature recovery with the rich cultural heritage of the North Wessex Downs, e.g. hedge restoration and management, arable reversion to grassland on historic monuments, sensitive woodland management etc..



CHAPTER 6

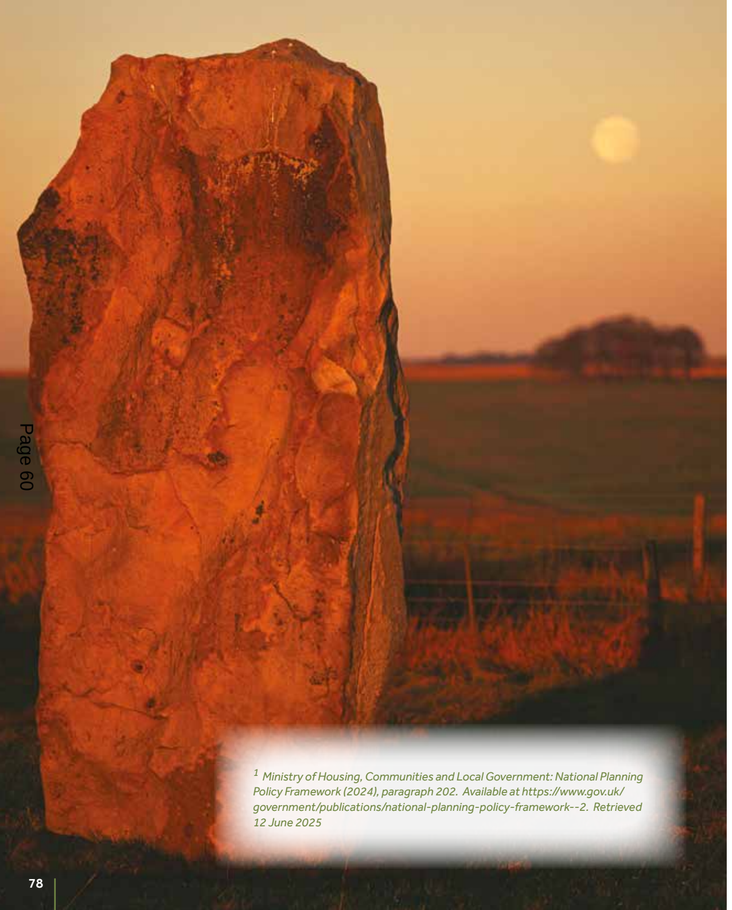
Historic Environment



Overview:

- **Neolithic and Bronze Age ritual and funerary monuments** including Knap Hill and Windmill Hill causewayed enclosures, West Kennet and Wayland's Smithy chambered tombs, Silbury Hill, Avebury stone circle and its surrounding ceremonial landscape, and Bronze Age round barrows including Seven Sisters and Seven Barrows groups. Also other features such as the Ridgeway.
- **Iron Age, Roman and post-Roman defences and settlements**, including hillforts at Oldbury, Barbury Castle and Uffington Castle, the Roman town of Cunetio (Mildenhall), Littlecote villa, the Roman road through Savernake Forest, Fyfield and Overton Down field systems and the linear earthworks of the Wansdyke, Grim's Ditch and Devil's Ditch.
- **Mediaeval and post-mediaeval settlements and buildings,** including castle earthworks, tithe barns, parish churches, and the layouts and historic buildings of Marlborough, Hungerford, Ramsbury and many smaller villages.
- **Country houses and landscaped parks and gardens** such as at Basildon Park, Highclere Castle, Tottenham House and Ramsbury Manor and Savernake Forest, many originating as mediaeval deer parks.
- **Post-mediaeval buildings and infrastructure** including the Kennet and Avon Canal, extant and former railway lines and tunnels, watermills, windmills, pumping stations, water meadows, 18th–19th-century planned farmsteads, historic trackways and paths, and First and Second World War airfields, pillboxes, ammunition dumps and practice trenches.





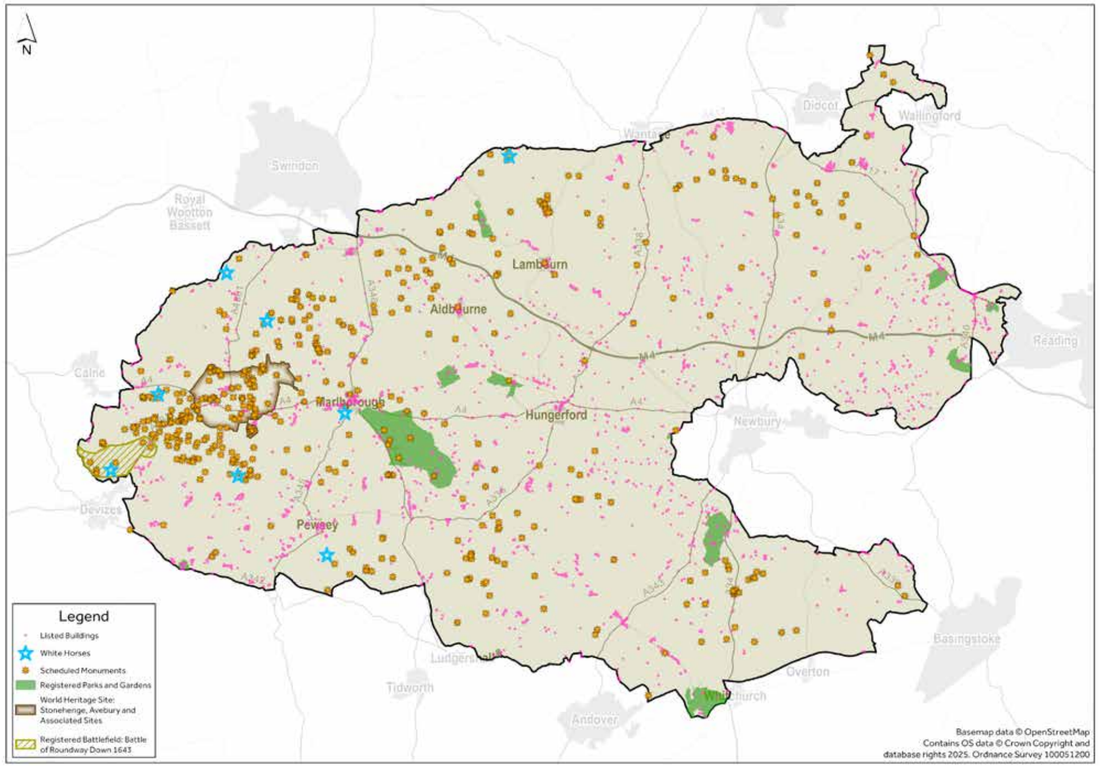
[1] *Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government: National Planning Policy Framework (2024), paragraph 202. Available at https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-planning-policy-framework--2. Retrieved 12 June 2025*

5.1 The North Wessex Downs is an ancient landscape, shaped by human hands. This cultural heritage makes a powerful and fundamental contribution to the present-day landscape and to our own lives, as Bill Bryson neatly describes. Evidence of human influence on the area extends back at least 5,000 years when the long barrows at Avebury were constructed.

5.2 In the three thousand years since the Uffington White Horse was sculpted, the landscape of the North Wessex Downs has been continually shaped to serve the changing needs of the successive generations of the people who have lived and worked here. What we see today is a rich and many-layered patchwork of features that demonstrate the different stages in its evolution. Together these features contribute an irreplaceable sense of time and character to the present-day scene. Past human influence is etched in every facet of the landscape – in the shape of fields and woods, the alignment of tracks and lanes, the form and texture of villages and hamlets, even the courses of streams and rivers. In years to come, the landscape of the North Wessex Downs will continue to evolve, but, it is to be hoped, in ways that will allow the underlying reminders of its past to add meaning and value to the lives of its future residents and visitors.

5.3 The importance of the historic environment is clearly recognised in the planning system. The National Planning and Policy Framework (NPPF) confirms that significance of heritage assets lies not only in their interest and value to people today but also to future generations.[1] That interest may be archaeological, architectural, artistic or historic. The significance of an asset derives not only from physical presence, but also from its setting – in other words, its relationship to nearby historic places and within the wider landscape.

5.4 Furthermore, the NPPF states that heritage assets are an irreplaceable resource which deliver wide social, economic, cultural and environmental benefits. Change is inevitable and so in the face of mounting threats, careful management is needed. There is a deficit in the understanding not only the historical evolution of individual settlements and how this should influence their future development, but also in the overall quantity of archaeological assets in the NWD, particularly in woodland areas. Where it is available, LiDAR data and its analysis can greatly help as a first step in understanding archaeological assets in woodland.



Features of the North Wessex Downs

5.5 A wide range of features of differing scale, visibility and significance make up the historic environment. Many of the area's archaeological sites have national or international recognition. The landscape that includes the complex of Neolithic and Early Bronze Age monuments around Avebury (and including Silbury Hill, West Kennet long barrow, the causewayed enclosure on Windmill Hill, dozens of Bronze Age barrows and many other important sites) is of such global significance that it has been inscribed on the World Heritage List by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) as a World Heritage Site.

5.6 There are 478 Scheduled Monuments in the North Wessex Downs National Landscape, one of the densest concentrations in the country. These include:

- **Neolithic long barrows at Wayland's Smithy high on the chalk ridge overlooking the Thames Valley and at Adam's Grave above the Vale of Pewsey.**
- **Bronze Age barrow cemeteries such the Lambourn Seven Barrows and the Windmill Hill complex (barrows comprise over 60% of the scheduled monuments in the NDWNL).**
- **The Uffington White Horse and its adjacent Iron Age hillfort, (one of a string of major late prehistoric monuments that occupy prominent positions on the higher downs).**
- **The small Roman town at Cunetio near Mildenhall and Roman settlements such as Maddle Farm and the villa at Littlecote.**
- **The mediaeval motte and bailey castles at Hamstead Marshall and Marlborough College.**

5.7 One Registered Battlefield is included within the National Landscape: Roundway Down, near Devizes. This site was the location of a major encounter fought in July 1643 when a Parliamentarian army was heavily defeated by a significantly smaller Royalist force.

5.8 In addition to designated archaeological features, the local Historic Environment Records (HERs) maintained by the County Councils in Hampshire and Oxfordshire and the unitary authorities in Wiltshire, Swindon and West Berkshire, are estimated to contain records of close to 12,000 sites, monuments and finds of archaeological and historic interest within the boundary of the North Wessex Downs. Whilst these features may not be designated as scheduled monuments, many of these sites are of national









importance. Many others are of local or regional significance and make a substantial contribution to local distinctiveness and sense of place. The information contained on the HERs is a vital part of the jigsaw of information that allows us to understand how our communities have developed and our landscapes have evolved over several thousand years.

5.9 Another important aspect of the local heritage is the extensive network of footpaths, bridleways and byways, including the ancient ridgeway paths along the Marlborough Downs to the Chilterns and beyond. These historic communication and trade routes are a characteristic feature of the North Wessex Downs and, in addition to being a legacy of human activity, they are now a valuable recreational resource.

5.10 The built environment also makes a fundamental contribution to the landscape. The North Wessex Downs contain 4,088 Listed Buildings. More than 250 of these are listed at Grade I or II*, the two highest levels of importance. Buildings protected through listing take many different forms and reflect nearly a thousand years of human settlement. As well as grand country houses, the market towns in the National Landscape are peppered with town houses of wealthy merchants and the villages are host to splendid mediaeval parish churches. Listed buildings in the North Wessex Downs also include very early farm buildings and barns, as well as locks and other structures associated with the Kennet and Avon Canal. Listed milestone markers, roadside pumps, and signs related to turnpike roads tell the story of moving about the post mediaeval landscape, and pillboxes built during the early phase of the Second World War illustrate the North Wessex Downs' part in the planned defence of Britain against expected invasion.

5.11 The North Wessex Downs include 15 Registered Parks and Gardens. One of these, Highclere Castle, is registered Grade I, and four examples, Tottenham House, Purley Hall, Ashdown House and Inkpen House, are registered as II*. Many other areas of designed landscape, including historic parkland, gardens and cemeteries, whilst not on the National Register, nonetheless add significant local value.

5.12 As with the undesignated archaeological resource, many local buildings and structures remain unprotected through the listing mechanism. Even so, they contribute both to our understanding of historic events or processes, and to the overall narrative of the National Landscape. Some of these lie within the Conservation Areas designated by local authorities in settlements of particular historic character or significance. Many others, however, particularly isolated structures or farm buildings, receive little or no formal protection.

5.13 A further heritage asset, often overlooked in terms of importance to the historic landscape, is managed woodland. This can include deer parks, hunting forests, irreplaceable ancient woodland, as well as ancient and veteran trees, historic pollard trees and coppice stools. These areas, managed sensitively, can play a significant role in protecting archaeological earthworks from damage from cultivation.





Historic Landscape Character

5.14 Defining and mapping the Historic Landscape Character Areas for the North Wessex Downs has provided new insights into the evolution of the landscape and the historic processes that have influenced the countryside. Historic Landscape Characterisation (HLC) is a way of analysing and recording how several millennia of human interaction with the land produces the rural landscape of today. It is nationally recognised as a means for understanding and managing the entire landscape and not just the individual and often isolated archaeological sites and buildings traditionally protected by scheduling or listing. Written in the Land is a publicly available resource which draws on HLC data to provides an insight into the archaeology and history of the North Wessex Downs, and can be accessed via the North Wessex Downs website.[2]

5.15 A greater appreciation of how the landscape has evolved in relation to its underlying geology, human interventions and activities, and changing socio-economic circumstances is vitally important. The HLC methodology brings together a wealth of information, including semi-natural and living features (e.g., woodland, hedges, waterways) as much as archaeological features, with a clear recognition of the dynamic nature of the landscape, interpreting landscape on the basis of its 'time-depth' – the natural and cultural history that has produced the landscapes we find in the North Wessex Downs today.

5.16 The HLC process facilitates a fuller understanding of the whole protected landscape, not only raising awareness of the unique cultural heritage of the North Wessex Downs among local communities, visitors and the wider population, but also providing a tool for the integrated management of the area's historic environment. The resource informs planning decisions and provides a framework for policy-making and research, whilst improving the county-based Sites and Monument Records (SMRs) and Historic Environment Records (HERs).

5.17 HLC has confirmed that the landscape of the North Wessex Downs has always been predominantly rural, but it has also illustrated how its detailed character has changed over time. One of the most significant statistics concerns the loss of open chalk downland. Of the 18% of the area that could be characterised as unploughed pasture in 19th century, barely 3% survived in the early 21st century[3].

5.18 The rate of agricultural change is also evidenced by the fact that nearly 75% of pre-18th century field enclosures have been lost during the 20th century. In addition, some two-thirds of mediaeval assart enclosures (woodland clearances) have been lost or significantly modified in the same period.



"Whatever religious or ritualistic significance the White Horse may have had to its creators has long since faded away. For most of its existence – through plague, war and famine… the White Horse has been preserved simply because people liked it. I think that is splendid."

BILL BRYSON (INTRODUCTION TO THE ENGLISH LANDSCAPE, 2000)

Settlement Pattern

5.19 The pattern and distribution of settlement within the North Wessex Downs has evolved over millennia of human occupation. However, most of the current towns, villages, hamlets, and farms are likely to have originated in mediaeval or post-mediaeval times. Some of the most characteristic features of the 'Downland' and 'Downland with Woodland' landscape character areas are the long linear settlements of the river valleys – the main concentrations of population in otherwise open uninhabited downland. Characteristically, these are loosely strung along a road on the first contour above the winter flood level, with the winterbourne or river forming an integral feature of the village. Examples are at St Mary Bourne in Hampshire, Collingbourne Kingston in Wiltshire and Hampstead Norreys in Berkshire.

5.20 The pattern in the Lowland Mosaic landscape character area is distinctly different. This reflects its mediaeval origins in a network of hamlets, lines of houses, and villages along roads. Some villages have a clear nucleus, typically associated with a village green or church, while others have a more dispersed pattern, typical of post-mediaeval squatter settlements. This pattern is also reflected in the Downland with Woodland landscape type, which has small, clustered hamlets and villages sheltering in folds in the chalk, as in the Chutes in Wiltshire, or exposed on ridgetops, as at Faccombe in Hampshire. Evidence from the Domesday Survey of 1086 suggests that the creation of many of these settlements was during the Early Mediaeval (Saxon) period.

5.21 Another distinct settlement type of the North Wessex Downs is the string of small, spring-line villages that developed along the base of the lower north-facing scarp. Examples of these aesthetically attractive villages are Clyffe Pypard, Clevancy, Liddington, Letcombe, Ashbury, and Bishopstone.

[2] *https://www.historicnorthwessexdowns.org.uk/*

[3] *Wyvern Heritage and Landscape Consultancy for the North Wessex Downs National Landscape Partnership: North Wessex Downs National Landscape Historic Landscape Characterisation report 2012, page XX.*

Historic Environment: Key Issues

Key issues with the potential to have significant influence on the National Landscape's Historic Environment Valued Qualities:

Development pressure

a) Inappropriately sited or poorly designed new development that fails to reflect the historic fabric and visual character of traditional market towns and villages.

b) Insensitive conversions, inappropriate siting of agricultural buildings or infrastructure for renewable energy and transport.

c) Erosion of traditional mixed character of settlements from infilling and over-expansion on small plots.

d) Limited consistency in the designation and management of Conservation Areas, in particular the systematic use of Conservation Area appraisals and management plans.

Land management practices

e) A decline of traditional agriculture and industry leading to changes in land and woodland management.

f) Loss of grazing animals, threatening archaeological sites with damage from uncontrolled scrub encroachment.

g) Uncontrolled or inappropriate scrub management makes archaeology more vulnerable to burrowing animals.

h) Deep ploughing over archaeological sites and remains.

i) Negative impacts to buried and undesignated archaeology from planting trees or biomass crops directly on archaeological features.

j) Some modern farming practices impact on the overall character of the historic landscape.

k) Inappropriate tree planting and wetland creation as a response to national targets and green finance incentives threaten both archaeological sites and visual landscape character.

Poor understanding and limited engagement

l) Poor or incomplete understanding of some aspects of heritage in the North Wessex Downs, particularly woodland.

m) Limited data for condition monitoring of sites at risk.

n) Narrow audience demographic engaged with heritage in the landscape.

o) Insufficient accessibility to the heritage of the wider landscape to enhance people's enjoyment and understanding of the North Wessex Downs.

p) Inappropriate or illegal use of off-road motorised vehicles, which places sensitive sites at risk.

Historic Environment: Priorities

1. Increase the knowledge and enjoyment of the North Wessex Downs heritage and culture by local residents, visitors and the wider public, and bring a love of heritage to wider parts of society.
2. Seek new discoveries of unknown heritage assets and improve understanding of those already identified, to reveal the significance of the historic environment and cultural heritage of the National Landscape.
3. Develop a better understanding of the current condition of heritage assets of the National Landscape, beyond the Heritage Risk Register.
4. Promote wider use and understanding of Historic Landscape Characterisation to inform and guide strategic planning, development decisions, land management practices and other forces for change.
5. Secure greater protection for archaeological and historic features, sites, and their landscape settings in the face of inappropriate development or management practices, or forms of access that can cause damage.

Historic Environment: Policies

HE 01 Encourage and facilitate work to improve the condition of designated heritage assets that are on Historic England's Heritage At Risk register and explore the designation or greater protection of other heritage assets through work with local Historic Environment Records, Historic England and Natural England.

HE 02 Encourage and support collaborative activity on poorly understood aspects of the local historic environment, involving professional and voluntary sectors, such as research and advice from historic environment experts and use of citizen science.

HE 03 Work closely with the Stonehenge and Avebury World Heritage Site Partnership and other groups to develop shared objectives and deliver joint actions in support of the World Heritage Site Management Plan.

HE 04 Encourage and support the production and publication of local lists of heritage assets.

HE 05 Encourage owners of designated heritage assets to create Conservation/ Heritage Management Plans and manage/restore assets appropriately.

HE 06 Promote opportunities to include the historic environment in community-generated Village Design Statements, Parish and Neighbourhood Plans etc., linked where appropriate to Conservation Area Appraisals.

HE 07 Promote and encourage the use of Historic Landscape and Historic Settlement Characterisation to inform land management, policy making and planning decisions.

HE 08 Support more, better, and joined-up explanation, interpretation and promotion of the historic environment for residents and visitors.

HE 09 Encourage the sensitive restoration of historic buildings for new uses, where appropriate and in alignment with National Landscape purposes, to ensure their long-term survival.

HE 10 Encourage improvements in agricultural practice to remove or mitigate the threat to archaeological sites from arable cultivation, e.g. through ELMS.

HE 11 Encourage the consistent use of Conservation Area appraisals and management plans as important considerations to inform planning decisions.



CHAPTER 7

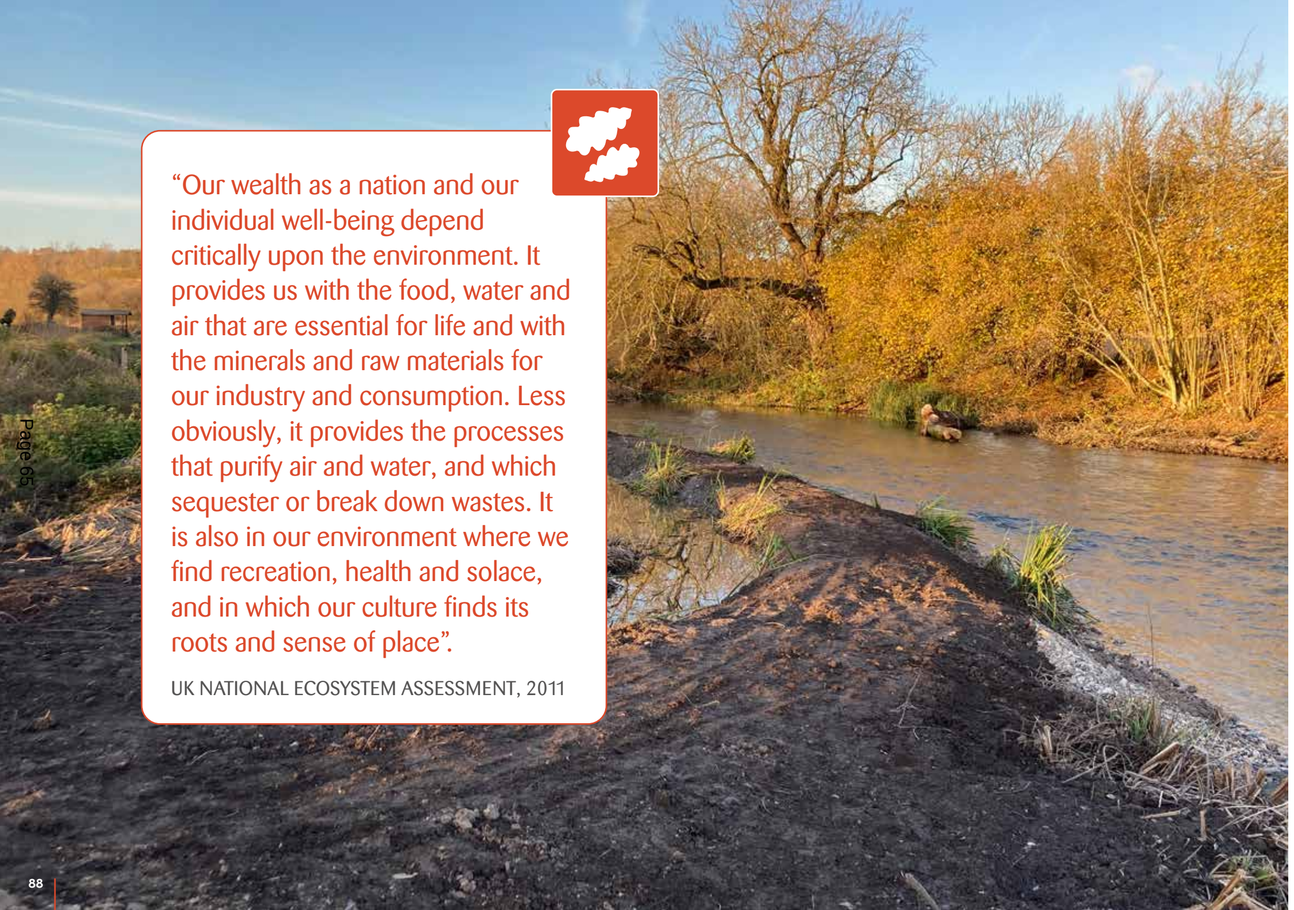
Natural Resources & Climate Change



Overview:

- Cretaceous, Tertiary and Quaternary **geological history**, with features such as Sarsen Stones.
- This geology in turn influences the main **soil types** of the North Wessex Downs:
  - Thin chalk soils of the open downland, now primarily under arable production.
  - The capping of Quaternary Clay with Flints over the chalk found as pockets of reddish-brown clay containing flint pebbles. These areas are particularly characteristic of the Downland with Woodland and Wooded Plateau Landscape Types.
  - Quaternary Coombe deposits found where accumulated frost-weathered debris was carried down slope by melt waters at the end of the last glaciation. These have created till deposits in the dry valleys of the downs providing richer pockets of soil, often under arable production.
  - Deep well-drained loamy soils over Greensand and river alluviums in the Vale of Pewsey, traditionally under pasture with large areas forming winter flood meadows.
  - A mixed soil mosaic to the east of Newbury with nutrient-poor acidic soils over plateau gravels intermixed with fertile loamy soils overlying the London Clay, characterised by the Medieval landscape of the Lowland Mosaic Landscape Type.
- Carbon storage in the characteristic habitats of the North Wessex Downs such as chalk grassland and broadleaved woodland.
- Rivers with shallow sloping banks, clean shallow 'washed' **river gravel beds** (riffles) contrasting with deeper shaded pools.
- Often a complex pattern of **river channels** (as on the Kennet downstream of Marlborough) reflecting the past use of the river to supply water to an extensive network of water meadows and mills, most of which are now disused. Upper winterbourne sections and winterbourne tributaries, flowing only during winter and spring when groundwater levels are at their highest.
- **Clear natural water** fed from the chalk aquifer by springs which issue in the valleys of the chalk dip slope at the point where the water table comes to the surface. Limited fluctuations in water temperature throughout the year, resulting from the filtration of groundwater as it percolates through the chalk.





> “Our wealth as a nation and our individual well-being depend critically upon the environment. It provides us with the food, water and air that are essential for life and with the minerals and raw materials for our industry and consumption. Less obviously, it provides the processes that purify air and water, and which sequester or break down wastes. It is also in our environment where we find recreation, health and solace, and in which our culture finds its roots and sense of place”.
>
> UK NATIONAL ECOSYSTEM ASSESSMENT, 2011

Accounting for Natural Benefits

6.1 **Wh**ether we live in towns or in the countryside, we are dependent on ecological systems (ecosystems) for our health and well-being. The components of the natural environment that provide us with these benefits are known as natural capital. The benefits which society derives from natural capital assets (ecosystem services) are commonly grouped into four core categories of services:

- **Supporting services (for example the processes which form soil, cycle nutrients and the essential photosynthetic process in plants).**
- **Provisioning services (for example, woodland that provides timber for fuel, construction and manufacturing; plant communities which sustain populations of insects to pollinate crops).**
- **Regulating services (for example, soils and aquifers that absorb rainfall reducing flooding, and filtering water to give us healthy rivers and clean drinking water).**
- **Cultural services (for example, landscapes, wildlife and cultural heritage that give us a sense of identity, support tourism, offer recreational and learning opportunities, assist our physical and mental well-being and delight the soul).**

6.2 The UK National Ecosystem Assessment (NEA 2011) identified that inadequate consideration in decision-making of the full range of natural benefits and services that we derive from the natural environment is a significant factor contributing to the degradation of ecosystems. The Follow-on report (2013) (NEAFO 2013) emphasised that “the natural world, its biodiversity and its constituent ecosystems are critically important to our well-being and economic prosperity, but are consistently undervalued in conventional economic analyses and decision-making”[1] and concluded that embedding knowledge of our ecosystems and their services into project, programme and policy appraisals, is critical for decision-making. While we pay for some ecosystem services, like food and fibre, we are often unaware of the importance of others, such as natural purification of water and air, and the attenuation of flood water. The cost of providing these artificially is considerable. In the years after the highly technical UK NEA reports were published, the environmental campaigner and writer Tony Juniper explained ecosystem services in an accessible and readily understandable format using a series of examples from around the world (in What has Nature Ever Done for Us?) and from around the UK (in What Nature does for Britain). These illustrate clearly the tendency to under-estimate the value of natural processes and the services and benefits we derive from the natural world. This leads to poorly informed decisions on how to safeguard these functions and utilise natural resources sustainably. The result is pollution, depletion of biodiversity, degraded ecosystems and substantial damage to the processes which are vital to life on Earth. There is a significant financial cost to restore ecosystem functionality or, if it is feasible to do so, to replace such functions with artificial alternatives.

6.3 Just as there are costs to restoring degraded ecosystems, there are benefits and savings from a healthy and naturally functioning environment. Degraded ecosystems present risks to businesses in terms of security of raw materials, waste disposal, insurance rates and brand image. In the North Wessex Downs, there are obvious direct links between ecosystems and the business activities of land-based industries such as farming and forestry (where soil health clearly underpins ecosystem function and the products from the land) and rural tourism. Associations can be less obvious or indirect for other businesses and relate, for example, to supply chains and investment choices.

6.4 In the rural landscape, sustainable agriculture and forestry could deliver widespread positive effects on ecosystems in the area. Grants, subsidies and advice can support and promote sustainable approaches to land use among farmers, foresters and other land managers.

[1] UK National Ecosystem Assessment Follow-on – Synthesis of the Key Findings, UNEP-WCMC 2013.

Conserving Resources and Maintaining Ecosystem Function

6.5 Protecting natural resources and the natural benefits arising from them by operating in a way that minimises damaging impacts is part of sustainable development. There is a particular need to conserve soil health, manage water and maintain clean air.

Soils

6.6 Soils are cultivated to produce essential items of food, clothing and fuel. Soils also deliver natural benefits, influencing water flows; storing carbon, and supporting wildlife habitats and nutrient cycling. The Government's strategy for soils in the DEFRA Environmental Improvement Plan sets out a case for improving soil health and protecting peatland by addressing factors such as erosion, compaction and decline of organic matter. The stated policy objective is that *"By 2028 we will bring at least 40% of England's agricultural soil into sustainable management through our new farming schemes, increasing this to up to 60% by 2030."*[2] Healthy soils are one of the indicators chosen to monitor and evaluate progress.

6.7 Chalk forms the underlying surface geological structure of the North Wessex Downs but the overlying soils influence vegetation cover and land use. Each soil type in the area has its own management requirements.

Sustaining Water Resources

6.8 The main rivers flowing through the Downs – the Pang, the Lambourn and the Kennet – drain eastwards to the River Thames. Watercourses flowing off the northern escarpment into the vales also feed the Thames catchment. The separate catchments of the Hampshire Avon and the Test flow south, draining the Vale of Pewsey and Hampshire Downs respectively. The escarpment in the west around Calne falls into the Salisbury Avon catchment, flowing west.

6.9 The status and condition of both surface waters and groundwater in terms of quality, availability and flow is important to people and to habitats and species in the National Landscape. The North Wessex Downs National Landscape Partnership is committed to supporting the work of Catchment Partnerships, water companies, local planning authorities and other interested groups to help assess, protect and enhance these important assets.

6.10 One in four residential and commercial properties in England is at risk from flooding. Flooding costs the UK economy £2.2 billion a year, with projections indicating a 27% increase by 2050. In the North Wessex Downs, localised flooding of villages in the river valleys in the winter is regular, and climate models indicate that flooding at the scale experienced in January 2024 is likely to be more frequent and have greater impact. The most severe flooding has been caused by a combination of high groundwater, surface water and river flooding. Flood risk management may include the provision of sustainable measures to alleviate future flood risk, for example Sustainable Drainage Systems (SuDS) incorporating biodiverse rain gardens, attenuation basins and wetlands and Natural Flood Management (NFM) schemes involving attenuating surface water runoff from agricultural land, river restoration, river floodplain enhancement and the creation of wetlands. The NFM approach delivers sustainable flood resilience, biodiversity gains, improvements in water quality, carbon capture, and enhanced health and wellbeing for communities. Groundwater flooding is a challenge particular to chalk landscapes and NFM is not usually a solution to this type of flooding, although it can reduce surface water flooding.





6.11 In summer, some rivers suffer from lack of flows because of water abstraction. At its most extreme it leads to dry river beds and the death of aquatic life, but more subtly it leads to ***a deterioration in water quality and ecological diversity caused, for example, by*** reduced capacity to dilute inflows downstream from sewage treatment works or to transport silt resulting in its deposition. Pressure for abstraction from the chalk aquifers that feed these rivers is directly related to the rising demand for water, including from new development. Drainage structures and other features modify natural flow regimes. Climate change, the deterioration of assets, as well as continuing pressure to build in areas of high risk flood zones, will contribute to increased risk of flooding affecting local communities. Gradual urban creep from paving gardens, tarmacking tracks and infill development can significantly increase volumes of storm water runoff, leaving drainage networks unable to manage.

6.12 The waters of the chalk aquifers and rivers are a major source of potable water. Ground waters from within the river catchments are abstracted to meet demands for public water supply and for industry, agriculture and aquaculture (watercress and fish farms). The level of abstraction and effect on river flows varies across the area.

6.13 Groundwater abstraction points in the Kennet valley are numerous, The Chalk Stream Restoration Strategy expresses abstraction as a percentage of recharge (A%R) and considers 10% to be a sustainable level. Across the North Wessex Downs abstraction varies from 1.1% of recharge on the Pang to 33% of recharge on the Enborne., A long-running programme of investigations and licence changes to make groundwater abstractions more sustainable across the National Landscape is still under way, with low flow investigations on the Kingsclere Brook and Upper Kennet in progress. All licence reductions are still dependent on other sources of supply being available. Overall, pressure on rivers from abstraction has reduced in the last 20 years, but it is critically important that new development should not be allowed to reverse these hard-won gains.



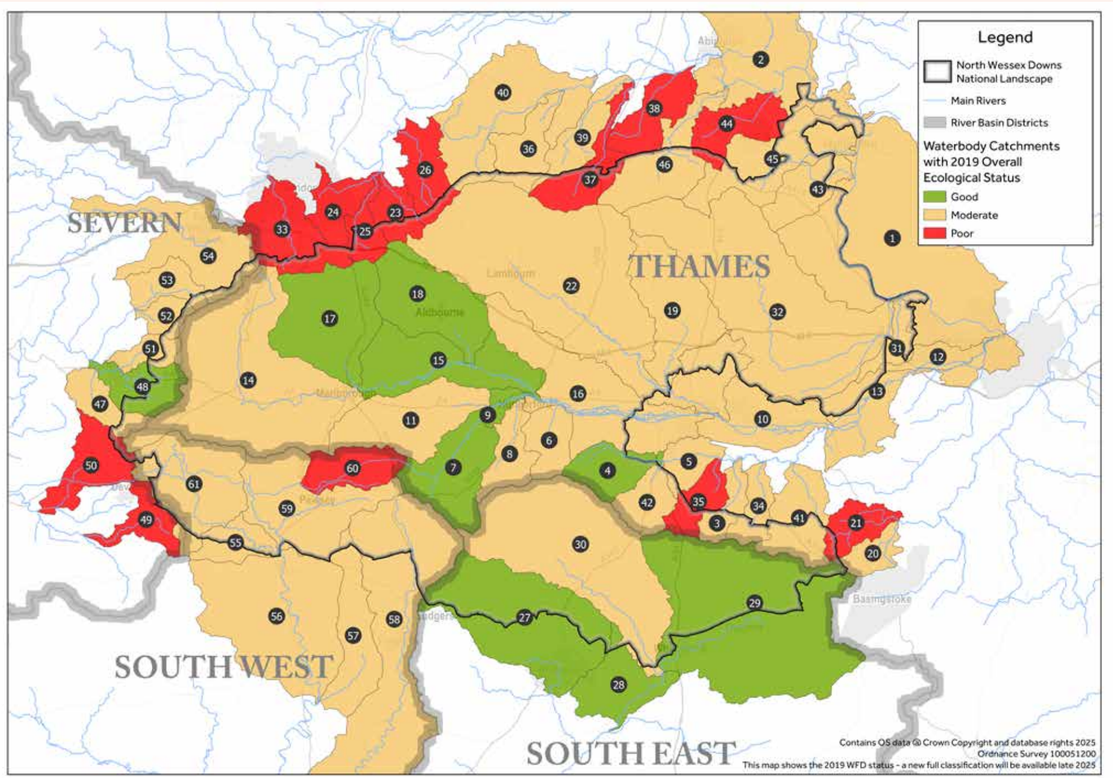
[2] *Environmental Improvement Plan 2023 - First revision of the 25 Year Environment Plan, DEFRA 2023*





No.	Waterbody name	Ecological status
1	Thames Wallingford to Caversham	Moderate
2	Thames (Evenlode to Thame)	Moderate
3	Ecchinswell Brook (source to Enborne)	Moderate
4	Enborne (Source to downstream A34)	Good
5	Enborne (downstream A34 to Burghclere Brook)	Moderate
6	Inkpen Stream (source to Kennet)	Moderate
7	Upper Dun	Good
8	Shalbourne (source to Kennet at Hungerford)	Moderate
9	Kennet and Avon Canal and Dun above Hungerford	Good
10	Kennet (Lambourn confluence to Enborne confluence)	Moderate
11	Froxfield Stream	Moderate
12	Holy Brook	Moderate
13	Lower Kennet (Sheffield Bottom to Reading)	Moderate
14	Upper Kennet to Marlborough	Moderate
15	Middle Kennet (Marlborough to Hungerford)	Good
16	Middle Kennet (Hungerford to Newbury)	Moderate
17	Og	Good
18	Aldbourne	Good
19	Winterbourne	Moderate
20	Vyne Stream	Moderate
21	Bow Brook (Pamber End to Bramley)	Poor
22	Lambourn (Source to Newbury)	Moderate
23	Lenta Brook, East of Swindon	Poor
24	Cole (source to Lenta Brook)	Poor
25	Liden Brook, Swindon	Poor
26	Tuckmill Brook and tributaries	Poor
27	Anton - Upper	Good
28	Test - Bourne Rivulet to conf Dever	Good
29	Test (Upper)	Good
30	Bourne Rivulet	Moderate
31	Sulham Brook	Moderate

32	Pang	Moderate
33	Ray (Wiltshire) source to Lydiard Brook	Poor
34	Kingsclere Brook (Source to Enborne)	Moderate
35	Earlstone Stream and Burghclere Brook (source to Enborne)	Poor
36	Stutfield Brook (source to Ock)	Moderate
37	Letcombe Brook	Poor
38	Cow Common Brook and Portobello Ditch	Poor
39	Childrey and Woodhill Brooks	Moderate
40	Ock (to Cherbury Brook)	Moderate
41	Baughurst Brook	Moderate
42	Penwood Stream	Moderate
43	Cholsey Brook and tributaries	Moderate
44	Moor Ditch and Ladygrove Ditch	Poor
45	Mill Brook and Bradfords Brook system, Wallingford	Moderate
46	Ginge Brook and Mill Brook	Moderate
47	Willow Brook (Bristol Avon and North Somerset)	Moderate
48	Marden - source to conf Cowage Bk	Good
49	Worton Str - source to conf Semington Bk	Poor
50	Summerham Brook	Poor
51	Abberd Bk - source to conf R Marden	Moderate
52	Hoppingstone Stream	Moderate
53	Cowage Bk - source to conf unnamed trib	Moderate
54	Brinkworth Brook	Moderate
55	Hampshire Avon (West)	Moderate
56	Hampshire Avon (Upper) u/s Nine Mile River confl	Moderate
57	Nine Mile River	Moderate
58	Bourne (Hampshire Avon)	Moderate
59	Hampshire Avon (East) and Woodborough Stream	Moderate
60	Hampshire Avon (East) and Deane Water	Poor
61	Etchilhampton Water	Moderate



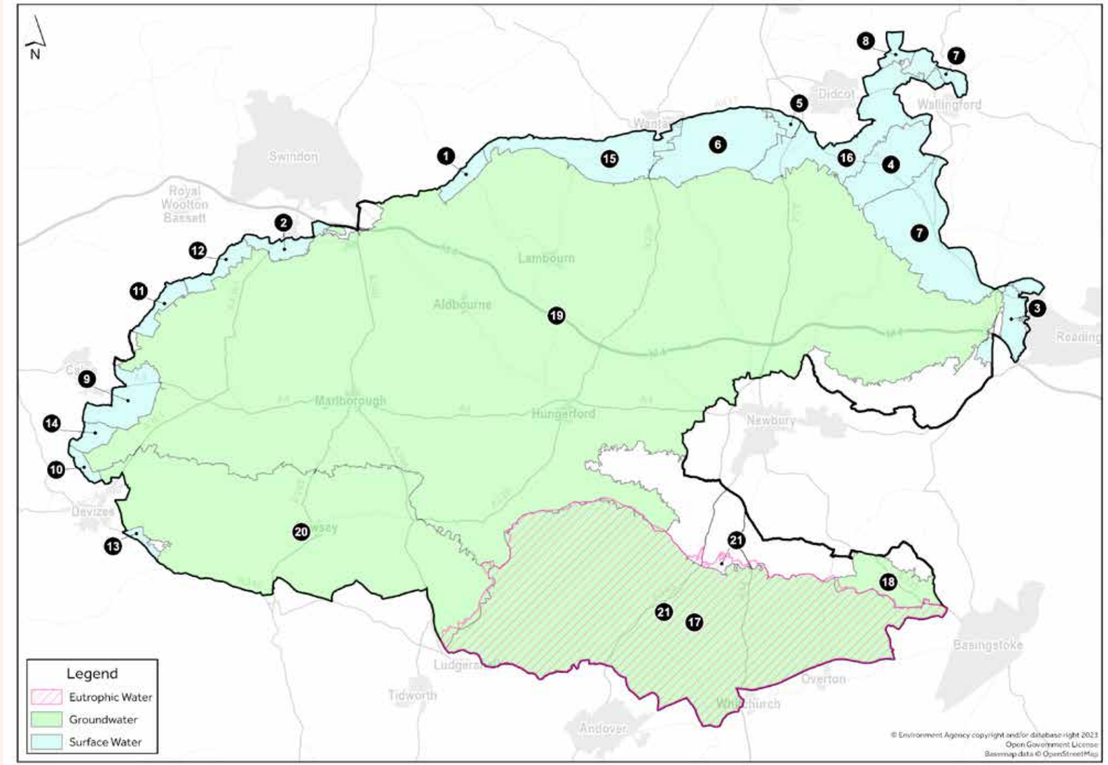
6.14 At the same time, the operational requirements of the Kennet and Avon Canal have an effect on the Kennet. Between Bath and the summit at Crofton Pumping Station the Canal is fed by the Bristol Avon; between the summit and Kintbury by the River Dun, a tributary of the Kennet; and between Kintbury and Reading by the Kennet. There has been significant progress amongst the various parties to minimise the impacts of the Canal on the river and vice versa. Under the Kennet Water Level Management Plan, examples of where action has been taken to optimise flows in the river channels are the diversion of the Froxfield Stream under the Canal to flow directly into the Dun, and the better management of Sherman's Hatches to augment important flushing flows in the Kennet during high flow (previously, more winter flow was siphoned off the Kennet into the Canal via the Kintbury feeder, bypassing long sections of braided river channel). As a result, loss of flow from reaches of the Kennet to the Canal is currently deemed not to be significant in terms of impacts. . There remain issues with water quality, especially where the Canal and river come together. Small tributaries including the Pear Tree Bottom and Inkpen Streams are known to bring high volumes of sediment into the slow-moving canal., Actions to address water quality pressures have included the construction of bypass weirs at canal locks west of Hungerford to reduce canal water spilling over into the River Dun. Wet winters in 2024 and 2025 have tested these beyond their design limits and canal overflows remain a challenge for the river. It is a clear objective of the Canal and River Trust to optimise the use of water resources in the Canal and to use back-pumping to conserve water in the 'artificial' section between Bath and the Canal summit. It is a clear objective of the Kennet Catchment Partnership to minimise the impact of the canal on water quality in the river.

6.15 Under the Nitrates Directive, the majority of the North Wessex Downs National Landscape is designated as a Nitrate Vulnerable Zone (NVZ). Within these zones, farmers are required to limit the application of manures and nitrogen fertilisers, subject to a closed season for the application of certain manures. They are also required to keep records of cropping, stocking and the application of nitrogen fertilisers and manures. As a consequence of post-war farming practices, nitrate level in groundwater is high across the North Wessex Downs, which has ecological impacts and renders some groundwater sources of drinking water unuseable without treatment or dilution.

6.16 Further control of diffuse pollution is a requirement of the Water Framework Directive. There is an obligation to manage river basins to deliver good environmental outcomes in both surface waters and groundwater. Agriculture is recognised as one of the main sources of diffuse pollution of water courses and groundwater. DEFRA encourages Catchment Sensitive Farming (CSF) as a key approach to resolving this by managing land in a way that is sensitive to the ecological health of the water environment. While farming is not the sole cause of diffuse pollution, it does contribute approximately 60% of nitrates, 25% of phosphorus and 70% of sediments along with other pollutants which enter our surface waters.

No.	NVZ Name	NVZ Type
1	Tuckmill Brook and tributaries	Surface Water
2	Thames (Churn to Coln)	Surface Water
3	Sulham Brook	Surface Water
4	Cholsey Brook and tributaries	Surface Water
5	Moor Ditch and Ladygrove Ditch	Surface Water
6	Ginge Brook and Mill Brook	Surface Water
7	Thames Wallingford to Caversham	Surface Water
8	Thames (Leach to Evenlode)	Surface Water
9	R Marden - source to conf Abberd Bk	Surface Water
10	Summerham Bk - Poulshot Str to conf Semington Bk	Surface Water
11	Cowage Bk - conf unnamed trib to conf R Marden	Surface Water
12	Brinkworth Bk- Hancocks Wtr to conf R Avon (Brist)	Surface Water
13	Worton Str - source to conf Semington Bk	Surface Water
14	Willow Brook (Bristol Avon and North Somerset)	Surface Water
15	Ock and tributaries (Land Brook confluence to Thames)	Surface Water
16	Mill Brook and Bradfords Brook system, Wallingford	Surface Water
17	Hampshire Chalk	Groundwater
18	Kingsclere and Greywell	Groundwater
19	Berkshire Downs	Groundwater
20	South Wessex	Groundwater
21	Hamble Estuary Eutrophic (TraC)	Eutrophic Water





6.17 Sewage treatment works serving communities in the North Wessex Downs discharge both treated and untreated sewage effluent into our rivers. Marlborough Sewage Treatment works was the first in the country to benefit from phosphate-stripping, and the long-term data show the benefit in reducing phosphate levels in the Kennet as a consequence. Across the North Wessex Downs there are more than 100 storm overflows, which spill untreated sewage into rivers for tens of thousands of hours every year when groundwater is high or after rain. Chalk streams have been prioritised in water companies' storm overflow reduction programmes but no real improvement is expected until 2030. Some rural communities within the National Landscape are served by private septic tanks, which do not provide a reduction in phosphate and require management and maintenance to function effectively.

6.18 Untreated run-off from roads drains into rivers in the protected landscape. For example, the M4 motorway drains directly to both the Lambourn and the Pang. This storm water carries complex chemicals known as per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances (PFAS), as well as hydrocarbons which both bioaccumulate and are carcinogenic. There is little research and no regulation regarding these pollution but it is an emerging threat to the health of rivers and communities.

Maintaining Air Quality

6.19 A variety of air pollutants have known or suspected harmful effects on human health and the environment. In most areas of Europe, these pollutants are principally the products of combustion from space heating, power generation or from motor vehicle traffic. Pollutants from these sources may not only prove a problem in the immediate vicinity but can travel long distances, chemically reacting in the atmosphere to produce secondary pollutants such as acid rain or ozone. The nearest monitoring site to the North Wessex Downs is at Harwell. Other sites are in Reading town centre, Newbury, Thatcham, Bath and Oxford. Pollution is low but there may be local issues such as environmental quality relating to traffic pollution.

Climate Change

6.20 There is clear and mounting evidence that global climate change is accelerating, primarily due to human activity, including use of fossil fuels for transport and energy, deforestation, changes in land use and industrial processes. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) Sixth Assessment Report (2021) confirms that human influence has unequivocally warmed the atmosphere, ocean, and land, with significant consequences for biodiversity, agriculture, water resources, and communities. In response, the UK Government has committed to achieving net zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2050, as set out in the Climate Change Act 2008 (amended 2019).

6.21 The UK Climate Projections 2018 (UKCP18) provide the most up-to-date assessment of expected climatic shifts. For southern England,
these include:

- **hotter, drier summers, increasing risks of drought and water scarcity;**
- **milder, wetter winters, leading to greater flood risks and soil erosion; and**
- **more extreme and unpredictable weather events, including storms, heatwaves, and seasonal shifts.**

6.22 These changes will affect land use, biodiversity, water resources, ecosystems and community resilience in the North Wessex Downs. While some shifts may be gradual, many impacts require urgent action due to the time needed for implementation.

6.23 Based on the UK Climate Projections 2018 (UKCP18), the UK's third Climate Change Risk Assessment (published in 2022) and the National Adaptation Programme 2023-2028 are key initiatives that define climate change impacts and adaptation strategies. The North Wessex Downs Partnership is keen to refine its understanding of the impacts of climate change and develop strategies for adaption to these effects.

6.24 Making Space for Nature outlined four key ways that we can adapt our ecological networks to a changing climate:

- **Ensure that all parts of the network are in the best possible management.**
- **Increase the population sizes of vulnerable species.**
- **Reduce the risks of local extinction.**
- **Provide colonists for new sites.**

6.25 The Making Space for Nature principles remain relevant, with the Environment Act 2021 and the Environmental Improvement Plan (2023) further emphasising the need for nature recovery and increased ecological resilience.

Impacts on the North Wessex Downs

1. Water Resources and Hydrology

- Increased winter rainfall may cause more flooding and soil erosion, damaging historic landscapes and increasing sediment and nutrient runoff into rivers.
- Drought conditions in summer will contract the chalk stream network, with some perennial streams becoming seasonal winterbournes, threatening freshwater biodiversity.
- Changes in rainfall patterns will affect groundwater recharge, putting additional pressure on water availability for agriculture, wildlife, and local communities.

2. Biodiversity and Habitat Shifts

- Warmer temperatures and changing conditions will alter tree species composition, with the impact of ash die-back continuing, oak showing some resilience to climate change, whilst beech, which remains vulnerable to drought and storms associated with climate change, may decline. More drought-tolerant species like sweet chestnut and sycamore may become more prominent.
- Species distributions will shift, with some populations contracting, expanding, or migrating in response to climate pressures.
- The increased prevalence of invasive species and diseases (e.g. ash die-back, oak processionary moth, bluetongue virus) has the potential to threaten native species and ecosystems.

3. Agriculture and Land Use

- Farmers may adapt their crop choices, incorporating drought-resistant varieties and possibly increasing biofuel cultivation.
- Livestock may face greater risks from heat stress and emerging diseases, requiring changes in herd management and pasture practices.
- Soil degradation risks will increase due to heavier winter rainfall and drought-stressed soils, necessitating better land management practices.
- Whilst renewable energy sources are essential, the integration of wind turbine and solar technology needs careful consideration to avoid negative visual impacts on the landscape, natural beauty, and ecological assets of the North Wessex Downs

4. Recreation and Tourism

- Warmer summers may increase visitor pressure on sensitive landscapes, particularly waterways and shaded woodland areas.
- Seasonal patterns of tourism may shift, requiring adaptive management to balance conservation and public access.



6.26 The North Wessex Downs Partnership is committed to refining its understanding of climate change impacts and developing effective adaptation strategies, in line with the latest scientific evidence and national policy frameworks.

6.27 To do this we must:

- **Allow species to adapt by shifting their distributions naturally to stay within their preferred 'climate envelope' through increasing connectivity (habitat patches and corridors and a network of protected sites to provide a more permeable landscape).**
- **Enhance the opportunities for species to stay within their climate envelope through small-scale local movements (as opposed to being forced into long-distance dispersal) by promoting landscape level heterogeneity within the National Landscape.**
- **Promote nature-based solutions, such as habitat restoration and connectivity and wetland restoration/creation.**
- **Enhance soil health and regenerative farming practices to reduce erosion and carbon loss.**
- **Increase tree canopy cover and hedgerow restoration/planting where they align with landscape character and National Landscape purposes, to mitigate temperature extremes and capture carbon.**
- **Improve water conservation measures and encourage sustainable land management.**
- **Strengthen biodiversity networks through the principles of Making Space for Nature, ensuring species have the ability to adapt and migrate as needed.**
- **Value the crucial role the extensive grasslands of the North Wessex Downs play in carbon sequestration and maintaining water quality, further supporting the vital ecosystem services within the landscape.**
- **Prioritise nature-based solutions to climate change..**
- **Prioritise climate change mitigation and adaptation responses that are landscape-led and enhance the characteristics, valued qualities, and distinctiveness of the North Wessex Downs**

6.28 In accordance with the UK government's third National Adaptation Programme (NAP3), the North Wessex Downs National Landscape will develop a dedicated Climate Change Adaptation Plan by 2028. This plan will be embedded within and directly linked to this Management Plan. It will outline specific, measurable, achievable, realistic, and timely actions and objectives designed to adapt the National Landscape to the impacts of climate change, encompassing nature, people, and place. This Adaptation Plan will be reviewed and updated on a five-yearly cycle, aligning with future iterations of the Management Plan, ensuring a proactive and adaptive approach to climate change resilience.



Natural Resources and Climate Change: Key Issues

6.29 Key issues with the potential to have significant influence on the National Landscape's Natural Resources Valued Qualities:

a) Lack of agreement on the levels of acceptable environmental limits within the National Landscape.

b) The need to raise awareness of water quality issues.

c) Accelerated water run-off and soil erosion, especially on steeper slopes and under 'open' arable crops, such as maize.

d) Opportunities to encourage minimum tillage and careful application of inputs,

e) Overall air quality is generally good but activities outside the National Landscape can have a significant effect across the area; impacts of air pollution from road traffic and agriculture on ecosystem health is of concern.

f) Over abstraction of groundwater.

g) Increasing water demand, especially during the summer months, as a result of climate change and changing lifestyles.

h) Increasing water demand for crop irrigation as a result of climate change and more erratic weather patterns resulting in prolonged dry periods and intense summer rainfall.

i) The influence of climate change on groundwater recharge patterns, overall water availability and elevated temperatures in chalk streams.

j) Increasing water demand as a result of major development in the urban areas in and around the North Wessex Downs, also sometimes leading to export of water out of the National Landscape catchments.

k) Loss of river habitats as a result of historical land drainage and channel modifications associated with past flood alleviation works and past industry (although some man-made features, e.g. mill leats, are of considerable historical importance).

l) Need to maintain wild fish stocks and quality of fisheries.

m) Excessive removal of bankside vegetation (on occasion associated with fisheries management).

n) Watercourse maintenance to conserve habitat, and a need for a change in emphasis from dredging to slowing the flow.

o) Loss of winterbourne channels through agricultural cultivation, or destruction of character of winterbourne channels by dredging.

p) Increasing lock movements on the Kennet and Avon Canal taking water from the River Kennet and its tributaries.

q) Pollution of rivers from point sources, including public and private domestic sewerage systems (with phosphorus discharges a particular problem), agriculture, commercial watercress beds, and fish farms.

r) Impacts on ecology of rivers from diffuse sources of pollution - often individually minor but collectively significant - including run-off from roads, houses and commercial areas, run-off from farmland, and seepage into groundwater from developed landscapes of all kinds, resulting in raised nutrient levels and toxic algal blooms.

s) Pollution pressure on the River Kennet generated by poor water quality and boat traffic on the Kennet and Avon Canal.

t) Domestic pet flea treatments as a source of pollutant harm to water quality and river ecology.

Natural Resources and Climate Change: Priorities

1. Action to ensure that chalk rivers and streams in the National Landscape achieve and are maintained at good ecological status including, for example, appropriate riparian planting to mitigate elevated water temperatures predicted as a consequence of climate change.
2. Collaborative landscape-scale action to mitigate and adapt to the effects of climate change, for example through nature-based solutions (NbS).
3. Develop a Climate Change Adaptation Plan for the North Wessex Downs National Landscape
4. Ensure that all landscape interventions recognise and address the implications of climate change for the valued qualities of the North Wessex Downs and its setting.
5. Secure full recognition by decision makers of the importance of the North Wessex Downs landscape for the value of its natural capital and the environmental goods and services it provides to the economy and society as a whole, including heritage, water quality, healthy soils, food production, wildlife, flood management, carbon storage, recreation, health and well-being.

Natural Resources and Climate Change: Policies

NR 01 Support co-ordinated action, guidance and measures on soil health issues.

NR 02 Promote and encourage initiatives for the sustainable management of soil by farmers and other land managers to minimise soil degradation through erosion, compaction, pollution and impoverishment, particularly in the case of the thin chalk downland soils.

NR 03 Support landscape awareness and understanding among catchment partnerships in and around the North Wessex Downs, and encourage collaborative research, projects and management to protect and improve watercourses and catchments.

NR 04 Encourage all partners to take water demand and its consequences for landscape, ecology and fisheries fully into account in decisions regarding development, changes to land use or cropping patterns within the North Wessex Downs.

NR 05 Support the introduction of demand management measures for water use in those settlements that draw on the aquifers of the North Wessex Downs, and measures to monitor and reduce water wastage.

NR 06 Encourage action to identify and address the sources of diffuse and point pollution within the North Wessex Downs.

NR 07 Encourage co-ordinated remedial action through the Catchment Sensitive Farming programme and other partnership schemes to restore and enhance degraded river sections within the North Wessex Downs.

NR 08 Support measures to reduce abstraction and help businesses adopt new mitigation measures.

NR 09 Promote well designed Sustainable Drainage Systems (SuDS), taking into account unique characteristics of the chalk geology and groundwater levels, which benefit water quality, water quantity, biodiversity and amenity in urban areas. Promote natural flood management initiatives, particularly upstream in the catchment, to maximise multiple benefits to benefit people and wildlife.

NR 10 Promote restoration and continued maintenance of rivers and river corridors to further biodiversity and amenity objectives – re-creating natural river channels and re-linking rivers with their floodplains where this would not damage artificial channels of historic and cultural importance.

NR 11 Develop a better understanding of the likely implications of climate change on the environment and economy of the North Wessex Downs.

NR 12 Support reductions in greenhouse gas emissions, such as carbon dioxide, nitrous oxide and methane, from all possible sources.

NR 13 Support climate mitigation measures including nature-based solutions, energy efficiency improvements, better on-farm management of fertiliser and animal waste, biomass heating from local fuel stocks and small-scale renewable energy generation consistent with conserving and enhancing the natural beauty of the landscape.

NR 14 Engage with opportunities to improve the availability and accessibility of sustainable modes of transport (e.g. bus and rail services, cycling) recognising in particular the health benefits of active modes (walking, cycling, riding etc) and promote use their use.

NR 15 Encourage greater use of timber from sustainable woodland, and in particular short local supply chains to support forestry, woodland and wood products businesses in the National Landscape.

NR 16 Promote carbon sequestration as an objective and benefit of habitat creation and management of woodland and permanent grassland.

NR 17 Encourage and support simple greenhouse gas and carbon accounting to monitor the effectiveness of changes.

NR 18 Encourage and support knowledge exchange among landowners and farmers to adapt to the impacts of climate change, e.g. including sustainable farming practices, soil health, circular water economy principles (reduced usage, grey water re-use, increased resilience to water shortages), and micro-generation of renewable energy compatible with National Landscape purposes.





CHAPTER 8

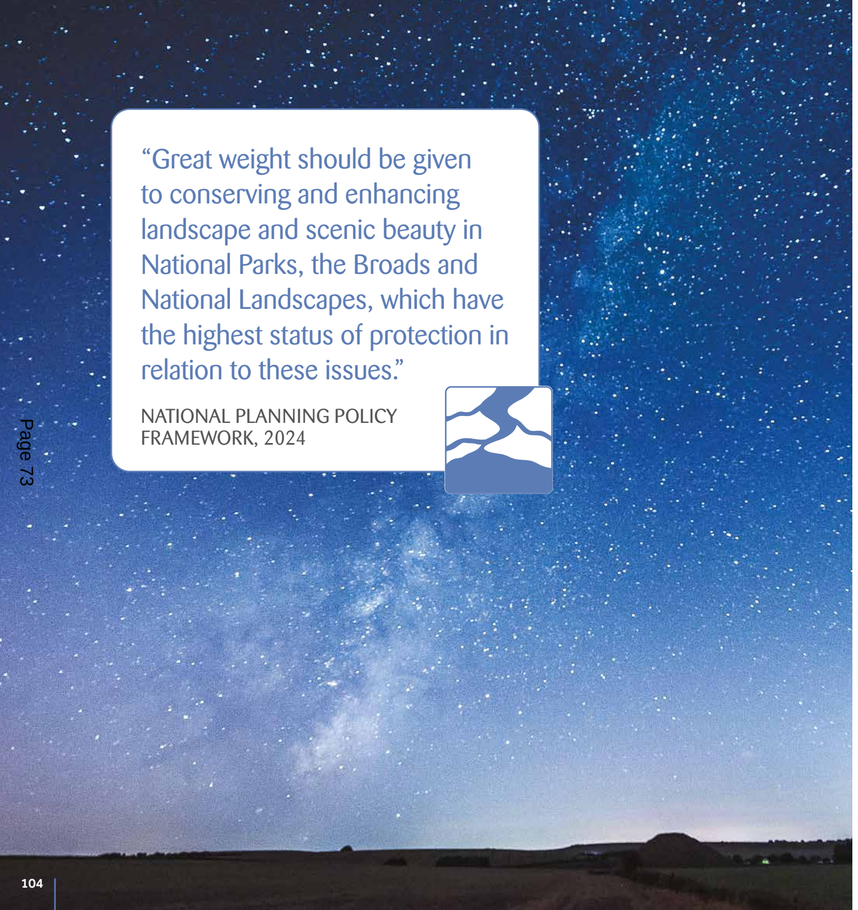
Planning & Development



Overview:

- The sense of **remoteness and tranquillity** that comes from an undeveloped and rural quality with only limited human intervention, containing typically modest villages with distinctive and ancient settlement patterns:
- The **Open Downlands**, **Downland with Woodland** and **High Chalk Plateau** areas are generally very sparsely populated, containing scattered isolated farms, equestrian establishments or small hamlets sheltering in the dry valleys and folds of the chalk upland.
- **Wooded Plateau** contains a distinct pattern of settlement comprising a remote, largely uninhabited western plateau, smaller settlements such as Froxfield and a concentration of villages in the east of the area, in the valley of the River Dun.
- In the **Downs Plain and Scarp** character area, attractive spring-line villages cluster along the base of the Northern ridge or along the valley of Avebury Plain. 20th century military installations, including Wroughton Airfield and a First World War camp near Draycot Foliat, are dominant and defining features of the area.
- The Vales are settled landscapes with a concentration of compact small towns, clustered villages, hamlets and many dispersed residential and farm buildings, while the **River Valleys** display a concentration of nucleated and linear settlement including tiny hamlets clustered around a church, many small villages and market towns.
- The **Lowland Mosaic** remains one of the most densely settled landscape types, with a diverse range of settlements ranging from large manor houses, villages, numerous hamlets and lines of houses along the roads and lanes.
- **Distinctive architectural styles** that vary throughout the North Wessex Downs but within specific areas create a sense of place and vernacular local character due to the availability of local building materials and traditional building styles. This includes traditional knapped flint and brick, timber framed farm buildings, thatch and tiled roofs, use of sarsen stone, blue flint and tile and clunch and cobb walls.
- **Dark Skies** add to the beauty, tranquillity, and sense of remoteness of a place that connects all landscapes. In the North Wessex Downs you can find areas as dark as any in the country. Looking up at a starry sky or across a moonlight landscape in this special place is a memorable and magical experience.
- A **sparse and intimate road network** connecting settlements and landscape, but there is good access from a number of economically significant towns such as Swindon, Andover, Whitchurch, Basingstoke, Reading, Devizes, Newbury and Didcot, resulting in an economy that is largely outward looking towards these boundary towns and beyond.
- Within the North Wessex Downs, the **traditional land-based** and **rural economy** contrasts with a growing high tech and creative sector.





> "Great weight should be given to conserving and enhancing landscape and scenic beauty in National Parks, the Broads and National Landscapes, which have the highest status of protection in relation to these issues."
>
> NATIONAL PLANNING POLICY FRAMEWORK, 2024

7.1 The North Wessex Downs are a sparsely populated landscape with a population density of 59residents per km2 across the National Landscape[1ii] . The open, largely uninhabited downlands retain a strong sense of remoteness and tranquillity, a very special perceptual characteristic within this otherwise densely populated part of southern England. Attractive villages nestle in the river valleys of the Pang, Bourne, Kennet and Lambourn and cluster in the low-lying land to the east of the National Landscape. The quality of this valued landscape makes strong direct and indirect contributions to the wider regional economy.

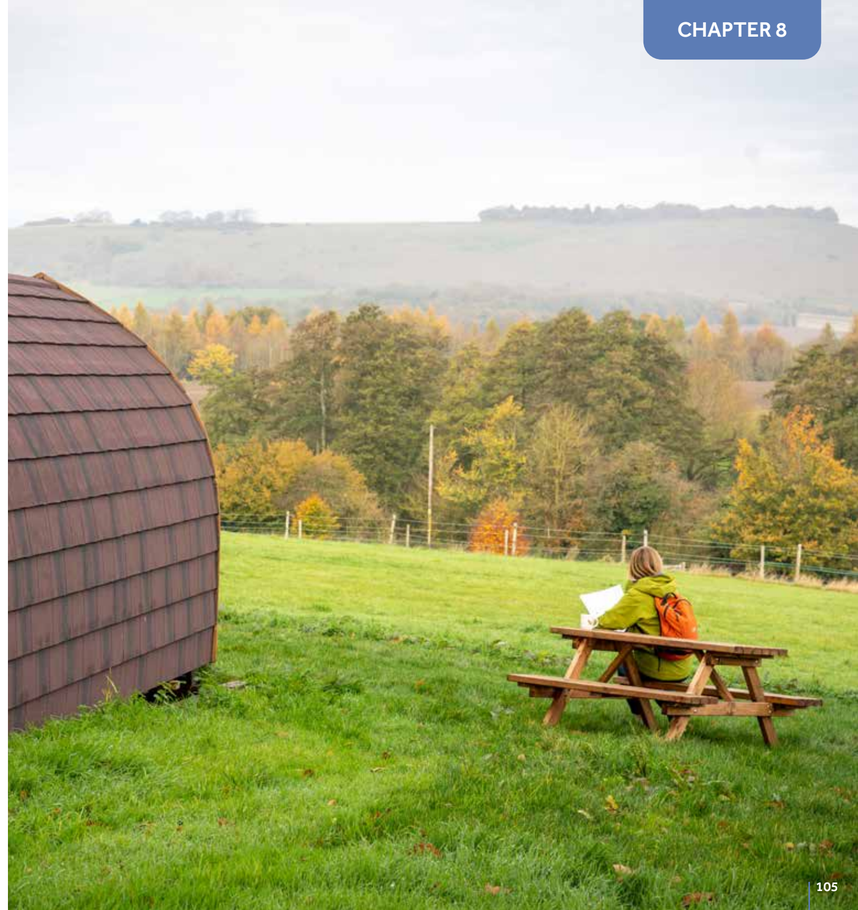
7.2 Despite the relatively low population density, there are development pressures on the North Wessex Downs. This is due to its location within south east England and its proximity to London, which makes it an attractive place to live, work and visit. There is a need to manage these pressures with sensitivity both within and in the setting of the National Landscape in order to maintain economic and social viability whilst retaining the character of the North Wessex Downs. Communities need to be economically viable and have adequate housing, amenities and facilities, and longstanding guidance states that "Particular regard should be paid to promoting sustainable forms of economic and social development that in themselves conserve and enhance the environment."[2] However, the primary purpose of the designation - to conserve and enhance the natural beauty of the landscape - needs to be paramount when considering such issues.

7.3 There is also a need to ensure a consistent approach across the North Wessex Downs. The National Landscape currently extends across parts of nine different local authority areas, although proposals for local government reorganisation could reduce this during the Plan period. Planning law requires that applications for planning permission must be determined in accordance with the relevant Development Plan, unless material considerations indicate otherwise. The Management Plan is a statutory document therefore, the North Wessex Downs looks to its constituent local authorities to adopt the Management Plan and use it to 'formulate their policy for the management of the area and for the carrying out of their functions in relation to it'[iii].

7.4 In protected landscapes even more than elsewhere, a strong planning system is the unsung hero of environmental conservation and enhancement. Its value is often overlooked and underappreciated. Good planning provides certainty to landowners and investors, ensures consistency, enforces standards and supports community confidence. The process itself also has value in securing accountability for decisions, encouraging a degree of consensus about land use change and through scrutiny and discussion, often delivering better outcomes than would have otherwise resulted.

[1] ONS (2024) Population estimates for national landscapes in England and Wales by single year of age and sex, mid-2021 and mid-2022

[2] Countryside Commission: Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty: a policy statement CCP 356, 1991, p.5.



Relationship with the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF)

7.5 The National Planning Policy Framework sets out that planning policies and decisions should recognise the intrinsic character and beauty of the countryside[iv]. Paragraphs 189 and 190 provide specific guidance for plan makers and decision takers in relation to National Landscapes. It states that 'great weight' should be given to conserving their landscape and scenic beauty and that these designated areas have the highest status of protection in relation to these issues[v]. It further states that the scale and extent of development in these areas should be limited. In particular, major development should be refused in National Landscapes, except in exceptional circumstances and where it can be demonstrated to be in the public interest. As stated in the NPPF[vi] 'whether a proposal is major development is a matter for the decision maker, taking into account its nature, scale and setting, and whether it could have a significant adverse impact on the purposes for which the area has been designated or defined'. The NPPF makes clear that land within the setting of the National Landscape is as important as the land inside the protected landscape boundary. The NPPF must be read alongside the supporting National Planning Practice Guidance which provides a basis for plan making and decision taking. This states that the presumption in favour of sustainable development does not automatically apply within National Landscapes[vii] and that applying policies relating to National Landscapes may mean that it is not possible to meet objectively assessed needs for housing and other development in full[viii].

7.6 A key element of the NPPF's 'environmental objective' (supporting the defined purpose of the planning system to contribute to achieving sustainable development) is the protection and enhancement of the natural, built and historic environment. To support the overarching purpose and objectives, Local Plans should allocate land for development with the least environmental or amenity value, where consistent with other policies in the NPPF. The strategic policies in Local Plans should set out an overall strategy, and sufficient provision for, the conservation and enhancement of the natural, built and historic environment, including landscapes and green infrastructure.[x]

7.7 The NPPF provides specific guidance on measures to protect, restore and enhance biodiversity assets and to secure measurable net gains for biodiversity, setting out principles to avoid a significant harm to biodiversity.[xi] Local Plan policies should clearly differentiate between land within and outside National Landscapes. Recognition of the valued qualities of the North Wessex Downs by local authority partners will strengthen Local Plans.

The Approach to Development

7.8 The North Wessex Downs National Landscape Partnership supports pre-application discussions from applicants (the NWDNL staff unit offers a chargeable service) and with the relevant Local Planning Authorities. The protected landscape is a 'sensitive area' as defined under the Environmental Impact Assessment Regulations and as such some forms of development may require an Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) or Landscape and Visual Impact Assessment (LVIA).

7.9 The Environment Act 2021 introduced 10% Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG) as a mandatory requirement for new development. The preference for on-site provision reduces the likelihood of large-scale BNG funding for nature recovery within the National Landscape. However, the North Wessex Downs is a protected landscape, and where BNG does apply the national status of the designation means there is a strong case for a higher BNG target which aims to deliver the priorities of the North Wessex Downs National Landscape's Nature Recovery Plan and Local Nature Recovery Strategies.

7.10 The North Wessex Downs is a living and working landscape. The North Wessex Downs supports the provision of affordable housing that meets evidenced local need (right development, right place) which meet the purposes of the National Landscape to conserve and enhance natural beauty. To achieve this, Local Plans, Neighbourhood Plans and development proposals within the National Landscape and its setting must be landscape-led. Allocations and development proposals should demonstrate an understanding of and respond to local context and natural beauty with the aim of encompassing a sense of place throughout the process. The North Wessex Downs Landscape Character Assessment along with landscape sensitivity assessments and landscape visual impact assessments are essential tools in achieving a landscape-led approach.

7.11 The cumulative impact of development needs to be fully assessed. This is so as to avoid potential harm and erosion of the valued qualities of the National Landscape. This includes suburbanisation due to settlement extensions and smaller intrusions including changes to residential curtilages, extensions and outbuildings allowed as permitted development, street clutter/signage, increased traffic, noise and lighting.

Local Economy and Rural Business

7.12 The North Wessex Downs Partnership believes that promoting and supporting local enterprise is a key part of conserving and enhancing the character and valued qualities of the National Landscape. Local businesses are likely to:

- **employ local people;**
- **provide services to improve the local quality of life;**
- **spend money locally;**
- **promote community cohesion; and**
- **have a smaller environmental footprint (by reducing the transportation of goods from across communities).**

7.13 People like to live in a high quality environment. This attracts some businesses as it helps them retain staff. Support for small local businesses will provide local jobs and enhance the rural economy. For example, fast broadband is crucial for a healthy rural economy and we will work with relevant agencies to secure such infrastructure.

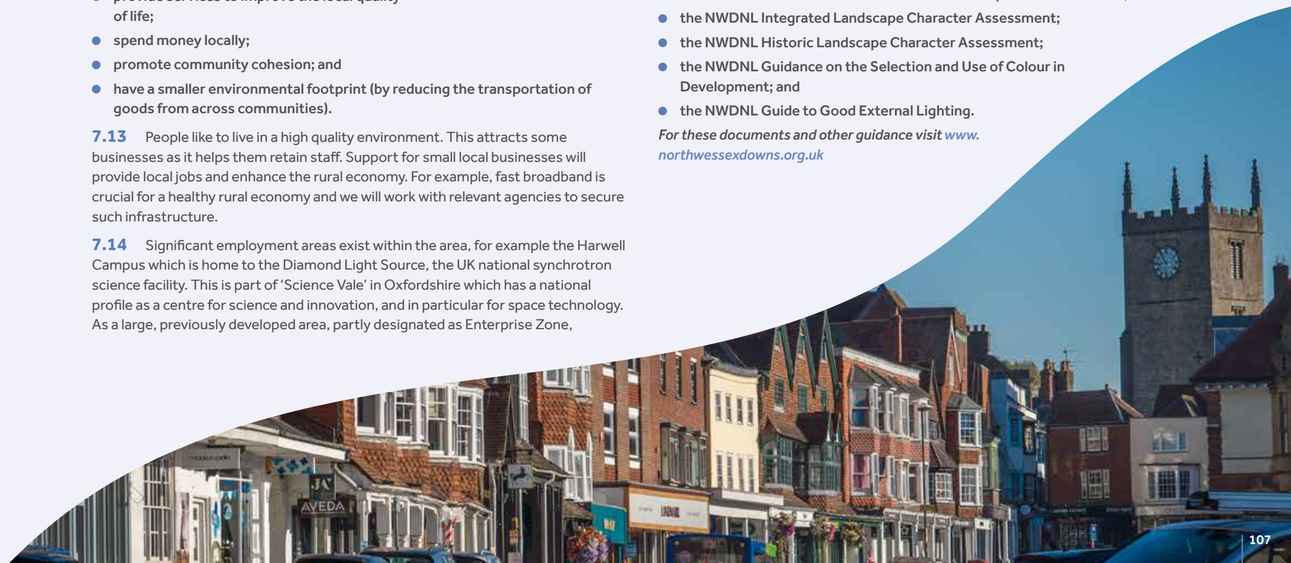
7.14 Significant employment areas exist within the area, for example the Harwell Campus which is home to the Diamond Light Source, the UK national synchrotron science facility. This is part of 'Science Vale' in Oxfordshire which has a national profile as a centre for science and innovation, and in particular for space technology. As a large, previously developed area, partly designated as Enterprise Zone, opportunities exist here for redevelopment and careful intensification of the site. Where such development occurs, it is important to recognise the purposes of the National Landscape designation and minimise any potentially adverse impacts on the valued qualities of the North Wessex Downs.

Additional Guidance

7.15 When preparing plans and planning applications, those responsible should make reference to the North Wessex Downs National Landscape (AONB) Management Plan and all other relevant North Wessex Downs National Landscape guidance. This includes, but is not confined to, the following North Wessex Downs National Landscape documents:

- **the NWDNL Nature Recovery Plan**
- **relevant NWDNL Position Statements and other published Guidance;**
- **the NWDNL Integrated Landscape Character Assessment;**
- **the NWDNL Historic Landscape Character Assessment;**
- **the NWDNL Guidance on the Selection and Use of Colour in Development; and**
- **the NWDNL Guide to Good External Lighting.**

For these documents and other guidance visit www.northwessexdowns.org.uk



Planning Conditions, Community Infrastructure Levy and Mitigation

7.16 It may be possible to overcome a planning objection to a development proposal by imposing a condition on the planning permission or by entering into a planning obligation (a Section 106 Agreement). Where this is appropriate, we may recommend planning conditions or a legal agreement to secure control over development and/or forms of mitigation. This will align with tests as set out in National Planning Policy Framework and supporting Planning Guidance and will be secured by our local authority Partners in forming decisions on planning applications.

7.17 We will seek financial or other contributions through Section 106 Agreements where possible to mitigate harmful impacts on the valued qualities of the National Landscape arising from new developments. We will also seek to access Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) funds from local authority partners to support identified landscape, nature recovery, community, green infrastructure and other environmental projects. A previous example of this is the IKEA development at Calcot in West Berkshire.

Remoteness and tranquillity

7.18 The sense of remoteness and tranquillity is core to rurality and the natural beauty of the North Wessex Downs. It is central to the enjoyment and appreciation of the landscape and a key characteristic in all landscape character areas. Dark night skies in the National Landscape contrast dramatically with surrounding urban areas providing a sense of remoteness and wilderness. The widespread absence of artificial light allows the full wonder of the night skies and stars to be appreciated unimpeded by the night-time glow of our major urban areas. 'Artificial light at night has revolutionised the way we live and work outdoors, but it has come at a price. When used thoughtlessly, lighting disrupts wildlife, damages human health, wastes money and energy, contributing to climate change, and it blocks our view of the starry sky'[xii]. In some parts of the area there is already an ambient level of noise associated with transport networks and machinery. A certain level of activity and noise will always be expected within a largely farmed landscape and within larger settlements.

7.19 These valued perceptual and scenic qualities are a fragile resource and under threat from a combination of factors, including major development, such as wind turbines, intruding into the open downland. Concerns raised by local residents and users of the landscape over loss of these valued perceptual qualities will inform decisions on particular development proposals. New uses or new developments that individually or cumulatively result in a material increase in lighting, noise and/or activity in the countryside should be resisted. Dark skies add to the beauty, tranquillity and sense of remoteness of a place. As well as being integral to the valued qualities of the National Landscape, dark skies are important for the health of people, wildlife and heritage. The North Wessex Downs has areas as dark as any in the country. One long-term goal for the National Landscape is to be a place: Where a sense of remoteness and tranquillity predominates and where vast night skies can thrill the eye, unaffected by light pollution; where these valued qualities are recognised in development decisions within in the setting of the National Landscape, so that the natural beauty of the North Wessex Downs is protected.



Sensitivities and constraints of the landscape to wind turbines

7.20 The North Wessex Downs National Landscape Partnership commissioned a study to identify the sensitivities and constraints of the landscape to wind turbines.[xiii] This work reveals that all Landscape types within the area are constrained to a degree. There are specific sensitivities and values that would be adversely affected by such forms of development.

7.21 Four landscape types (Open Downland; High Chalk Plain; Downs Plain and Scarp; and River Valleys) are considered to be highly constrained in relation to wind turbine development, where sensitivities to this form of development are high and any wind turbine is likely to have adverse impacts.

7.22 The remaining Landscape Types (Downland with Woodland; Wooded Plateau; Vales; and Lowland Mosaic) are considered to be moderately to highly constrained in relation to wind turbine development. The particular landscape characteristics and configuration of these Landscape Types is such that it may be possible to find locations that are less constrained to some types of turbine development, although these locations are likely to be very limited.

Other Renewable Energy Projects

7.23 As a response to the climate crisis, there is a need to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. The security of energy supplies is also a concern. These factors are likely to lead to an increase in renewable energy generation. There are already many well established and sensitively located forms of renewable energy projects across the area. These include:

- **micro-generation on individual residential and commercial properties;**
- **photovoltaic installations (some up to 1 ha in area);**
- **on farm bio-digesters;**
- **wood-fuel boilers; and**
- **hydro-electric generation projects within water courses.**

7.24 Large scale photo-voltaic arrays across farmland not only reduce the area of productive farmland but can have a significant effect on landscape character, shifting from a rural to industrial landscape which urbanises and unbalances the scenic quality, tranquillity and sense of place. To help meet net zero targets set by our local authority partners, the North Wessex Downs would support the installation of roof-based PV installations and small-scale solar arrays that are compatible with the purpose of conserving and enhancing the natural beauty of the National Landscape.

7.25 Further information concerning the likely acceptability of differing forms of renewable energy projects is contained with the North Wessex Downs Position Statement on Renewable Energy.

Green and Blue Infrastructure

7.26 Green infrastructure (GI) is the network of multi-functional open spaces and other environmental features, including parks and gardens, woodland, green corridors, public rights of way, watercourses and water bodies ('blue spaces'), street trees and open countryside. There is an opportunity for new development to secure and enhance the area's GI network, including through the Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL). This will support the sustainable management of natural resources; the delivery of sustainable development; biodiversity enhancement through habitat connectivity; local flood management; and the provision of opportunities to improve health and well-being through access to green and blue spaces. Schemes that improve links, including in particular public rights of way, for walkers, cyclists, riders, and carriage drivers, as well as securing biodiversity and landscape enhancements will be supported. Where appropriate, new and existing GI features should provide the greatest range of functions possible to maximise benefits for people and wildlife.

Urban fringe and Setting

7.27 A number of sizeable and expanding towns lie just outside the North Wessex Downs, including Swindon, Wantage/Grove, Didcot, Newbury, Thatcham, Reading, Basingstoke, Andover and Calne. The agricultural economy on these urban fringes is under pressure due to uncertainty over the future, marginal viability and suburban pressures including vandalism and litter dumping. There is scope for such areas to become places of environmental and community opportunity, with and multiple uses. However, targeted action is required to deliver this potential.

7.28 The setting of the North Wessex Downs does not have a defined geographical boundary but it should be addressed as the area within which development and land management proposals, by virtue of their nature, size, scale, siting, materials or design, can be considered to have an impact, either positive or negative, on the natural beauty and valued qualities of the North Wessex Downs National Landscape.

7.29 The potential for harm on the setting of the area from large-scale urban extensions is substantial. The area within the setting of the North Wessex Downs forms part of a transitional corridor. In some areas, particularly the northern boundary, long-distance views in and out of the National Landscape can be significant as the intervisibility between landscapes enhances the sense of openness and tranquillity. Any new uses or development proposed outside but within the setting of the area should be guided by the North Wessex Downs Position Statement on Setting. Proposals should include detailed measures to mitigate against harm on and into the area. Forms of mitigation may include strategic landscape buffers, use of colour in building materials, careful design and restrictions on lighting, restrictions on building heights, care over massing and scale, care over roofscape design, or avoidance of development in the most exposed locations.

Built Environment and New Housing

7.30 The North Wessex Downs National Landscape Partnership's approach to the provision of new housing is set out in the North Wessex Downs Housing Position Statement. This emphasises that strategic levels of new housing within the National Landscape should be avoided except in exceptional circumstances, in line with national planning policy.[xiv] Land of least environmental or amenity value situated outside the protected landscape and its setting should be the first choice for development. Only where it is necessary to meet appropriate local needs should new housing be considered. This should be landscape-led within existing settlements, preferably on previously developed sites. Excellent design and siting of all new developments in the North Wessex Downs is essential. They should reflect the intrinsic character of the local landscape and avoid generic pastiche architecture that can have a suburban effect. New development will become part of the landscape's future cultural heritage and design should recognise and reflect this while sustainably meeting the needs of the present. A positive design approach (site capacity, layout, scale, materials and landscaping) that understands the site and surrounding landscape will improve the ability of a development to better integrate into the landscape.

7.31 Housing may also be delivered through the Neighbourhood Plan process. Such provision should still be in general conformity with any Local Development Plan and be appropriate in terms of landscape character and nature.

7.32 The replacement of small dwellings in the countryside with more grand houses can significantly alter the character of a site and local street scene, which can have a suburbanising effect on the rural character of the site and local area. It also reduces the supply of smaller rural dwellings. A replacement dwelling, when clearly disproportionate to the original, can be tantamount in its impact to a new dwelling, which is some areas would contradict national and local policy. Even where a site is well screened there is a wider concern to maintain the essential rural nature and qualities of the area. Large extensions on small dwellings also have the potential to erode local rural character.

Highways Infrastructure

7.33 The M4 (London to Wales) and the A34 (Southampton to Oxford) form the main arteries in a wider network of A-roads crossing the North Wessex Downs. Yet the overall impression is of a relatively sparse road network underlining the historical and current lack of settlement on the open downland. The only part to have a dense network of winding rural lanes is the well-wooded Hampshire Downs and the lowlands to the north east of Newbury – both areas of ancient countryside with a Mediaeval settlement pattern.

7.34 More needs to be done to find imaginative and sensitive solutions to the maintenance of the existing highway network and the design of new roads. These should be sympathetic to the character and valued qualities of the North Wessex Downs landscape. Many rural lanes have a rich character of their own. The challenge is to retain that character whilst meeting modern highway safety needs. Particular problems occur when urban solutions are imposed on the rural setting. This is sometimes the result of safety guidelines Highway Authorities have a duty to comply with, but results in a loss of local character and the addition of lighting and clutter. The North Wessex Downs National Landscape Partnership will collaborate with the Highways Authorities to improve the existing highway environment and seek improvements to proposed new schemes. Examples could include better use of passing places and sensitive edge protection on lanes to prevent erosion of historic banks and species-rich verges. The development of new private driveways should retain rural character and to reflect the historic qualities of settlements.

7.35 The North Wessex Downs Unit has contributed to work that is helping to reduce the impact of highways infrastructure, such as through the Avebury World Heritage Site Transport Strategy.

Rail Electrification

7.36 Rail electrification has potential to cause widespread harm to landscape character and natural beauty. The failure of Network Rail to have regard for the purposes of protected landscape designation, as required by its duty under s. 85 of the CRoW Act 2000, when electrifying the Great Western main line in the mid-2010s led to a swathe of unnecessarily intrusive infrastructure in the Thames valley between Reading and Didcot through the Chilterns and North Wessex Downs National Landscapes. The Mend the Gap programme that resulted from that project is leading mitigation and enhancement work within the affected landscapes to soften and reduce the impact of the infrastructure on natural beauty.

7.37 The other main line that runs through the North Wessex Downs, the Berks and Hants route from Newbury towards Westbury and the south west, has also been proposed for electrification. It will be important for any future major infrastructure work to be landscape-led, with reference to the strengthened s.85 duty on all relevant bodies.

Minerals and Waste

7.38 It is national policy to avoid landbanks of non-energy minerals in National Landscapes. Mineral schemes that are major developments within the area should be refused planning permission unless it can be demonstrated that there are exceptional circumstances and that the development is in the public interest.[xvi]

7.39 Waste proposals should substantially be meeting local needs. They should be of a scale relevant to the proposal and avoid greenfield sites. Any new facilities should be consistent with an up-to-date Local Plan, as defined in the National Planning Policy for Waste.





Planning and Development: Key Issues

7.40 Key issues with the potential to have significant influence on the North Wessex Downs Development Valued Qualities:

a) The threat of expansion of the main urban areas just beyond the boundary of the North Wessex Downs, including the main centres of Swindon, Wantage, Didcot, Reading, Newbury, Basingstoke, Andover, and Devizes for example, creating urban fringe pressures and impact on the setting of the National Landscape.

b) New large free-standing dwellings as replacement dwellings in the open countryside.

c) The change of use of land from agriculture which has the potential to harm landscape character

d) The erosion of rural character through suburbanising influences from new development (new fencing, lighting, excessive glazing, signage, parking areas, paved footpaths, loss of native hedgerows and creation of new garden areas).

e) New housing developments on greenfield sites.

f) The threat of incremental housing development outside settlements from conversions, redevelopments or rural workers accommodation which are not clearly justified to be beneficial.

g) Impact on dark skies and tranquillity from external lighting (commercial, domestic and agricultural), especially where poorly directed or in an exposed location (not usually subject to planning control).

h) Potential for certain forms of development to intrude on the wider landscape, including telecommunications masts, pylons, wind turbine developments, photovoltaic schemes, and minerals and waste schemes, threatening the senses of remoteness and tranquillity, and landscape quality and heritage assets.

i) Unsuitable development of redundant previously developed and part-developed sites within the North Wessex Downs, especially redundant airfields and military sites (e.g. as at Wroughton), and the impact upon landscape quality and heritage assets.

j) New developments at the junction of the M4 and A34 or along their corridors which spread the impact from development yet further into the undeveloped parts of the National Landscape.

k) Impact from the racing industry from new gallops and facilities where inappropriately located and or designed.

l) Impact from equestrian uses and structures generally where new development is expansive in area, in greenfield locations, poorly designed and/or located on exposed sites.

m) Substantial new farm buildings and residential extensions where unjustified, poorly designed and or located in exposed locations that are deemed Permitted Development.

n) Development that results in a material loss of tranquillity and / or impact on the dark night skies within the North Wessex Downs or its setting.

o) New noise-creating activities, for example from quad or bike courses, microlight or other airstrips, shooting schools, kennels, new industrial, minerals or waste operations.

p) Large-scale new commercial uses or inappropriate farm diversification projects.

q) New road building, road and rail route upgrades and other large-scale infrastructure projects.

r) Impact of road signage, street lighting and other highway clutter on landscape character, including within settlements. Measures which have an urbanising effect on National Landscape character include: oversized, multiple and yellow-backed road signs; new street lighting in previously unlit locations; lighting that allows spillage or glare; road markings; concrete kerbing; illuminated bollards; fencing; and insensitive traffic-calming schemes.

Planning and Development: Principles

1. Ensure that the formulation and implementation of planning policies across the North Wessex Downs take full account of relevant authorities' statutory duty to seek to further the purposes of the National Landscape designation, conserving and enhancing the character and the valued qualities of the North Wessex Downs and its setting.
2. Ensure that all development proposals, including allocations at Local Plan stage, are landscape-led and development is based on identified need to sustain the vitality of local communities in ways that conserve and enhance the natural beauty of the North Wessex Downs.



REFERENCES

i Dark Skies of the North Wessex Downs – a guide to good external lighting
ii Population estimates for national landscapes in England and Wales by single year of age and sex, mid-2021 and mid-2022
iii Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000, s.89(2).
iv NPPF (2024) paragraph 187.
v NPPF (2024) paragraph 189
vi NPPF (2024) paragraph 190, footnote 67
vii NPPF (2024) paragraph 11 d) footnote 7.
viii NPPF (2024) paragraph 11 b) footnote 7.
ix (19 NPPF (2024) paragraph 188.
x (20 NPPF (2024) paragraph 20.
xi (21 NPPF (2024) paragraphs 192-195.
xii International Dark-Sky Association
xiii https://www.northwessexdowns.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/Wind_turbine_sensitivity_report_FULL_WEB.pdf
xiv (22 NPPF (2024) paragraph 189.
xv (23 NPPF (2024) paragraph 224(a).
xvi (24 NPPF (2024) paragraph 190.

Planning and Development: Policies

DE 01 Development and use changes within the North Wessex Downs and its setting must seek to further the purpose of the National Landscape (to conserve and enhance the Natural beauty of the protected landscape) and should demonstrate how they have had regard to the Management Plan and guidance produced by the North Wessex Downs National Landscape Partnership.

DE 02 Under the NPPF determining major development is a judgement for the local authority as decision taker; in determining this, plan makers and decision takers should consider the context of the locality and whether the development by reason of its scale, massing, character or nature, has the potential to have a significant adverse impact on the natural beauty and valued qualities of the North Wessex Downs. The potential for significant adverse impacts must include the consideration of both the impact of cumulative development and the individual characteristics of a proposed development or use of land.

DE 03 A landscape-led approach should be applied at the earliest stages of development of Local Plan policies and all development proposals within the National Landscape and its setting. Natural beauty must be a golden thread throughout all stages of the process and aim to encompass a sense of place. The North Wessex Downs Landscape Character Assessment along with landscape sensitivity assessments and landscape visual impact assessments are essential tools in achieving a landscape-led approach.

DE 04 Development within the National Landscape and its setting should be of high quality which responds to local context, including; historic settlement pattern, height, massing, roof form, density, materials (inc. colour) and local building vernacular. All development should actively seek to conserve and enhance local distinctiveness, sense of place, tranquillity, biodiversity, the historic environment and dark skies.

DE 05 Historic settlement patterns and valued green spaces within and surrounding settlements form part of the distinctive character and heritage of the North Wessex Downs. Neighbourhood Plans, Development Plan allocations and development proposals should identify these characteristics and ensure their value is recognised and retained.

DE 06 The surroundings of the North Wessex Downs and the protected landscape itself add value to each other as the landscape and landforms link visually and functionally, joining the surroundings to the National Landscape. Proposals for development or change of use in the setting should, therefore, reflect and respond to the inter-connectivity with the National Landscape, its landscape character, and valued qualities.

DE 07 Development (apart from exempted development) must encourage, support and promote biodiversity net. gain and contribute to nature recovery by protecting, restoring and providing for new and improved habitats and connected nature recovery networks.

DE 08 To ensure that dark skies and tranquillity are protected, no new uses or developments that individually or cumulatively result in a material increase in lighting, noise, pollution and/or activity that fails to conserve and enhance the valued qualities of the National Landscape should be permitted.

DE 09 To avoid and reduce the potential for light pollution, details of external lighting should be submitted alongside a lighting assessment as part of any development or new use within the National Landscape and its setting, to ensure it meets the standards set out in the NWDNL Good Lighting Guide.

DE 10 Encourage, support and promote good practice in the design and management of roads in the National Landscape and its setting that conserves and enhances the character of the landscape and settlements. Opportunities should be taken to reduce erosion and maintain or restore the character of rural roads through adoption of a low-key rural design approach to roads across the North Wessex Downs.

DE 11 Maintain the rural character and valued qualities of the National Landscape by preventing over development of sites and the erosion of local character. The following should be considered:

- The overall size, scale and massing of the replacement dwelling and/ or extension compared to the original (new dwellings should not be materially larger in terms of volume).
- Site context and local context including natural and built character and features, visual prominence and the local vernacular.
- Relationship within the local street scene/ rural countryside and potential to unbalance this.

DE 12 Proposals for farm diversification, including the re-use of buildings, should be considered positively provided they will conserve and enhance the natural beauty of the National Landscape and its setting and:

- can demonstrate that they meet a local need;
- contribute to the local economy;
- add value to land-based products; or form part of a whole farm/ estate plan endorsed by the NWDNL unit and the local authority

DE 13 To help meet net zero targets, a net zero design approach should be adopted for all new developments. The installation of roof-mounted photovoltaic solar installations and other small-scale renewable energy proposals that are compatible with the purpose of conserving and enhancing the natural beauty of the National Landscape should be supported.

DE 14 Renewable energy schemes determined to be major development must demonstrate that the development is appropriate in location, scale and design which conserves and enhances the local landscape character and natural beauty of the National Landscape. Proposals for renewable energy should not have an adverse impact individually or cumulatively and should demonstrate that important views and tranquillity are maintained or enhanced.

DE 15 Encourage the retention of existing and provision of new 'Green and Blue Infrastructure'. Ensure that Green and Blue Infrastructure (including new or enhanced biodiversity assets) is incorporated within the area of all 'major developments', both within and in the setting of the National Landscape.

DE 16 Any development within the catchment area of watercourses within the National landscape and its setting, or supplied by water abstraction from the aquifers that feed them, must apply a nature-based approach to avoid, and if necessary mitigate, any potential impacts to this valued landscape asset/valued quality. Nutrient neutrality requirements may also apply in some catchments. The North Wessex Downs are home to globally rare chalk streams. These ecosystems are sensitive to change and play a key role in sustaining local biodiversity.

DE 17 New landscape enhancement proposals and/or mitigation should apply a nature-based approach which is informed by local context. The NWDNL Nature Recovery Plan and the relevant Local Nature Recovery Strategy. Non-native or invasive species will not be supported unless a valid reason can be demonstrated, and it meets the priorities of the Nature Recovery Plan and conserves and enhances local landscape and the natural beauty of the National Landscape.

DE 18 Encourage environmentally sustainable economic growth, new responsible tourism opportunities and diversification of the local economy of a scale and nature compatible with conserving and enhancing the natural beauty of the National Landscape.

DE 19 Breaches of planning controls that undermine the purpose of designation should meet with prompt and robust enforcement action.

CHAPTER 9

Communities



Overview:

- Containing a **dispersed and relatively small population** spread over a large area, the majority live in the small villages and the two market towns of Marlborough and Hungerford with the high downs including large expanses, without any significant habitation. The trend of young people leaving to relocate to areas with better service provision and cheaper housing continues, resulting in a higher proportion of middle aged and elderly people in many communities.
- Unemployment remains low and **economic activity** rates high, with many jobs in high value-added industries within a short journey from villages in the National Landscape. Swindon, Newbury and Basingstoke in particular maintain international reputations within the technology sector with some of the lowest unemployment rates in the country. Remote working practices have increased since the pandemic, enabling more residents to work for distant employers while living in the National Landscape. The economic influence of London, the Thames Valley and north Hampshire is most keenly felt to the south east and east of the National Landscape and in particular those villages with good access to mainline stations.
- The **Armed Forces** continue to play a significant role in the local economy, especially in places such as Tidworth and Ludgershall to the south of the National Landscape on the Wiltshire-Hampshire border.
- **Good access to the wider area** and road network means that much of the National Landscape is highly accessible to commuters working in the adjacent towns. The east of the National Landscape continues to experience greater pressure on housing stock in West Berkshire, Basingstoke and Deane and South Oxfordshire.
- A well-structured and resourced **farming industry**, with substantial assets of land, machinery, knowledge and entrepreneurial ability, though facing significant challenges with the continuing transition to Environmental Land Management Schemes (ELMS). Many examples of diversification into food processing, tourism and provision of space for economic activity can be seen across the North Wessex Downs.
- Villages and small towns with a **strong sense of identity and wellbeing** linked to the historic landscape, active and resourceful community groups.
- There is a strong local resonance and **affinity with the landscape** of the North Wessex Downs, particularly the individual downs and the river valleys and other outstanding features.





Communities of the North Wessex Downs

9.1 The North Wessex Downs National Landscape is not a wilderness. It is a distinct and recognisable area arising from a long history of human occupation and the sustainable use of its natural resources. There is a clear relationship between land stewardship, community, the economy and natural beauty; these features and functions combine to give the area its special character.

9.2 Within the North Wessex Downs there are 173 parish councils and two market towns, Marlborough and Hungerford. In mid-2022, the total population of the National Landscape was estimated as 102,352[1]. Post-pandemic working patterns have evolved, with a notable increase in remote and hybrid working arrangements. Many villages are now largely occupied by those who split their working time between home and offices outside the area. This has continued to stimulate rising house prices, with very significant pressure placed on the affordable housing stock. In addition, villages often have a reduced population during parts of the day, undermining the viability of village services such as post offices, pubs and doctors' surgeries. There is a need for a broad mix of housing to maintain sustainable communities and support village services.

9.3 To have sustainable communities in the North Wessex Downs they must be places where people want to live and work, now and in the future. Sustainable communities should be:

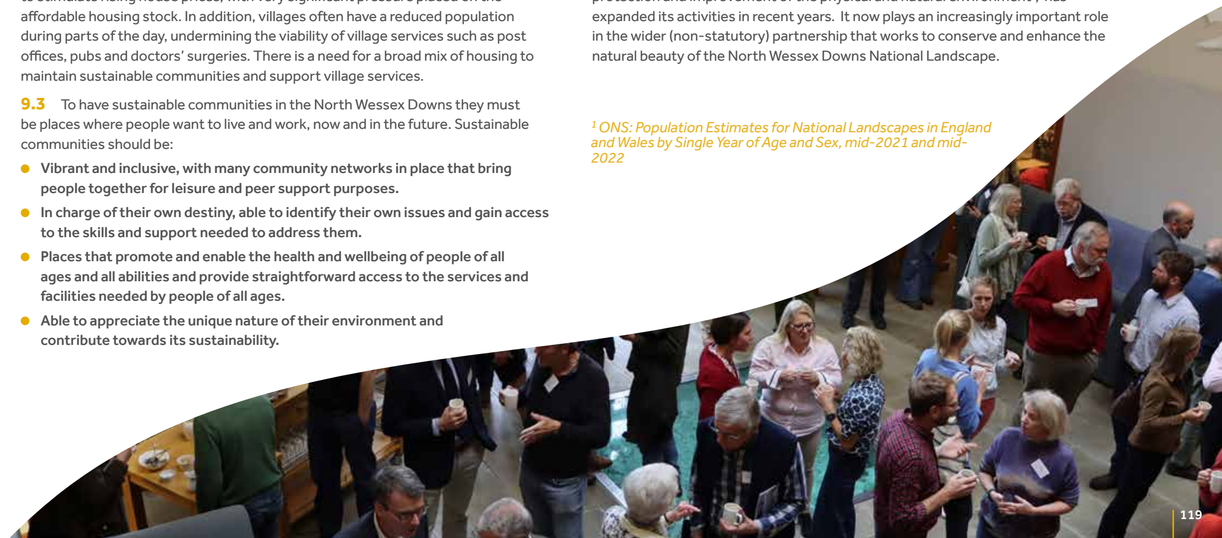
- **Vibrant and inclusive, with many community networks in place that bring people together for leisure and peer support purposes.**
- **In charge of their own destiny, able to identify their own issues and gain access to the skills and support needed to address them.**
- **Places that promote and enable the health and wellbeing of people of all ages and all abilities and provide straightforward access to the services and facilities needed by people of all ages.**
- **Able to appreciate the unique nature of their environment and contribute towards its sustainability.**

9.4 A number of parishes in the North Wessex Downs have undertaken community-led planning, and the number of Neighbourhood Plans in the National Landscape has continued to increase since 2019. Community-led plans include actions relevant to the social, economic and environmental objectives of the North Wessex Downs. We support this approach and provide advice and support to parishes where requested.

9.5 Most North Wessex Downs residents continue to have poor access to services when compared to regional averages, though digital service provision has improved access to some services.

9.6 The North Wessex Downs Landscape Trust, established in 2016 "To promote for the benefit of the public the conservation, protection and improvement of the physical and natural environment in the North Wessex Downs National Landscape and its setting." [and] "To advance the education of the public in the conservation, protection and improvement of the physical and natural environment", has expanded its activities in recent years. It now plays an increasingly important role in the wider (non-statutory) partnership that works to conserve and enhance the natural beauty of the North Wessex Downs National Landscape.

[1] ONS: Population Estimates for National Landscapes in England and Wales by Single Year of Age and Sex, mid-2021 and mid-2022







Employment and Training

9.7 The majority of the local economy remains part of a larger 'urban economy', a characteristic that is likely to have been reinforced and extended by the changes to living and working patterns in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic. Many businesses benefit from the area's high landscape quality to either attract staff or customers. Agriculture, forestry and fishing businesses are the third-largest business types in the North Wessex Downs, accounting for approximately 10% of all businesses in the area.

9.8 The fundamental changes in the area's land-based economy continue to require new skills and the re-learning of old skills. There is a need to understand, define and then meet training and education needs. Support comes from:

- **National Training Organisations (such as LANTRA representing the land-based sector);**
- **Further education and training colleges;**
- **Representatives of community groups.**
- **Travel and Transport**

9.9 Local communities and visitors need access to services – a key issue for social inclusion. That access should be sustainable. The North Wessex Downs is within easy reach of three mainline railways:

- **The Waterloo to Exeter line with stations at Basingstoke, Overton, Whitchurch and Andover;**
- **The Paddington to Penzance line with stations at Kintbury, Hungerford, Bedwyn and Pewsey (and connections to Marlborough);**
- **The Paddington to Bristol and South Wales line with stations at Pangbourne, Goring, Cholsey, and Didcot.**

9.10 Outside the main towns that ring the North Wessex Downs, bus services remain limited and have faced further reductions in some places since 2019. Although the distribution of bus routes suggests that rural areas are well served, many of these services run only infrequently. Some routes between significant towns, e.g. Hungerford and Wantage, are not served at all. However, a number of innovative and flexible community transport schemes continue to operate within the North Wessex Downs. These often rely on the support of charitable funding and volunteers. During the last Management Plan period, the new Wiltshire Connect service has been rolled out to cover much of the western half of the North Wessex Downs. This includes both timetabled services and a flexible on-demand bus service supported by a dedicated app, that allows passengers to book from seven days to 30 minutes in advance.

Communities: Key Issues

9.18 Key issues with the potential to have significant influence on the National Landscape's Communities Valued Qualities:

a) Widespread lack of awareness of the North Wessex Downs National Landscape among local residents and businesses.

b) The towns which surround the National Landscape are all expected to accommodate significant housing and employment development.

c) Impact of the main strategic highway corridors running through the National Landscape, including the M4 and A34. Increased volumes of traffic or an increasing demand for quicker journey times may lead to pressure for widening and other 'improvement' schemes on these and other roads in the National Landscape and its setting.

d) Greater prosperity enjoyed by some people leads to other environmental impacts such as more over-flights by aircraft, more use of roads and rights of way for motorised leisure pursuits, and increased demand for second homes.

e) Loss of affordable housing, reducing the social mix within settlements and leading to a loss of essential rural skills and services.

f) Potential changes in demographic profile, social exclusion, access to services and loss of public transport routes and other key facilities.

g) The trend of commuting to higher paid jobs outside the National Landscape whilst living in the area is resulting in rising house prices, though increased remote working is changing some of these patterns.

h) High demand for traditional buildings to convert to residential use, so reducing the opportunities for business conversions.

i) The positive benefits of a strong and active community spirit in many National Landscape communities, including a rich artistic and cultural life.

j) Perceived limitations on opportunities for businesses in inaccessible locations, although improved digital connectivity is reducing some barriers.

k) Opportunities and risks for the National Landscape associated with instruments such as Neighbourhood Plans, which form an increasingly important element of local decision-making

l) Financial pressures reducing the ability for town and parish councils to participate in partnerships and community activities.

m) Lack of understanding of the impacts of daily lifestyle decisions on the environment of the North Wessex Downs – from individual travel decisions to the use of water as if it were an unlimited natural resource.

n) Increasing volume of HGVs, delivery vans and commuter traffic on rural lanes. 'Rat-running' on minor lanes to escape congestion on the main arterial roads.

o) Government requirements that businesses running apprenticeship schemes must have business premises (many traditional land-based contractors do not have formal business premises).

p) The need for better understanding and awareness of the links between high environmental quality and ecosystem services and local business.

q) There are opportunities to increase involvement in local community activities to improve social cohesion and sense of belonging.

r) The need for local sources of employment and opportunities for local people to develop skills that could support them into self-employment or enterprise.

s) The need for a wide range of skills training for land managers and other rural enterprises within the North Wessex Downs.

t) The impacts of the transition to the Environmental Land Management Scheme (ELMS) on farming businesses and communities.

u) The opportunities and challenges presented by changes to living patterns in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic, including increased remote working and use of telecommunications for shopping and access to services.

v) The role of communities in climate change mitigation and adaption.

w) Poor level and extent of bus services across some parts of the National Landscape.

x) The need to decarbonise travel and transport.

y) The challenges of enabling school-age children to learn about the history, management and conservation of the National Landscape.

Communities: Priorities

1. Support the development of the North Wessex Downs Landscape Trust in pursuit of its charitable purposes to promote actions which underpin the conservation and enhancement of the National Landscape.
2. Support and facilitate community-led initiatives that help deliver National Landscape purposes and Management Plan objectives.
3. Encourage an enhanced sense of respect and pride in the North Wessex Downs amongst local people and their increased participation in activities that raise the understanding and profile of the National Landscape.
4. Assist the development of connectivity, based on principles of planning and integrating multi-functional green infrastructure assets, from neighbouring urban areas and within the area, facilitating active and sustainable access to and around the National Landscape to make it easier for communities to experience and benefit from the natural beauty of the North Wessex Downs.





Communities: Policies

CO 01	Support efforts to raise the profile of the North Wessex Downs National Landscape among communities within and surrounding the area.
CO 02	Provide parishes and all other relevant community groups and individuals with information and training as necessary to raise awareness of the valued qualities of the National Landscape and the need to conserve and enhance it.
CO 03	Encourage, support and celebrate local communities' engagement in the planning, conservation and enhancement of their local environment, protecting its natural beauty and enhancing the sense of local pride and ownership.
CO 04	Support communities to play their part in climate change mitigation and adaption, including projects to promote community use of renewable energy sources, consistent with National Landscape objectives.
CO 05	Publicise relevant community activities and events across the North Wessex Downs.
CO 06	Support community initiatives aimed at retaining rural services, including the combining of services where this will improve their viability.
CO 07	Support initiatives to foster awareness, understanding and appreciation of the National Landscape in local schools and encourage greater connectivity with nature and the environment in line with proposals in DEFRA's 25 Year Environment Plan and the 2023 Environmental Improvement Plan.
CO 08	Support initiatives to address the specific needs of different groups within and around the National Landscape, such as access to training and social activities for young people and engagement with under-represented and/or disadvantaged groups.
CO 09	Support provision of reliable and affordable broadband and mobile telephone connections throughout the North Wessex Downs in ways that respect the valued qualities of the area.
CO 10	Ensure the development and implementation of transport plans and programmes, including those related to the strategic highway corridors running through the National Landscape, addresses the needs of North Wessex Downs communities, reduces transport impacts on the environment, and conserves and enhances the valued qualities of the landscape.
CO 11	Support measures to enable active travel and provide integrated and demand-responsive passenger transport, including easily accessible information, across the North Wessex Downs that serves the needs of local people and visitors.
CO 12	Secure Travel Plans for new developments with significant traffic generation potential within the North Wessex Downs to reduce car use and encourage active and sustainable travel.
CO 13	Support good practice examples of community approaches that respond to locally identified needs and promote them as an inspiration to others (e.g. the establishment of local housing trusts, support for new village shops, community transport schemes, etc).
CO 14	Support communities in landscape-led approaches to enable the availability of housing for identified local needs that will be -and will remain- genuinely affordable in perpetuity, consistent with National Landscape purposes.

CHAPTER 10

Access, Recreation & Tourism



Overview:

- Offering some of the finest **cultural landscapes** in England including chalk downland, river valleys, ancient woodland, historic sites. There is recognition of the landscape in literature and the arts, with locations such as Watership Down, Uffington White Horse and the Wittenham Clumps inspiring well known works.
- **Historic attractions** reflecting the industrial and socio-economic history of the area including the Kennet and Avon Canal, Crofton beam engines and Wilton Windmill.
- **Picturesque market towns** and small villages with independent shops, superb pubs, restaurants and plenty of B&Bs and hotels. A growing reputation for local food and produce.
- **Rich archaeological history** and evidence of our ancestors that can be found in greater concentrations than much of the country.
- The **great country houses** at Highclere, Basildon Park, Littlecote, Tottenham and Ashdown and the medieval, Norman and Saxon churches
- The **extensive Rights of Way** network offering many opportunities for quiet enjoyment of the countryside away from crowds, by ramblers, cyclists and riders, including the Thames Path and Ridgeway National Trails, access land, commons and accessible woodland
- A **'hot spot' for antiques** in Hungerford, Marlborough and Pewsey.





9.1 The North Wessex Downs is a landscape rich in historic sites and natural features. This magical landscape has attracted naturalists, antiquarians and travellers throughout history. Tourist attractions of international renown within the North Wessex Downs include the 25 km2 (9.6 square miles) Avebury World Heritage Site (taking in Avebury Village, the Avebury Henge complex, as well as Silbury Hill, Windmill Hill and the West Kennet long barrow); the White Horse at Uffington; the Ridgeway and Thames Path National Trails; and the Kennet and Avon Canal providing a strategic waterways link between the Thames and Bristol Channel But it is the spectacular scenery, highly attractive villages, and sense of isolation that are the primary recreational and tourism attractions of the area.

9.2 There are different types of users for access, recreation and tourism in the North Wessex Downs National Landscape who have different priorities and needs, and will engage with different partners across the area. These include tourists visiting or touring in the National Landscape; tourists to major destinations outside the protected landscape, e.g. Stonehenge, Blenheim, Oxford, or visitors on business who are staying in the North Wessex Downs for its proximity to other places; residents in the National Landscape; residents of adjacent towns; and groups who use the area for recreation, including ramblers, runners, road cyclists, mountain bikers, youth and school groups, horse riders and carriage drivers.





Rights of Way and Access

9.3 Access to the countryside is an important part of the lives of people who live in the area and also for visitors as a tourism asset. There is widespread recognition of the importance of using and enjoying the natural environment for health and well being, yet the potential of the North Wessex Downs National Landscape to enable and support this has so far been largely untapped. Government funding for access in the National Landscape tends to be short-term in nature and restricted to capital projects. Long-term commitment and resourcing will be needed to build links with t surrounding large towns and other communities to better understand their needs and facilitate their engagement with the landscape. The lack of convenient public transport imposes limits on the benefits and sustainable use of the protected landscape as a resource. The on-demand Wiltshire Connect bus service, which now serves a wide area linking Marlborough, Pewsey, Great Bedwyn, Hungerford and Devizes, is good example of what can be done to improve green travel options for residents and visitors.

9.4 Access and the needs of recreational users must be managed alongside those of farmers/land managers and objectives for nature recovery and heritage conservation. Wider and easier access should be encouraged where this can be achieved without conflicting with conservation aims or the landowner's use of the land. There may be opportunities arising from the growth of settlements on the fringes of the North Wessex Downs to mitigate some of the impact by improving and extending access.

9.5 The CRoW Act 2000 established access land which the public has the right to enjoy under certain conditions. There are 1,189 ha of open access land and 694 ha of registered commons in the North Wessex Downs. There are also permissive arrangements by which landowners grant access voluntarily or as part of inheritance tax agreements. At present some of this access can be difficult to determine due to the patchwork nature of its provision. In addition, there are 100 hectares of National Trust land to which there is access. An analysis of accessible natural greenspace provision in South East England (2007) found that the North Wessex Downs National Landscape had the smallest proportion of all accessible natural greenspace (4% of the total) across the South East Protected Landscapes. No more recent data have been found to indicate whether this has changed in recent years]

9.6 Of the accessible natural greenspace, 59% was woodland. In general woodland with open or partial access is owned by the Forestry Commission, the Woodland Trust or the National Trust. Sixty-nine per cent. of the woodland area has a public right of way either crossing through or along one edge of a wood. However, open access to woodland is at a different scale, at just 14% of the total National Landscape woodland area.

9.7 One of the most important resources of the North Wessex Downs is its extensive rights of way network, providing access to some of the most spectacular views and secluded valleys in southern England, free for all to use. Not only does it underpin the recreational and tourism sectors but also affords some opportunities for sustainable and safe journeys to school and work. Important national and regional walking routes within the North Wessex Downs are set out in the Table below. In addition, a very large number of other paths are promoted as recreational walking routes by a diverse range of local authorities and national and local organisations, on the ground, online and in published walking guides.

Table 1: Walking routes of National and Regional significance in the North Wessex Downs National Landscape (some figures are estimated)

	Approximate Distance within the NWDNL	
Route name	**Kilometres**	**Miiles**
Ridgeway National Trail[1]	68	42
Thames Path National Trail[2]	13	8
Kennet & Avon Canal towpath	48	30
Lambourn Valley Way	29	18
Mid-Wilts Way	59	37
Pewsey Vale Circular Way	116	73
Test Way	22	14
Watership Down Trail	37	23
Wayfarer's Walk	27	17
White Horse Trail	29	18

[1] *Natural England: PLTOF Additional statistic 8: The length of National Trails within Protected Landscapes 2024.*
[2] *As footnote 1.*

9.8 There are a large number of advertised cycle routes (on- and off-road) that pass through the area, taking advantage of quiet lanes, byways and bridleways. Route 4 of the Sustrans National Cycle Network (NCN4) runs for 29 miles / 47 km through the North Wessex Downs, in part following the Kennet and Avon Canal towpath. NCNs 45, 246, 403, 482 and 544 also pass through the National Landscape. Cycling UK has developed a 217 mile / 350 km circular leisure cycle route, King Alfred's Way, part of which goes along the Ridgeway National Trail.

9.9 The Three Downs Link is a multi-user recreational route connecting The Ridgeway with the South Downs Way, utilised by riders alongside cyclists and walkers. The Ridgeway is promoted as a National Trail for riding. There are a number of shorter riding routes promoted by the British Horse Society that utilise the Ridgeway and link with the much wider multi-use network. These include the Ilsley Downs Riding Route and the Downland Villages Riding Route, both shown on the OS Explorer map and waymarked on the ground. Responsible recreational cycling and riding are two of the key activities to encourage in the North Wessex Downs. Supporting the provision, consistent with the purposes of designation, of facilities such as accommodation with access to stables and paddocks, parking for horse boxes and trailers, drying rooms, bike wash facilities and cycle hubs are examples of how this could be achieved.

9.10 The CRoW Act 2000 requires every county and unitary authority to set out their plans for improvement of the rights of way network. This is through the production of a Rights of Way Improvement Plan (ROWIP, sometimes called a Countryside Management Plan or a Countryside Access Improvement Plan). These plans set out how an authority will maintain countryside access resources and take opportunities for improving and promoting access to the countryside. The Act also requires these authorities to establish a Local Access Forum with a membership representing a range of stakeholders, which advises the authority on matters relating to public rights of way and other types of access.

9.11 Landowners are often reluctant, for example because of the associated liability and responsibilities for maintenance, to dedicate new public rights of way so permissive paths may be the only way to improve connectivity of the existing network. The Eling Way in Berkshire is a good example of a permissive route created in the last few years.



"Out on that almost trackless expanse of billowy Downs such a track is in some sort humanly companionable; it really seems to lead you by the hand."

KENNETH GRAHAME (1859-1932)

Recreation and Tourism

9.12 Although not large in number, there is a range of paying visitor attractions within the North Wessex Downs. These include Basildon Park, Lower Basildon (run by the National Trust) and Highclere Castle, near Newbury (owned by the Earl of Carnarvon), the Crofton Beam Engines and Pumping Station on the Kennet and Avon Canal at Great Bedwyn, and the Living Rainforest environmental education centre at Hampstead Norreys. There are many more attractions in the National Landscape or its setting that could benefit from greater collective promotion and support. These tend to be individual small sites, often managed by independent charities. They include museums and heritage centres in Devizes, Pewsey, Wallingford, Whitchurch and Wantage; nature reserves, commons and access land managed by the Wildlife Trusts, the National Trust and private owners; the wealth of ancient monuments across the whole landscape; prominent landmark sites such as Wilton windmill; and individual urban properties such as the Merchant's House in Marlborough. The North Wessex Downs Landscape Trust's Postcards Project (2025) may help to address this with the promotion of interesting, historic or quirky local landmarks.

9.13 Despite its close proximity to major areas of population, the North Wessex Downs is not well used as a place for quiet enjoyment. Green tourism offers enormous opportunities for the North Wessex Downs and a good business reason for conserving and enhancing the landscape. Many visitors (and residents) are unaware that they are in the North Wessex Downs National Landscape when they are in a particular town or village or passing through the area - most users of the Kennet and Avon Canal and walkers on the Ridgeway National Trail and the Thames Path are passing though the North Wessex Downs or Chilterns National Landscapes. The North Wessex Downs Landscape Trust's welcome signage programme for the North Wessex Downs will help address this issue. It is also important for any organisation promoting its town, village, or site to include information about the North Wessex Downs National Landscape. Tourists who use the National Landscape as a base for exploring external attractions also represent a potential market that could be encouraged to discover the North Wessex Downs. There are opportunities for the tourism sector to support investments in improving rights of way, providing accommodation, facilities, and information.

9.14 At present, visitors to the National Landscape directly support around 2,200 full time jobs. Of all visitors, 18% are from overseas, most of whom are travelling for business purposes and stay for a single night, during Monday-Thursday. Well over 90% of all foreign visitors are either business or family related. Nearly half of all visitors to the area stay with family or friends. The average length of stay by UK visitors is two days and it is estimated that a visitor spends an additional £27 in the North Wessex Downs. More than half of all serviced accommodation providers are un-graded for quality. Budget accommodation for young visitors and others is very limited, but at the time of writing includes Streatley Youth Hostel in the Thames valley and the Court Hill Centre above Wantage in Oxfordshire. Despite efforts by the local community, supported by the Chilterns and North Wessex Downs National Landscapes during the last Management Plan period, the future of Streatley Youth Hostel remains uncertain. There is great potential to improve the performance of the area as a short break destination. This is especially with the development of bespoke activity packages, such as self-guided off-road cycle routes. The area can appeal particularly to affluent visitors from London and the Home Counties. That could bring significant benefits to the rural economy.





Access, Recreation and Tourism: Key Issues

9.17 Key issues with the potential to have significant influence on the National Landscape's Access, Recreation and Tourism Valued Qualities:

a) Increasing pressure on local authority funding for management and maintenance of rights of way, poor condition of some rights of way, especially byways used by off-road vehicles, and poor connectivity of the rights of way network in some areas for circular walks and rides.

b) Irresponsible use of the rights of way network by motorised vehicles, of particular concern along the route of the Ridgeway and green lanes in and around the World Heritage Site at Avebury, on the downs south-east of Pewsey and on some commons, e.g. at Bucklebury.

c) Impact of behaviour of some rights of way users, including littering, dogs off leads disturbing wildlife and worrying livestock, leaving gates open etc.

d) Noise associated with some recreation pursuits, including that from trail bike courses and powered aircraft, affecting tranquillity and others' enjoyment.

e) Lack of information and provision for the less able and other disadvantaged groups to access and enjoy the North Wessex Downs.

f) Popularity of a few 'honeypot' locations with resulting impact of traffic noise and disturbance, car parking, wear and tear on verges and paths, litter and lower enjoyment, and potentially intrusive traffic management measures.

g) Management and resourcing challenges and opportunities presented by the Ridgeway and Thames Path National Trails.

h) Infrequent or non-existent public transport links to and between points of access, key attractions and accommodation. Limited services at some railway stations reduce green travel opportunities.

i) Increasing recreational pressures and associated opportunities arising from the predicted growth in the population of settlements surrounding the North Wessex Downs National Landscape.

j) Tourism provision in the National Landscape is fragmented and poorly co-ordinated, supporting relatively few jobs and limited income considering its accessibility, natural beauty and historic interest.

k) Multiple destination management organisations and Local Visitor Economy Partnerships across the National Landscape mean that co-ordinated marketing of the North Wessex Downs National Landscape as a whole remains weak, despite significant progress in recent years.

l) Lack of indication such as road/railway station, bus stop and waymark signs that visitors are entering or in the National Landscape.

m) Generally limited recognition amongst North Wessex Downs communities of the opportunities that association with a landscape of national importance offers for quiet recreation and green tourism and their associated economic benefits, e.g. for local produce.

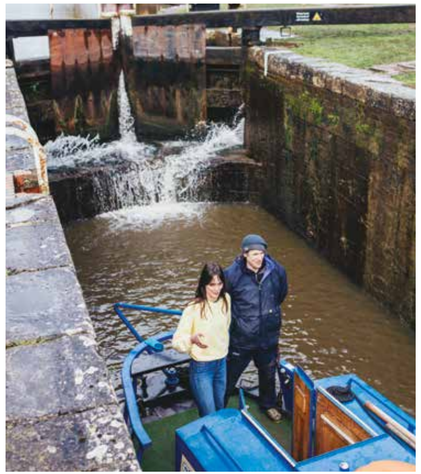
n) Potential for insensitive, inappropriate or excessive recreational or tourism development to harm the valued qualities of the National Landscape.

o) Impacts and risks associated with climate change, particularly more extreme weather. Extreme rainfall, storms and drought cause impacts, costs and risks for access, for example through tree damage, flooding, path erosion and wildfire risk.

p) The need to manage pressures relating to holiday accommodation, including proposed development or intensification of holidays parks and other sites, and pressure on the housing stock from second homes and short-term lets.

9.15 A number of sites in the National Landscape offer educational visits. There is increasing interest among farmers in hosting school visits and the North Wessex Downs Farming in Protected Landscapes programme has enabled more farms to do so, helping to fund training and infrastructure such as classrooms and trailers. To deliver a greater benefit from grant funding, beneficiaries are encouraged to make agreements to share use of trailers, for example with other members of the same farmer-led group. Rushall Manor Farm in Berkshire (run by the John Simonds Trust, Oxenwood Outdoor Education Centre in Wiltshire and Linkenholt Countryside Adventure Centre in Hampshire, (both run by Community First, the latter in partnership with the Blagrave Trust) offer outdoor learning facilities for school and youth groups.

9.16 The North Wessex Downs can be an area for green tourism, with easily accessible information about its wildlife, culture and history, and with many opportunities to explore, on foot, by bike and on horseback. Following the previous Our Land and Love Your Land initiatives to encourage local businesses to reflect the protected landscape better in their offer, the North Wessex Downs National Landscape Partnership has become a Designated Ambassador under the Great West Way (London to Bristol) destination touring initiative led by Visit Wiltshire.





Access, Recreation and Tourism: Priorities

1. Facilitate opportunities for more people of all backgrounds and abilities to access and enjoy the North Wessex Downs in ways that respect and promote the valued qualities of the National Landscape and its setting.
2. Greater awareness of the value of access and enjoyment of the North Wessex Downs National Landscape for public health and well being.
3. Develop a strategic framework to guide the use of funding provided to the North Wessex Downs National Landscape for access enhancements.
4. Co-ordinated promotion of the North Wessex Downs National Landscape by the tourism and recreation sector as a destination for responsible access that respects and promotes the valued qualities of the protected landscape and its setting.

Access, Recreation and Tourism: Policies

ART 01 Enable greater accessibility to the North Wessex Downs National Landscape for users of all backgrounds and abilities for quiet enjoyment and improved health and well-being, consistent with National Landscape purposes..

ART 02 Support local initiatives by communities and businesses to promote responsible recreation and tourism across the North Wessex Downs National Landscape.

ART 03 Manage and improve the network of public rights of way, ensuring that relevant plans for development and delivery of access to the area take full account of the local distinctiveness, character and quality of the North Wessex Downs and its setting.

ART 04 Promote and encourage non-motorised journeys throughout the North Wessex Downs by the creation and appropriate maintenance of new - and improvement of existing - permissive and definitive routes, including links using the road network.

ART 05 Encourage the creation and maintenance of new permissive and definitive routes that link existing routes and enable recreational walkers, cyclists, riders and carriage-drivers to avoid busy roads.

ART 06 Recognise and protect those areas which are too sensitive to intrusion or disturbance, for example archaeologically or ecologically, for the promotion of public access.

ART 07 Promote a strategic, collaborative, approach among destination management organisations, Local Visitor Economy Partnerships and other partners to marketing responsible access and tourism and in the North Wessex Downs National Landscape.

ART 08 Encourage events such as walking festivals that celebrate the valued qualities of the North Wessex Downs, introduce new audiences to the landscape and contribute to the visitor economy

ART 09 Encourage and facilitate signage or other ways of informing visitors and residents that they are in the North Wessex Downs National Landscape, consistent with the purpose of designation.

ART 10 Encourage greater recognition among commercial transport providers such as train operating companies and bus operators of the recreational / leisure potential of stations in and around the North Wessex Downs, including access from the 'gateway towns' on the edge of the National Landscape.

ART 11 Support initiatives to help communities and businesses reduce the outflow of revenue, retaining and recycling income from visitors in the area for longer.

ART 12 Support more and better monitoring of the distribution and demography of visitors and promote management approaches that reduce pressure on sensitive habitats.

ART 13 Support land managers and the access sector to recognise and manage the potential for tensions between public access and commercially sensitive areas, for example livestock farms or game shoots where disturbance could have a damaging impact.

ART 14 Enable, encourage and promote active and sustainable transport access, including but not limited to particular 'honeypot' locations which are under stress from car-borne visitors, to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, improve air quality and conserve and enhance the natural beauty of the landscape.

CHAPTER 11

Summary of Activity

under the North Wessex Downs AONB Management Plan 2019-2025



North Wessex Downs National Landscape (NWDNL) Partnership

- The Partnership's governing Council of Partners was chaired by Ted Hiscocks (2015-2021), Sarah Nichols (2021-2025) and Gill Haggarty (2025-).
- Continued Partnership meetings and activity throughout the Covid-19 pandemic.
- Committed to becoming the first UK candidate protected area to achieve the International Union for Conservation of Nature's Green List standard.
- Undertook a comprehensive governance review, inc. a revised Partnership Agreement, new Partnership Goals and Strategic Objectives, and a new Business Plan.
- Supported 20 community projects with grants from the Sustainable Development Fund, managed on our behalf by the North Wessex Downs Landscape Trust.

Value for Money

- Delivered an increase in the annual value of benefits to the NWDNL levered by each £1 of partners local authorities' funding contributions from £4.82 (2019-20(to £22.46 (2023-24).

National and Regional Collaboration

- Hosted field trips and visits for the National Landscapes annual conference (twice); DEFRA Environment Bill, 30 by 30 and Landscapes, Access and People teams; the Protected Landscapes Partnership;; and the Minister responsible for protected landscapes.
- Supported National Landscapes Association activities.
- Participated in the Big Chalk calcareous landscapes nature recovery initiative as a board member, inc. hosting a field trip at the inaugural Big Chalk Conference.
- Participated in the SE and E Protected Landscapes Lead Officers' Group and the SE, E and SW Protected Landscapes Planning Officers' Group.
- Collaborated with other landscapes on FiPL projects such as Pasture and Profit in Protected Landscapes.
- Chaired the Avebury World Heritage Site Steering Committee.

Communications

- Commissioned an entirely new web site focussed on public access in light of experience during the Covid-19 pandemic.
- Celebrated the 50th anniversary of the designation of the North Wessex Downs as an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty.
- Rebranded ourselves as a National Landscape and published a new visitor guide leaflet.
- Produced regular newsletters and social media posts and grew our general and targetted mailing lists, social media following and web site visits.

Access, Recreation and Tourism

- Ran annual walking festivals 2022-24 with delivery partners.
- Delivered access improvements using DEFRA's Access for All Fund.
- 22 projects supported.
- £414,000 in project grants to make new or existing rights of way more accessible; replace styles with gates, create permissive paths, install publicly available lavatories on or next to rights of way, add way markers and other improvements to recreation across the NWDNL.
- Promoted the NWDNL as a Destination Ambassador for the Great West Way tourism initiative.



Dark skies and Lighting

- Published a Good Lighting Guide and leaflet to help minimise light pollution in the National Landscape and its setting.
- Partnered with Marlborough Town Council and Marlborough College to hold the first Marlborough Dark Skies Festival, with 30 events attracting more than 4,500 people.
- Offered dark skies training to our partner local authorities.
- Supported local astronomy groups with grants and community-led light level monitoring.

Farming in Protected Landscapes (FiPL) Programme

FiPL is a national DEFRA programme of advice, guidance and grants for farmers and land managers. It is focussed on four pillars of nature climate, people and place, viewed through the prism of each protected landscape's Management Plan. In the first four years 2021-25:

- Over 200 grant applications received.
- 176 projects awarded grants.
- £3,073,638.66 in grant funding given to environmental projects.

Major projects:

Some of the highest value projects supported (all over £50K):

- Pond creation at Englefield Home Farms.
- Restoration of Manor Farm Barn, Old Burghclere.
- Pasture cropping trial to assess landscape scale change ro farming system.
- Hedgerow dormouse project within the Wessex Farm Conservation and Southern Streams Farmer Groups.
- Micro-scale vegetable tannery for cattle hides and create an education hub at Great Cotmarsh Farm.
- Regenerative farming and re-introduction of livestock at Manor Farm, Wilton.
- Cactus Guards, fencing, farm surveys, bird boxes, a short educational film, bridleway access gates and automatic magnesium chloride water dispenser at Yatesbury House Farm.
- Dew ponds on the Pewsey Downs.
- Saving England's Lowland Junipers – revitalising populations in the North Wessex Downs (Plantlife).

Other projects and support:

- Also supported river enhancement and wetland creation, scrub removal, arable reversion, access improvements, fenceless collars to aid conservation grazing, a sheep dairy, deer management/venison initiatives (training, diversification scheme), public access, including toilets and information, repair and restoration of historic listed barns, and re-introduction of Large blue butterfly in collaboration with NE and other partners.
- Helped establish eight new farmer-led groups.
- Convened regular meetings of the facilitators of all farmer led groups in NWDNL.

Education:

- Training for farmers to host schools, e.g. LEAF collaboration.
- Knowledge-sharing for farmers and the public, e.g. Pasture for Life, FiPL events, equine events.
- Equipment and facilities, e.g. trailers, classrooms, to enable improved visits.
- Support for local community gardens to feed and educate local groups.



Going Underground at Roundway Hill

Under the £500m Visual Impact Provision agreed with Ogfem, NWDNL is benefitting from one of four National Grid projects to reduce the impact of overhead electricity transmission lines on protected landscapes. The route runs across the site of the Battle of Roundway Down (1643), a Registered Battlefield, and close to Roundway Down and Covert SSSI and the Devizes Millennium White Horse. On completion, 4.5km of overhead electricity line will be buried underground, removing 13 pylons from the National Landscape. We have:

- Engaged closely with National Grid from the project's inception. The scheme received consent in 2023.
- Worked with National Grid and the Pewsey Downs Farmer Group to identify associated opportunities for nature recovery and landscape enhancement along the route.



Historic Ridgeway

- With partners we helped develop, match funded and supported delivery of this Ridgeway Partnership project with funding from Historic England to survey scheduled and unscheduled monuments along the Ridgeway National Trail and identify conservation, access, interpretation, and nature recovery needs and opportunities.

Landscape Character

- Commissioned an Environmental Colour Assessment and published Guidance on the Selection and Use of Colour in Development. Designed to minimise potential negative impacts of development on the character of the National Landscape by providing advice on colour selection and material use to help integrate development into the protected landscape.
- Held a training session for local authority partners.
- Commissioned the first comprehensive review of the NWDNL Landscape Character Area Assessment since 2002 to provide an up-to-date evidence base for the new Management Plan.





Mend the Gap

- Mend the Gap is a joint initiative between the North Wessex Downs and Chilterns National Landscapes and the Railway Action Group to soften and heal the landscape harm caused by electrification of the Great Western mainline between Reading and Didcot. It is funded by Network Rail. The programme has delivered:

Landscape Enhancement:

- Softened the impact of the overhead wires and gantries with over 4km of hedge planting and over 600 trees so far.

Communities:

- Worked with eight Parish Councils to help them support nature recovery in their communities, including a new management plan for Pangbourne Meadows.
- Worked with over 6000 children to support them to better understand the Landscape and nature around them, with over £200,000 committed to school grounds projects.

Wildlife:

- Levered over £700,000 in nature recovery projects so far to enhance chalk and wetland habitats, for example working with farmers and expert botanists to restore chalk grassland and raise awareness of the Goring Gap's importance for wild plants.
- Delivered a Joint project with Partnerships for Nature to fund and new wetland with grassland and arable plant conservation on the Sulham Estate.

The Arts:

- Worked with two artists on the Springline Project at Aston Tirrold and Cholsey to commission artwork to communicate the special wildlife of the Cholsey and Mill brooks.

Nature Recovery Plan

- Fulfilled our commitment under the Colchester Declaration (2019) by developing a Nature Recovery Plan for the NWDNL, sent to over 115 consultees in addition to the online consultation.
- Launched at our Nature Recovery-themed Annual Forum in October 2023.
- Contributed to the development of Local Nature Recovery Strategies in Berkshire, Hampshire Oxfordshire and Wiltshire.

Partnerships for Nature

We secured £1.75m from DEFRA's Species Survival Fund with matched funding for a Partnerships for Nature programme of habitat creation and restoration involving nine partners across seven sites in NWDNL.

- Restoration/enhancement of 2.5 km of chalk stream habitat and regrading of 2.36 km of riverbank habitat.
- Restoration and enhancement of 26 ha of existing lowland heathland, 31 ha of newly created heathland and 200 ha of wood pasture, with a ranger service and reintroduction of grazing by non-breeding, native breed cattle.
- 26ha arable field demonstration site for regenerative farming inc. agroforestry, with wildlife-rich habitats alongside food production.
- Restoration/enhancement of 20 ha of chalk grassland
- Creation of 0.5ha of wetland habitat.
- Restoration/enhancement of two coppice plots (1.6 ha and 2 ha).
- Restoration/enhancement of two dew ponds.
- Creation of ten hibernacula.
- Recruitment and training of project volunteers.
- A series of activities including organised site walks, workshops for local farmers and landowners, practical advice for farms on how to introduce species and nature recovery into their longer-term business models, habitat interpretation materials.



Planning and Design

- Engaged with Local Plans, Core Strategies, Minerals and Waste Plans and other policy documents for Basingstoke and Deane, Hampshire, Vale and South Oxfordshire, Test Valley, West Berkshire and Wiltshire Councils.
- Prevented major harm to the setting of the National Landscape from a large commercial Science Park development on the edge of Swindon. We worked alongside Council Officers during the application and at appeal.
- Screened over 5,000 applications and commented on approximately 2,000.
- Collaborative working with Natural England and West Berkshire Council which resulted in a landscape-led local plan review and the formulation of a standalone National Landscapes policy.
- Supported Swindon Borough Council at an Enforcement Inquiry against unauthorised change of use and development at Wroughton Airfield. The appeal was dismissed and the enforcement notices upheld.

Sparkling Streams

We Secured £990,000 Green Recovery Challenge Funding for the Sparkling Streams Project: a catchment approach, working with Action for the River Kennet (ARK) and the Town and Manor of Hungerford to improve the condition of the River Kennet chalk stream and its Shalbourne and river Dun chalk stream tributaries, increasing wildlife and connecting people with nature.

- 1.1 km of new or enhanced chalk stream and a fish pass created at Eddington Mill.
- 3 km of enhanced in-river, and riparian habitat work carried out on eight sites on the river Dun and the Shalbourne.
- 1 km hedge (5,025 plants) and 6 ha woodland (3,400 trees) planted on six sites.
- 64 volunteer tasks held.
- 145 people (94 new volunteers) gave over 1,600 hours of their time.
- Rain garden created at Shalbourne Primary School.
- 381 adults and 60 children attended activities.

CHAPTER 12

Protected Landscape Targets



Protected Landscape targets

The Protected Landscape targets are non-statutory and create a shared ambition for all 44 of England's Protected Landscapes. The targets are for the Protected Landscapes as places (the geographic area covered by the designation). Action will be coordinated by Protected Landscape bodies through their statutory management plan. It will be the responsibility of all stakeholders, partners and land managers in the area to support their delivery.

Some targets are action-focussed, while others set a clear numerical target for how much Protected Landscapes are expected to contribute as areas to the national targets.

The targets are based on an analysis of the environmental potential of the Protected Landscapes. They are also set proportionally, based on the characteristics of these areas and the share of relevant natural assets within them. The targets are set for Protected Landscapes as geographical areas and will be delivered and monitored as such.

The targets in this framework are set at a national level for all 44 landscapes as a collective. Each individual Protected Landscape body, working with relevant local partners, will set their own individual contribution, which will be embedded in their management plan. Natural England will support this process and ensure contributions represent a fair share and add up to the national total.

Thriving plants and wildlife targets

Protected Landscapes have significant environmental potential, containing almost half of England's priority habitats. They also contain over half of our most precious sites for biodiversity, land designated as Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs). To ensure these habitats are reaching their full potential for nature recovery, we have set targets to motivate more activity on the components needed to ensure wildlife can thrive.

The protection, restoration, creation, and management of priority habitats will increase species abundance. It will help turn the tide on extinction risk and support our international commitment to protect 30% of land by 2030 (30by30). The adoption of nature friendly farming practices will help stop biodiversity loss and increase species abundance alongside sustainable food production.

Protected Landscape bodies and partners should seek to increase the amount of land in favourable management in Protected Landscapes through meeting the targets below and other available means. This will maximise the contribution that Protected Landscapes can make towards our national targets for nature recovery.

TARGET 1

Restore or create more than 250,000 hectares of a range of wildlife-rich habitats within Protected Landscapes, outside protected sites by 2042 (from a 2022 baseline).

TARGET 2

Bring 80% of SSSIs within Protected Landscapes into favourable condition by 2042.

TARGET 3

For 60% of SSSIs within Protected Landscapes assessed as having 'actions on track' to achieve favourable condition by 31 January 2028.

TARGET 4

Continuing favourable management of all existing priority habitat already in favourable condition outside of SSSIs (from a 2022 baseline) and increasing to include all newly restored or created habitat through agri-environment schemes by 2042.

TARGET 5

Ensuring at least 65% to 80% of land managers adopt nature friendly farming on at least 10% to 15% of their land by 2030.

Mitigating and adapting to climate change targets

Protected Landscapes contain some of the UK's most important carbon stores, including significant tracts of peatland, woodland and hedgerows providing important carbon sinks for achieving net zero. To ensure we are maximising the opportunities for climate mitigation within our Protected Landscapes we have set targets for restoring peat and increasing tree planting. Restoration and ongoing management of these habitats is essential for sequestering and storing carbon into the future, and therefore reducing net greenhouse gas emissions. They can also provide natural flood management and other benefits for farmers and local communities.

Protected Landscapes are leading action to achieve net zero at a landscape level, working with residents, businesses and communities, aiming to reduce emissions and deliver nature-based solutions. We have set a target to support them in this ambition and strengthen their important contribution to our world leading target to achieve net- zero by 2050.

Tree planting and peat restoration at scale will support new skills and green jobs, attract private investment and help grow the rural economy.

For the long-term protection of our iconic landscapes, action is needed to increase their resilience and that of the communities within them. We must mitigate climate risks through nature-based solutions and adapt to the unavoidable impacts, planning for a changing future.

TARGET 6

Reduce net greenhouse gas emissions in Protected Landscapes to net zero by 2050 relative to 1990 levels.

TARGET 7

Restore approximately 130,000 hectares of peat in Protected Landscapes by 2050.

TARGET 8

Increase tree canopy and woodland cover (combined) by 3% of total land area in Protected Landscapes by 2050 (from 2022 baseline).





Enhancing beauty, heritage and engagement with the natural environment targets

Protected Landscapes are designated for their natural beauty and provide a range of health and wellbeing benefits and educational opportunities. We know these benefits are not currently being enjoyed equally by all parts of society. Protected Landscapes have a distinctive sense of place and represent our shared heritage and national identity. These special qualities must be protected for everyone to enjoy. The Environmental Improvement Plan (EIP) made a commitment that everyone in England should live within 15 minutes' walk of a green or blue space. It also committed to reduce other barriers that prevent people from accessing green and blue spaces, such as physical challenges, lack of confidence and lack of information. Protected Landscapes should be setting the standard for meeting this commitment, leading efforts to increase responsible access and engagement with nature.

To ensure that more people have the opportunity to enjoy and learn from these special places, we have set targets to improve accessibility for all. Protected Landscapes are leading the way to promote accessibility to the natural environment. They are using a range of tools such as engaging schools, providing disabled facilities and improving trails and waymarking. Targets will also conserve the important sense of place that these landscapes bring to our country and communities.

The government wants to boost visitor numbers in a safe and manageable way for local areas, allowing people, communities and businesses to reap the benefits of tourism, growing the rural economy, whilst preserving heritage and natural assets.

We rely on Protected Landscape bodies to gather relevant data to measure progress towards our beauty, heritage and engagement outcome. We will continue to work with Protected Landscape bodies and other partners to explore the benefits of further developing targets to improve and promote accessibility and engagement.

TARGET 9

Improve and promote accessibility to and engagement with Protected Landscapes for all using existing metrics in our Access for All programme.

TARGET 10

Decrease the number of nationally designated heritage assets at risk in Protected Landscapes.



Source: DEFRA Policy paper: Protected Landscapes Targets and Outcomes Framework, January 2024

Glossary

Term used	Definition / Explanation
Agri-environment Schemes (AES)	A range of schemes operated by DEFRA designed to encourage environmentally friendly farming and public enjoyment of the countryside. Currently includes Countryside Stewardship.
Ancient Semi-Natural Woodland (ASNW)	An ancient woodland site, believed to have had continuous woodland cover since 1600 AD, composed principally of native tree species that have not obviously been planted.
Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB)	Area designated under the National Parks and ... ose of designation being to conserve natural beauty.
Biodiversity Net. Gain	A principle by which development operations l... n by Government as a possible principle for national planning policy in 2018/1... account for the complexities of environmental goods and services provided by
Byway	A Byway open to all traffic (BOAT) is a Public Right of Way open to all users, including vehicular and all other kinds of traffic. Defined in 66(1) of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981. (See also Restricted Byway q.v.)
Catchment Abstraction Management Strategy (CAMS)	CAMS is a process used by the Environment Agency (EA) to provide both a consistent approach to local water resource management and greater public involvement in water management. The EA uses CAMS to determine its approach to catchment abstraction licensing within a given catchment. This is set out in a Catchment Abstraction Licensing Strategy for the catchment.
Catchment Partnership	A Catchment Partnership brings together a wide range of interests with local expertise to undertake integrated management of land and water, addressing each Water Framework Directive river catchment as a whole and delivering cross-cutting practical interventions on the ground. These aim to provide multiple benefits to water quality, wildlife, flood risk, resilience to climate change and more resource efficiency. Catchment Partnerships are active across England.
Catchment-Sensitive Farming (CSF)	A partnership between Defra, the Environment Agency and Natural England. It works with farmers and a range of other partners to improve water and air quality in high priority areas. CSF offers farmers free training, advice and support for grant applications. Also used to refer to the general approach advocated by CSF.

To follow

Common Agricultural Policy (CAP)	European Union-wide policy that supports agriculture through price support, market management and measures to improve the agriculture industry. Undergoing a Mid term review, introducing decoupling and more modulation and cross compliance.
Common Land	Defined in section 22 of the Commons Registration Act 1965 as land subject to rights of common (as defined in this Act) whether those rights are exercisable at all times or only during limited periods.
Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL)	A planning charge, introduced by the Planning Act 2008 as a tool for local authorities to pay for infrastructure to support development in their area. Introduced by the Community Infrastructure Levy Regulations 2010. Development may be liable for CIL if the local planning authority has chosen to set a charge in its area.
Conservation Area	Defined by section 69 of the Planning (Listed Buildings & Conservation Areas) Act 1990 as an area of special architectural or historic interest, the character or appearance of which is desirable to preserve or enhance.
Coppice	Woodland which has normally been regenerated from shoots formed at the cut stumps of the previous crop trees, root suckers, or both i.e. by vegetative means. Coppice is normally grown on a short rotation, e.g. 5–25 years, to yield small diameter material.
Countryside and Rights of Way (CRoW) Act (2000)	Contains measures to improve public access to the open countryside and registered common land while recognising the legitimate interests of those who own and manage the land concerned; it amends the law relating to rights of way; it amends the law relating to nature conservation by strengthening protection for Sites of Special Scientific Interest including tougher penalties and by providing extra powers for the prosecution of wildlife crime; it provides a basis for the conservation of biological diversity; and it provides for better management of Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty, including the requirement for local authorities to produce AONB management plans every five years and places a duty on public bodies to have regard to the purposes of AONB designation.
Countryside Stewardship (CS)	The current Common Agricultural Policy environmental land management support scheme introduced by DEFRA in 2014.
Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra)	The central government department body with responsibility for protected landscapes, wildlife, food and farming, natural resources etc.
Ecosystem Goods and Services	The assets and services, especially those of benefit to humans, provided by the functioning of an ecosystem or environment. Often categorised as: • supporting e.g. soil formation, nutrient cycling, pollination • provisioning e.g. food, timber, water • regulating e.g. carbon sequestration, floodwater storage, air and water purification, climate regulation • cultural e.g. landscapes, wildlife etc. of aesthetic, cultural, historical, recreational or spiritual value to people.

Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA)	A process under which developers are required to provide, in additional to a planning application, an environmental statement evaluating the likely environmental impact of the development, together with an assessment of how this may be mitigated. EIA is intended to ensure that, when deciding whether to grant planning permission for a project which is likely to have significant effects on the environment ,a local planning authority does so in full knowledge of the likely effects, and takes this into account in the decision making process. Governed by the Town and Country Planning (Environmental Impact Assessment) Regulations 2017 in compliance with EU Directive 2011/92/EU.
Higher Level Stewardship (HLS)	The Higher Level Scheme was a Stewardship (i.e. agri-environment) scheme introduced in 2005 to concentrate on the more complex types of management needed to achieve the objectives of the ELS where land managers need advice and support, where agreements need to be tailored to local circumstances and where management needs to be carefully targeted.
Highway Authority	The Highways Act 1980 defines a Highway Authority as the body responsible for maintaining all highways maintainable at public expense and keeping them free of obstruction, including responsibility for public rights of way.
Historic Landscape Characterisation (HLC)	A method used to define and map the historic and archaeological dimensions of the present-day landscape. HLC is an extremely useful tool for enabling better decision making about future land use management and change. By properly understanding the historic landscape context we can assess the likely effects of changes and make better informed decisions.
Historic Parks and Gardens	Parks and Gardens containing historic features dating from 1939 or earlier and registered by Historic England in three grades as with historic buildings.
Landscape	An area, as perceived by people, whose character is the result of the action and interaction of natural and/or human factors.
Landscape Character	A distinct, recognisable and consistent pattern of elements in the landscape that makes one landscape different from one another, rather than better or worse.
Landscape and Visual Impact Assessment (LVIA)	A process for identifying the effects of proposed changes (e.g. new development) on views and on the landscape itself. A depth of analysis and understanding of these two interrelated aspects is required to produce a successful LVIA. The Landscape Institute publishes guidelines for carrying out LVIA. LVIA may be required for significant planning applications within the AONB or its setting (q.v).
Landscape Character Area (LCA)	Unique individual geographical areas in which landscape types occur, which share generic characteristics with other areas of the same type but have their own particular identity.
Landscape Character Assessment (LCA)	A method for identifying, understanding and expressing the different patterns and features i.e. woodlands, hedgerows, building styles and historic artefacts which give a place a distinctive character.

LEADER	European Union rural development initiative for assisting rural communities in improving the quality of life and economic prosperity of their area through the distribution of grant funding.
Local Access Forum (LAF)	Set up under CRoW Act to represent a balance of local interests and views, providing independent guidance to the relevant local authorities and the Countryside Agency on how to make the countryside more accessible and enjoyable for open air recreation in ways that address social, economic and environmental interests. Each county has one covering their respective areas of the North Wessex Downs.
Local Planning Authority (LPA)	The local authority, normally a unitary or local borough or district council, which is empowered by law to exercise planning functions.
National Nature Reserve (NNR)	Designated by Government under the National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act 1949 to protect and conserve nationally important areas of wildlife habitat and geological formations and to promote scientific research.
National Trail	Routes based on Public Rights of Way through the nation's finest and most characteristic countryside, allowing an extensive journey on foot, horseback or by bicycle and capable of attracting tourist use from home and abroad.
Natural Beauty	Legislation and associated guidance defines natural beauty as including the physical elements of flora, fauna, geology and physiographic or geomorphological, the cultural and heritage elements, together with less tangible values such as intactness, rarity, wildness, remoteness, tranquillity and the appeal to the physical senses.
Natural Capital	The elements of nature that directly or indirectly produce value to people, including ecosystems, species, freshwater, land, minerals, the air and oceans, as well as natural processes and functions. Natural capita is described in terms of assets. Natural capital is simply those assets provided by nature which have the capacity to generate goods and services. Natural capital can be regarded as the source of all other types of capital: whether manufactured, financial, human or social, underlining the importance of a healthy environment for human prosperity.
Natural Environment and Rural Communities (NERC) Act 2006	Legislation that extended the biodiversity duty in the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 to public bodies and statutory undertakers to ensure due regard to the conservation of biodiversity. The Act also refined the definition of "natural beauty".
Neighbourhood Plan	A document that a community may choose to prepare to set out a vision for how it wants an area to develop over the next 10-20 years. Once approved by an inspector and endorsed in a local referendum the plan becomes part of the statutory development plan for the area. Established by the Localism Act 2011.
Parkland	A large piece of ground usually comprising woodland, scattered mature trees, pasture and/or semi-formal gardens, often created to a specific landscape design and currently or once attached to a country house or mansion.
Pasture	An area of land dominated by grass, which is used only or principally for grazing, as distinct from a meadow that is mown. Pasture may be enclosed fields or unenclosed common land.
Permanent Grassland	Any grassland, whether pasture or meadow, composed of perennial or self-seeding annual plants kept indefinitely and not sown or ploughed.

Permissive Access	Public access to a route or area granted by the landowner, usually for foot access but occasionally for [horse] riders, which is not dedicated as a public right of way.
Plantations on Ancient Woodland Sites (PAWS)	Ancient Woodland Sites in which the former tree cover has been replaced, often with non-native trees. PAWS often retain important ancient woodland features including characteristic flora, fauna and archaeology.
Pollard	A tree which has had its top and/or upper branches cut some height above the ground to promote new and multiple growth, to avoid the reach of browsing animals or to create aesthetically pleasing forms, extend the life of the tree and/or maintain wildlife habitat. This is called pollarding.
Quiet Lane	Section 208 of the Transport Act 2000 makes provision for local traffic authorities to designate roads for which they are responsible as Quiet Lanes, enjoying voluntary speed restrictions and promotion for non-motorised traffic.
Regional Walking Routes	Longer named paths, promoted on the initiative of local authorities, signed and fully waymarked, and based on public rights of way, offering more than a day's travelling, perhaps following a theme or feature that offer tourism potential, such as the Wayfarer's Walk and the White Horse Trail.
Rights of Way Improvement Plan (ROWIP)	Sections 60 to 62 of the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 require local highway authorities to prepare and publish Rights of Way Improvement Plans for improving rights of way in their areas, taking into account the needs of the public including people with disabilities.
River Basin Management Plan	A River Basin Management Plan (RBMP), produced in compliance with the Water Framework Directive (q.v.), provides a framework for protecting and enhancing the benefits provided by the water environment. It also informs decisions on land-use planning. It consists of a number of different documents, maps and datasets. Overseen by the Environment Agency, there is one for each of the seven River Basin Districts in England.
Scheduled Monument (SAM)	A structure identified by Historic England for protection under the Ancient Monuments and Archaeological Areas Act 1979.
Section 106 agreement	A binding agreement between a local planning authority and a developer associated with a grant of planning permission and regarding matters linked to the proposed development.
Setting **(of the AONB)**	The area within which development and land management proposals, by virtue of their nature, size, scale, siting, materials and design can be considered to have an impact, positive or negative, on the landscape, scenic beauty and special qualities of the AONB.
Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI)	Area identified by Natural England under the National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act 1949 for protection by reason of the rarity of its nature conservation, wildlife features or geological interest.
Sites and Monument Record (SMR)	A database of sites of archaeological interest and potential within a particular area, usually a county.
Special Area of Conservation (SAC)	Site designated according to the Habitats Directive 93/43/EEC on the conservation of natural habitats and wild fauna and flora.
Special Qualities	The special qualities of the AONB are those aspects of the landscape for which it is considered important, and on which the priorities for its management are based. The interaction between natural and cultural factors can create a significance which is not recognised by looking at one aspect in isolation.

Supplementary Planning Document (SPD)	Documents prepared to support and amplify policies in the Local Development Plan. Such guidance must be consistent with national and local planning policy
Sustainable Drainage Systems (SUDS)	SUDS are intended to reduce flooding downstream of development by enabling surface water run-off to be controlled as near to the source as possible. National planning policy encourages use of SUDS and seeks to ensure that flood risk is considered on a catchment scale.
Tranquillity	Composite feature which seeks to characterise elements of wildness, solitude, peace and quiet, relating for example to low levels of built development, traffic, noise and artificial lighting.
Unimproved Grassland	Grassland consisting of native grasses and herbs which have not been significantly affected by treatment with mineral fertilisers, pesticides, intensive grazing or drainage.
Veteran Tree	Tree which by virtue of its great age, size and/or condition, is of exceptional value whether in cultural terms, for its landscape contribution or for the benefit of wildlife.
Water Framework Directive	EU Directive 2000/60/EC aims to achieve good qualitative and quantitative status of all surface and groundwater bodies.
Wetland	Transitional areas between wet and dry environments; wetlands range from permanently or intermittently wet land to shallow water and water margins.
Whole Farm (Conservation) Plan	A plan that considers an individual farm as a whole, producing a bespoke conservation plan considering farm type, location and any particular landscape or wildlife value, identifying adjustments to management practices that can significantly benefit the landscape and wildlife.
World Heritage Site (WHS)	A cultural or natural heritage site inscribed under the UNESCO Convention on the Protection of World Cultural and Natural Heritage for its Outstanding Universal Value.



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TO FOLLOW

This document is the statutory Management Plan for the nationally designated protected landscape of the North Wessex Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB), as required under the Countryside and Rights of Way (CRoW) Act 2000. It is a plan for all those that have a responsibility to look after this precious and treasured landscape.

Following informal consultation in 2017, an initial draft was approved by the Partnership in July 2018 and published for public consultation between August and November 2018. All comments received were reviewed and recommendations approved by the North Wessex Downs AONB Management Working Group and a Management Plan Review Group, created to oversee the process on behalf of the Council of Partners. The North Wessex Downs Council of Partners and relevant local authorities have approved this Plan for publication.

Assessment, associated documents and further map data can all be found on the North Wessex Downs website: **www.northwessexdowns.org.uk**. For Historic Environment mapping data visit: **www.historicnorthwessexdowns.org.uk**

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North Wessex Downs National Landscape













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Habitats Regulations Assessment Screening Report for the 2025/30 AONB Management Plan

The North Wessex Downs National Landscape

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2nd July 2025

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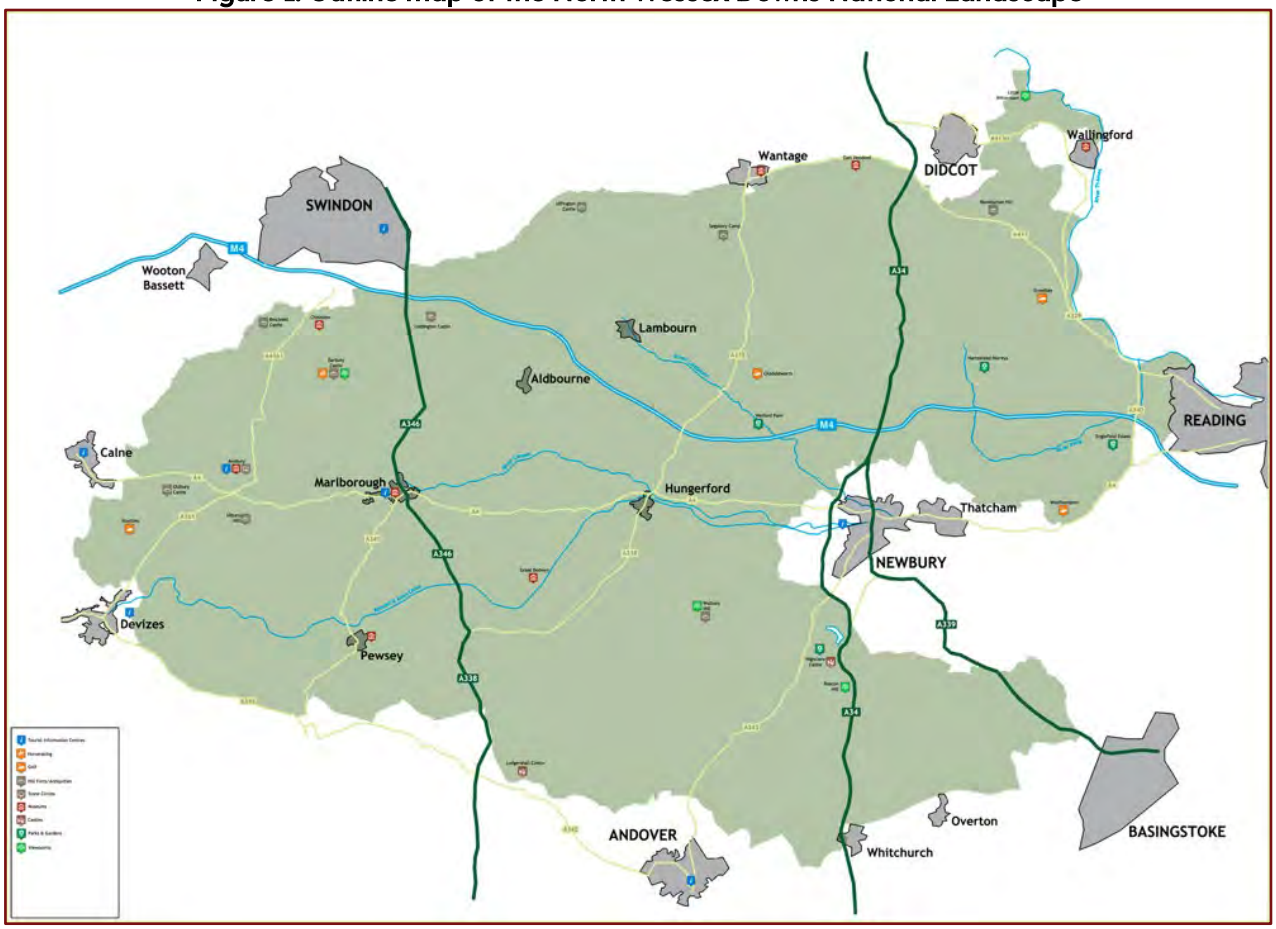
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Acknowledgements

Craggatak Consulting prepared this report with the close support of staff from the North Wessex Downs National Landscape Team.

Figure 1: Outline map of the North Wessex Downs National Landscape



1. Background

1.1. This Screening Report has been prepared as part of the Habitats Regulations Assessment (SEA) of the North Wessex Downs National Landscape (NL) Management Plan Review. A National Landscape is the everyday name for what is set out in legislation as an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB). This report is for scrutiny by Natural England, as the statutory consultee for Habitats Regulation Assessment.

The European Habitats Directive

1.2. The UK National Site network of European sites provides ecological infrastructure for the protection of sites that are of exceptional importance in respect of rare, endangered or vulnerable natural habitats and species. Habitat Regulations Assessment is a statutory requirement[1] to ensure that the protection of the integrity of these sites is a part of the planning process at a regional and local level. Under the Regulations, there is a requirement for the North Wessex Downs National Landscape Joint Advisory Committee to undertake a HRA of the draft Management Plan to decide whether its policies and actions are likely to have a significant adverse effect on any internationally recognised sites of nature conservation interest (the European Sites networks). These sites include Special Protection Areas (SPAs), designated under the Birds Directive[2]; and Special Areas of Conservation (SACs), designated under the Habitats Directive[3]. Natural England guidance specifies the inclusion of sites designated under the Ramsar wetlands convention in HRAs (there are no RAMSAR sites in this assessment)[4]. If there are significant adverse effects, then there is an examination of alternative policies or avoidance and mitigation measures. The intent is to prevent the plan from detrimentally influencing any European Sites network conservation objectives.

1.3. Article 2 of the Habitats Directive requires the maintenance or restoration of habitats and species of European Community interest, at a favourable conservation status. Articles 3 - 9 provide the legislative means to protect habitats and species of Community interest. Article 6 (3) of the Directive states:

1.4. “Any plan or project not directly connected with, or necessary to, the management of the [European] Sites, but likely to have a significant effect thereon, either individually or in combination with other plans or projects, shall be subject to appropriate assessment of its implications for the Sites in view of the site's conservation objectives”.

1.5. Under the regulations, HRA is needed in respect of both ‘plans’ and ‘projects’. Where a project is subject to assessment, there is generally sufficiently detailed project specific

[1] Council Directive 92/43/EEC of 21st May 1992 on the conservation of natural habitats and of wild fauna and flora. Transposed into law by the Conservation (Natural Habitats) Regulations 1994 (Habitats Regulation) as amended in 1997 and in 2000 (in England only) as amended in 2017 (SI 1012).
[2] Directive 2009/147/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 30 November 2009 on the conservation of wild birds (the codified version of Directive 79/409/EEC as amended).
[3] Directive 92/43/EEC on the Conservation of Natural Habitats and Wild Fauna and Flora
[4] Natural England 2009. Final Draft Guidance: The Habitats Regulations Assessment of Local Development Documents.

information against which to make a comprehensive assessment. A plan-based assessment is different; in most cases a plan is a strategic level document setting out broad intentions and often lacking the project specific details that may not be developed until after the plan has been published. Indeed, it is the plan itself which often steers the detail of the projects envisaged. As such the HRA of a 'plan' is recognised to require a different approach to that of a 'project'.

1.6. Case law requires the UK Government to secure the assessment of Britain's land use plans under the Habitats Directive (Case C-6/04[5]). In that judgment the Advocate General, and the Court itself, recognised that although they considered Britain's land use plans could potentially have significant effects on European sites, despite the later need for planning permission at 'project' level stage, the assessment of plans had to be tailored to the stage in plan making.

1.7. The Advocate General's opinion that informed the judgment of the court acknowledged the difficulties associated with an assessment of a plan[6]. In paragraph 49 of her opinion Advocate General Kokott said that adverse effects:

> '...must be assessed at every relevant stage of the procedure to the extent possible on the basis of the precision of the plan. This assessment is to be updated with increasing specificity in subsequent stages of the procedure.'

1.8. Consistently, in the UK High Court case of Feeney v Oxford City Council[7], the judge said:

> 'Each appropriate assessment must be commensurate to the relative precision of the plans at any particular stage and no more. There does have to be an appropriate assessment at the Core Strategy stage, but such an assessment cannot do more than the level of detail of the strategy at that stage permits.'

1.9. In undertaking plan based HRAs, it is important to get the balance right; too severe an approach may be excessive. Caution is needed, even adopting a precautionary approach, not to assign a 'likely significant effect' to policies and proposals that could not, realistically, have such an effect, because of their general nature. It is important to apply the precautionary principle in the 'likely significant effect test' in the Regulations. But policies in a plan that are no more than general policy statements, or which express the general political will of an authority, cannot be likely to have a significant effect on a site.

1.10. The North Wessex Downs Partnership Board is a competent authority under the Habitats Regulations. Following Regulation 63 of those regulations, they must assess their Management Plan as a matter of law before it is adopted[8]. This assessment is

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[5] Case C-6/04: Commission of the European Communities v United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland judgment of the Court 20 October 2005.
[6] Opinion of Advocate General Kokott, 9th June 2005, Case C-6/04. Commission of the European Communities v United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland
[7] Sean Feeney v Oxford City Council and the Secretary of State CLG para 92 of the judgment dated 24 October 2011 Case No CO/3797/2011, Neutral Citation [2011] EWHC 2699 Admin
[8] Refer regulation 105.

generally referred to as a 'Habitats Regulations Assessment' or 'HRA' and the regulations set out a clearly defined stepwise process that must be followed.

Habitats Regulations Assessment Stages

1.11. It is the accepted practice to adopt a stage-by-stage approach for an Article 6 Assessment. There are four stages:

- **Stage One: Screening** - To find the likely impacts on a European Sites network of a project or plan, either alone or in combination with other projects or plans, and consider whether these impacts are likely to be significant;
- **Stage Two: Appropriate Assessment** (where there are likely to be significant impacts) - To consider the impact on the integrity of the European Sites network of the project or plan, either alone or 'in combination' with other projects or plans, with respect to the structure, function and conservation objectives of the Sites. Additionally, where there are adverse impacts, to assess the potential mitigation of those impacts;
- **Stage Three: Assessment of alternative solutions** - To examine alternative ways of achieving the objectives of the project or plan that avoid adverse impacts on the integrity of the European Sites network;
- **Stage Four: Assessment where no alternative solutions exist** (where adverse impacts remain) - To assess compensatory measures where, in the light of an assessment of imperative reasons of overriding public interest, it is deemed that the project or plan should proceed.

Each stage decides whether a further stage in the process is needed. If, for example, the conclusions at the end of Stage One are that there will be no significant impacts on any European Sites network, there is no requirement to continue further.

North Wessex Downs National Landscape

1.12. Designation of the North Wessex Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty was in 1972. It extends over 1,730 square kilometres straddling the boundaries of four counties: Wiltshire, Berkshire, Hampshire and Oxfordshire. An area united by chalk, which has formed the wide-open downland, dramatic scarp slopes, majestic ancient woodland and sheltered river valleys of the landscape.

1.13. The North Wessex Downs encompasses the bright, bare uplands of the Marlborough, Berkshire and North Hampshire Downs and, on its northern edge, sweeps to a crest above the White Horse Vale. In the east, the chalk ridge meets the River Thames and the Chilterns along the wooded reaches of Goring Gap. It loops south round the Kennet Valley, with superb views north from the steep scarp edge, to fall gently away to the Test Valley. These richly farmed valley landscapes are in pleasing contrast to the chalk uplands. They include the Vale of Pewsey's meadows in the west and the handsome beech avenues and oak-fringed glades of Savernake Forest.

1.14. The area is rich in wildlife and one of the most significant habitats is the chalk grassland. This springy turf is a rich habitat for chalk-loving flowers and rare butterflies. Farmland is a home to lots of rare bird species including lapwing, skylark and the elusive stone curlew.

There are heathlands at Snelsmore Common and Bucklebury, veteran trees at Ashmansworth and Savernake, and sparkling chalk streams such as the River Kennet and the Lambourn.

1.15. The area also has archaeological significance. Settled since 3000 BC, the downs are dotted with barrows and other prehistoric features. The Wansdyke earthwork, Roman roads and ancient tracks such as the Ridgeway add to a striking sense of antiquity. In places, distinctive white horses have been cut into the chalk, the most famous being the White Horse of Uffington. The neolithic stone circle at Avebury and surrounding monuments are included in a World Heritage Site.

Management Plan review

1.16. Section 82 of the Countryside and Rights of Way (CRoW) Act 2000 establishes the primary purpose of AONB designation as the conservation and enhancement of natural beauty. Section 85 of the CRoW Act (as amended by section 245 of the Levelling-up and Regeneration Act 2023) places a duty on all public bodies (other than a devolved Welsh authority) to 'seek to further the purpose of conserving and enhancing the natural beauty of the area of outstanding natural beauty'. Under section 89, the relevant local authorities must prepare and publish a Management Plan for each AONB; and keep it under review. A plan under section 89 relating to an AONB in England must further the purpose of conserving and enhancing the natural beauty of that area.

1.17. There are nine relevant local authorities for the North Wessex Downs NL; Basingstoke & Deane Borough Council, Hampshire County Council, Oxfordshire County Council, South Oxfordshire District Council, Swindon Borough Council, Test Valley Borough Council, Vale of White Horse District Council, West Berkshire Council, and Wiltshire Council. These councils have set up a Partnership, known as the Council of Partners.

1.18. The Partnership Board acts as the governing body for the National Landscape Team and is chaired by an independent person (it is a joint advisory committee under Section 102 (4) of the Local Government Act 1972). It guides the implementation of the Management Plan and oversees the specialist Topic Groups that work on the Annual Delivery Plan. A Steering Group provides advice and support to the National Landscape Team, whose task it is to ensure targets in the Management Plan are met.

1.19. The Management Plan is a statutory document. It provides a policy framework that brings together partners to help them design, resource and implement the priorities set out specifically for the AONB designation. It guides and informs all other plans and activities that may affect the AONB so that they can contribute to the continued conservation and enhancement of the AONB designation. The draft Management Plan Document has 11 chapters as follows:

1) Context and Framework
    a) Principles, priorities and implementation
2) Theme 1: Landscape
3) Theme 2: Farming and Land Management
4) Theme 3: Biodiversity and Nature Recovery
5) Theme 4: Historic Environment

6) Theme 5: Natural Resources
7) Theme 6: Planning and Development
8) Theme 7: Communities
9) Theme 8: Access, Recreation and Tourism
10) Monitoring

1.20. For this assessment under the Habitats Regulations, chapters 1 and 10 provide primarily background and contextual information. The 8 themes set out in chapters 2-9 hold the more detailed policies that will exert an influence over the management of the National Landscape over the plan period. For the HRA, whilst the entire Plan will be screened, it is chapters 2-9 that have the greatest potential to exert an influence over European Sites and will be of most relevance.

2. HRA programme and methodology

Introduction

2.1. The approach for carrying out the HRA of the National Landscape Management Plan Review is based on good practice and the following guidance:

- European Commission (2001). Assessment of plans and projects significantly affecting Natura 2000 sites
- European Commission (2002). Methodological guidance on the provisions of Article 6(3) and (4) of the Habitats Directive 92/43/ECC
- Department for Communities and Local Government (2006). Planning for the Protection of European Sites: Appropriate Assessment. Guidance for Regional Spatial Strategies and Local Development Documents.
- European Commission (2007). Managing Natura 2000 sites: The provisions of Article 6 of the Habitats Directive 92/43/ECC
- The Conservation of Habitats and Species Regulations as amended

2.2. A summary of the approach and method applied to the Management Plan is set out in **Table 1** below:

Table 1: The four stages of assessment

	Stages / Tasks		Description	Habitats Directive
1	**Likely Significant Effects or 'Screening'**	i	Analyse the European Sites network(s) and the reasons for designation, and the underlying trends affecting it (them)	*Article 6(3)*
		ii	Assess whether the policies and associated actions either alone or in combination with other plans are able to have a significant impact on the site(s).	
Where a significant impact is likely:				
2	**Appropriate Assessment**	i	Analyse the policy, including key components and how the actions would be implemented in practice	

		ii	Analyse other plans and projects that could contribute to 'in combination' effects	
		iii	Analyse how the policies and actions in combination with other plans and projects will 'interact' with implementation	
		iv	Where applicable, propose and assess mitigation measures for addressing adverse effects	
		v	Prepare an Appropriate Assessment Report for consultation with NE and key stakeholders	
3	**Assessment of Alternative Solutions**	-	Reassess alternatives if effective mitigation proves impossible and develop / select a different alternative that does not harm site integrity.	
4	**Assessment where no alternative solutions remain and where adverse impacts remain**	i	At this stage actions which, even with mitigation, still have an adverse effect on the site(s) integrity should be dropped.	*Article 6(4)*
		ii	Assess whether an action can be passed justified by 'imperative reasons of overriding public interest'.	
			Permitted on the grounds of human health, public safety or primary beneficial consequences for the environment.	

Step one – Pre-Screening

2.3. Gather information on the location of the National Landscape and the scope and intent of its draft Management Plan. This includes the location, conservation objectives and qualifying feature(s) for each European Site complete with the key factors influencing that condition; and the objectives of other plans and schemes in the area that may work in combination with the Management Plan to affect a European Site.

Step two – Screening for a likely significant effect

2.4. Categorise each element of the plan as to its likely effects on each interest feature of each European Site identified as subject to assessment in the evidence base. This includes all the reasons for the designation / classification or listing of the site (in the case of SAC, including primary and non-primary reasons for designation). There are four categories of potential effects as follows:

Category A: elements of the plan that would have no negative effect[9] on a European Site at all;

[9] 'Negative' effects in the context of this and all the following lists are effects that would be likely to undermine the conservation objectives of a European site. (Tyldesley, D., 2012 'Final Draft Guidance for Plan Making Authorities in Wales: The Appraisal of Plans under the Habitats Regulations' by David Tyldesley and Associates for Countryside Council for Wales, September 2012. footnote 24)

Category B: elements of the plan that could have an effect but the likelihood is there would be no significant negative effect on a European Site either alone or in combination with other elements of the same plan, or other plans or projects;

Category C: elements of the plan that could or would be likely to have a significant effect alone and will require the plan to be subject to an appropriate assessment before the plan may be adopted;

Category D: elements of the plan that would be likely to have a significant effect in combination with other elements of the same plan, or other plans or projects and will require the plan to be subject to an appropriate assessment before the plan may be adopted;

After Tyldesley, D. CCW 2012

2.5. There are three tasks in Step Two:

Task 1 – Compile a schedule listing all the policies and actions of the Management Plan. Check each element for the likelihood of it leading to a significant effect on a European Site.

All elements placed in Category A are set aside, as they could have no ecological impact on any European Site.

Those elements identified as having a potential negative impact upon any European Site were re-checked 'in combination' with other elements of the Management Plan. Where other elements clearly mitigated any potential negative impacts, they are set aside.

Task 2 – Assess the remaining elements of the plan for each European Site (both alone and in combination) to identify any elements that could have an effect but would not be likely to have a significant (negative) effect on a European Site because the effects are trivial or '*de minimis*', even if combined with other effects (Category B). The identification of such elements follows the precautionary principle. If there is any doubt about an ecological impact, then the element stays in the assessment process.

All elements placed in Category B are set aside, as they could have no ecological impact on any European Site.

Task 3 - Any remaining elements are likely to have a significant effect alone (Category C) or in combination (Category D).

Move to Step Three

Step Three – Appropriate Assessment

Once identified as Category C or D, the recommendation is to remove the policy or action from the plan, or otherwise change the plan, to avoid the likelihood of significant effects (all modifications pass through the assessment steps).

Where modification is not possible, the plan must be the subject of a full appropriate assessment.

Consultation and re-appraisal

2.6. The draft Management Plan and Habitats Regulations Screening Report (together with the Strategic Environmental Assessment) are the subject of consultation with the statutory agencies and principal stakeholders. As well as the formal consultation with the statutory agencies, there is regular informal support from Natural England throughout the process.

2.7. Amendments to the Management Plan may occur in the light of the Screening Report and Strategic Environmental Assessment findings and / or the advice received from the statutory agencies. The plan making authority should remove potentially harmful policies and proposals and explicitly include measures to ensure that no development flowing from the plan will have an adverse effect on the integrity of a European Site. The plan making authority must consult and reach agreement with Natural England before concluding that a plan would have no adverse effect on the integrity of a European Site. If the plan making authority amends the Management Plan, then there is a reappraisal of the impacts upon the integrity of any European Sites under the Habitat Regulations using the methodology set out above.

3. European Sites potentially affected

List of relevant European Sites

3.1. The European Sites provide ecological infrastructure for the protection of sites that are of exceptional importance in respect of rare, endangered or vulnerable natural habitats and species within the Europe. These sites consist of Special Areas of Conservation (SAC) and Special Protection Areas (SPA). It is common practice to treat RAMSAR sites (Internationally Important Wetlands) as if they were European Sites. All sites potentially adversely affected should be considered to a degree, but it is important to avoid unnecessary or excessive data gathering about sites that would either not be affected at all, or there are only theoretical risks. This keeps the assessment proportional to the residual risk of significant effects. The first task is to find those sites where there is credible evidence of a real risk sites from the adoption of the Plan as currently drafted.

3.2. The earlier version of the Management Plan was subject to HRA. Aspects of this earlier assessment may apply to this HRA. Where appropriate, this assessment 'adopts' some of the underlying reasoning from the earlier HRA of the earlier Management Plan where:

- No material information has appeared which would make the reasoning 'out of date', and
- The analysis underpinning the reasoning is sufficiently rigorous and robust.

3.3. Through an analysis using MAGIC Map[10] and the earlier HRA, it was found that there are seven European Sites within the National Landscape and five close to the boundary that may be affected. Using this list, and considering the draft Management Plan policies, Natural England and the National Landscape Team advised that two of the external sites were unlikely to be affected. The relevant European Sites for this assessment are set out in **Table 2.**

Table 2: European Sites

European Sites in the National Landscape boundary
Hackpen Hill SA
Hartslock Wood SAC
Kennet and Lambourn Floodplain SAC
Kennet Valley Alderwoods SAC
Little Wittenham SAC
Pewsey Downs SAC
River Lambourn SAC
European Sites outside of the National Landscape boundary
Avon River and Valley SAC
Salisbury Plan SAC
Salisbury Plain SPA
Though not subject to HRA, other sites to note
There are 30 km² of protected areas for biodiversity (SSSI, LNRs, and Local Wildlife Sites) on North Wessex Downs. 55.6% of the total number of SSSI features are assessed to be in favourable condition. There are 169 SSSI features and 24% have actions on track to achieve favourable condition.
North Wessex Downs supports 12 priority habitats that, combined, cover 20,804 hectares, or 12% of the National Landscape.

The qualifying features, conservation objectives and threats and pressures of each European Site listed in Table 2 are set out in **Appendix 1.**

4. Potential adverse effects of the Management Plan

National Landscape Management Plan

4.1. The Management Plan sets out a framework that gives guidance and direction towards achieving the long-term Vision for the North Wessex Downs National Landscape. The Priorities and policies are set out under eight themes. The themes are:

1. Landscape
2. Farming & land management
3. Biodiversity & nature recover
4. Historic environment

[10] The Government's open-access mapping service at http://magic.gov.uk/

5. Natural resources
6. Planning & development
7. Communities
8. Access, recreation & tourism

4.2. The policy framework is set out in **Appendix 2.**

Identifying potential adverse effects of Management Plan Policies

4.3. To understand whether the Management Plan may affect the European Sites listed above it is necessary to find those factors that will adversely affect the sites. Through Natural England, data is available for the European Sites on the conservation objectives and descriptions of the designated features of interest complete with a statement on the current pressures and vulnerabilities that threaten their integrity[11]. These pressures are set out in **Appendix 1** and are summarised in **Table 3.**

Table 3: Pressures on the integrity of European Sites
Site within the National Landscape
Air pollution (impact of atmospheric nitrogen deposition)
Change in land management
Game management
Habitat fragmentation
Hydrological changes
Inappropriate cutting/mowing
Inappropriate grazing
Inappropriate water levels
Inland flood defence works
Invasive species
Public access/disturbance
Siltation
Water pollution
Sites outside of the National Landscape boundary
Air pollution (impact of atmospheric nitrogen deposition)
Change in land management
Changes in species distributions
Habitat fragmentation
Hydrological changes
Inappropriate weed control
Invasive species
Physical modification

[11] There are Site Improvement Plans (SIPs) for each European Site in England, developed as part of the Improvement Programme for England's European Site network. They are live documents capable of updating to reflect changes in evidence / knowledge and as actions get underway.

Public access/disturbance
Siltation
Water abstraction
Water Pollution

The factors listed in the European Site schedules frame the testing of policies within the AONB Management Plan when assessing their effect upon the sites.

Results of the preliminary screening appraisal

4.4. **Task 1** is to compile a schedule listing all the policies of the Management Plan and check each for the likelihood of it leading to a significant negative effect on the European Sites (**Appendix 3a**). The first task was to find those policies that have no negative effects.

4.5. The Management Plan's policies do not directly trigger development proposals, and neither do they provide a decision-making framework for development. However, the assessment applies the precautionary principle. An element is screened when it has the potential for one or more of the impacts, even if it falls under an element that does not have that impact. Where no potential ecological impacts have been found, it has been assumed that the policy or action will not have an impact on the European Sites.

4.6. The preliminary screening finds that **17 policies** North Wessex Downs National Landscape Management Plan **may influence** the European Sites if applied in isolation. This was through land management changes, hydrological changes or through disturbance by the public. However, Policy ART 06 seeks to recognise and protect those areas that are too sensitive to intrusion or disturbance.

4.7. In addition, policy BNR15 ensures that proposals that have a likely significant effect (either alone or in combination with other plans and projects) upon a European Sites are resisted unless it can be found following an appropriate assessment that they will have no significant adverse effect on the integrity of the site concerned. The plan-wide nature of this policy is such that is not needed to address any specific adverse effect that was predicted to arise. Instead, it provides a precautionary approach to ensure that the implementation of the policies within the plan will not, inadvertently, result in any unforeseen harmful effects to European Sites. Consequently, there are unlikely to be any Significant Effects on any European Sites.

Results of the supplementary screening appraisal

4.8. **Task 2** is to consider the changes made to the policies of the Management Plan following consultation and check the amended and new policies for the likelihood of it leading to a significant negative effect on the European Sites (**Appendix 3b**).

4.9. Thirty-two policies have been amended. There are eleven new policies, and one (LA 07) has been dropped. The supplementary screening finds that none of the new policies will have a significant negative effect of any European Sites but that four of the amended policies **may still influence** the European Sites if applied in isolation:

- DE 12 supports farm diversification schemes without ensuring the integrity of a European Site.

- CO 04 provides support to renewable energy schemes without ensuring the integrity of a European Site.
- CO 09 advocates infrastructure development without ensuring the integrity of a European Site.
- ART 01 encourages public access that may increase disturbance by the public.

4.10. However, policy **BNR15** ensures that proposals that have a likely significant effect (either alone or in combination with other plans and projects) upon a European Site are resisted unless it can be found, following an appropriate assessment, that they will have no significant adverse effect on the integrity of the site concerned. The plan-wide nature of this policy is such that is not required to address any specific adverse effect that was predicted to arise. Instead, it provides a precautionary approach to ensure that the implementation of the policies within the plan will not, inadvertently, result in any unforeseen harmful effects to European Sites. In addition, policy ART 01 is limited by policy ART 06, which seeks to recognise and protect those areas that are too sensitive to intrusion or disturbance.

4.11. Consequently, there are unlikely to be any Significant Effects on any European Site arising from the application of these policies.

Outcome of consultation with Natural England

4.12. Natural England's advice is that the Management Plan, as submitted, is not directly connected with or necessary to the conservation management of these European Sites but is not likely to have a significant effect (excluding any mitigating measures designed to avoid harmful effects on the site) on the features for which the above-mentioned sites have been designated. There is no need to undertake an appropriate assessment under regulation 63 of the Habitats Regulations on this occasion (Précis in **Appendix 4**).

5. Other relevant plans

5.1. The Habitats Regulations state that when considering whether a specific plan or project is likely to have a significant effect on the European Sites network, this should consider possible 'in-combination' effects with other plans or projects. This assessment has found the potential for adverse effects from the management plan but agrees that there are measures within the plan that will avoid such effects.

5.2. As to 'in-combination' effects with other plans or projects, the management plan is a high-level strategy with broad general policy statements and aspirations. It does not set out any detailed project actions. The potential for in combination effects to arise with other plans and projects cannot be subject to any meaningful assessment at this stage, as there is no information as to where within the plan area the proposals provided for under the general plan wide policies will come forwards. The European Sites network policy requires an assessment of the potential for in combination effects when any proposals come forward under the plan that might have a likely significant effect on a European Site (see paragraphs 1.7-1.9). Based on the precision of the plan at this stage, in

the absence of any information as to where within the National Landscape potentially damaging proposals might come forward, it is not possible to try to undertake an in-combination assessment.

6. Conclusions

6.1. Results of Screening:

- **That no policy areas would have a Likely Significant Effect on any European Sites.**
- **There is no requirement to undertake an Appropriate Assessment under the Habitat Regulations.**

Appendices

Appendix 1: The relevant European Sites

Sites within the National Landscape		
Site name and qualifying features	**Conservation objectives**	**Current threats and pressures shown in the SIP[12]**
Hackpen Hill SAC Semi-natural dry grasslands and scrubland facies: on calcareous substrates (*Festuco-Brometalia*); Dry grasslands and scrublands on chalk or limestone *Gentianella anglica*, Early gentian	Ensure that the integrity of the site is maintained or restored as appropriate, and ensure that the site contributes to achieving the Favourable Conservation Status of its Qualifying Features, by maintaining or restoring; • The extent and distribution of qualifying natural habitats and habitats of qualifying species • The structure and function (including typical species) of qualifying natural habitats • The structure and function of the habitats of qualifying species • The supporting processes on which qualifying natural habitats and the habitats of qualifying species rely • The populations of qualifying species, and, • The distribution of qualifying species within the site.	None identified
Hartslock Wood SAC Semi-natural dry grasslands and scrubland facies: on calcareous substrates (*FestucoBrometalia*) (important orchid sites); Dry grasslands and scrublands on chalk or limestone (important orchid sites)* *Taxus baccata* woods of the British Isles; Yew-dominated woodland* (* shows a priority feature)	Ensure that the integrity of the site is maintained or restored as appropriate, and ensure that the site contributes to achieving the Favourable Conservation Status of its Qualifying Features, by maintaining or restoring; • The extent and distribution of the qualifying natural habitats • The structure and function (including typical species) of the qualifying natural habitats, and,	Air pollution (risk of atmospheric nitrogen deposition)

[12] As set out in the Natural England Site Improvement Plan; in priority order

	• The supporting processes on which the qualifying natural habitats rely	
Kennet and Lambourn Floodplain SAC *Vertigo moulinsiana*; Desmoulin`s whorl snail **River Lambourn SAC** Water courses of plain to montane levels with the *Ranunculion fluitantis* and *Callitricho-Batrachion* vegetation; Rivers with floating vegetation often dominated by water-crowfoot *Lampetra planeri*; Brook lamprey *Cottus gobio*; Bullhead	Ensure that the integrity of the site is maintained or restored as appropriate, and ensure that the site contributes to achieving the Favourable Conservation Status of its Qualifying Features, by maintaining or restoring; • The extent and distribution of habitats of qualifying species • The structure and function of the habitats of qualifying species • The supporting processes on which the habitats of qualifying species rely • The populations of qualifying species, and, • The distribution of qualifying species within the site.	Siltation Water pollution Invasive species Hydrological changes Inland flood defence works Inappropriate cutting/mowing Change in land management Inappropriate water levels Water pollution
Kennet Valley Alderwoods SAC Alluvial forests with *Alnus glutinosa* and *Fraxinus excelsior* (*Alno-Padion, Alnion incanae, Salicion albae*); Alder woodland on floodplains* (* shows a priority feature)	Ensure that the integrity of the site is maintained or restored as appropriate, and ensure that the site contributes to achieving the Favourable Conservation Status of its Qualifying Features, by maintaining or restoring; • The extent and distribution of the qualifying natural habitats • The structure and function (including typical species) of the qualifying natural habitats, and, • The supporting processes on which the qualifying natural habitats rely	Inappropriate water levels Game management
Little Wittenham SAC *Triturus cristatus*; Great crested newt	Ensure that the integrity of the site is maintained or restored as appropriate, and ensure that the site contributes to achieving the Favourable Conservation Status of its Qualifying Features, by maintaining or restoring; • The extent and distribution of habitats of qualifying species • The structure and function of the habitats of qualifying species	Invasive species Public access/disturbance

	• The supporting processes on which the habitats of qualifying species rely • The populations of qualifying species, and, • The distribution of qualifying species within the site.	
Pewsey Downs SAC Semi-natural dry grasslands and scrubland facies: on calcareous substrates *(FestucoBrometalia)* (important orchid sites); Dry grasslands and scrublands on chalk or limestone (important orchid sites) * *Gentianella anglica;* Early gentian (* shows a priority feature)	Ensure that the integrity of the site is maintained or restored as appropriate, and ensure that the site contributes to achieving the Favourable Conservation Status of its Qualifying Features, by maintaining or restoring; • The extent and distribution of habitats of qualifying species • The structure and function of the habitats of qualifying species • The supporting processes on which the habitats of qualifying species rely • The populations of qualifying species, and, • The distribution of qualifying species within the site.	Habitat fragmentation Inappropriate grazing Air pollution (impact of atmospheric nitrogen deposition)
Sites outside the National Landscape		
Avon River and Valley SAC *Vertigo moulinsiana*; Desmoulin`s whorl snail *Petromyzon marinus*; Sea lamprey *Lampetra planeri*; Brook lamprey *Salmo salar*; Atlantic salmon *Cottus gobio*; Bullhead	Ensure that the integrity of the site is maintained or restored as appropriate, and ensure that the site contributes to achieving the Favourable Conservation Status of its Qualifying Features, by maintaining or restoring; • The extent and distribution of habitats of qualifying species • The structure and function of the habitats of qualifying species • The supporting processes on which the habitats of qualifying species rely • The populations of qualifying species, and, • The distribution of qualifying species within the site.	Physical modification Siltation Water Pollution Water abstraction Changes in species distributions Invasive species Public access/disturbance Hydrological changes Inappropriate weed control Change in land management Habitat fragmentation
Salisbury Plan SAC *Juniperus communis* formations on heaths or calcareous grasslands;	Ensure that the integrity of the site is maintained or restored as appropriate, and ensure that the site contributes to achieving the	Changes in species distributions

Juniper on heaths or calcareous grasslands Semi-natural dry grasslands and scrubland facies: on calcareous substrates (*Festuco-Brometalia)* (important orchid sites); Dry grasslands and scrublands on chalk or limestone (important orchid sites)* *Euphydryas (Eurodryas, Hypodryas) aurinia*; Marsh fritillary butterfly (* shows a priority feature)	Favourable Conservation Status of its Qualifying Features, by maintaining or restoring; • The extent and distribution of habitats of qualifying species • The structure and function of the habitats of qualifying species • The supporting processes on which the habitats of qualifying species rely • The populations of qualifying species, and, • The distribution of qualifying species within the site.	Air pollution (impact of atmospheric nitrogen deposition)
Salisbury Plain SPA Circus cyaneus; Hen harrier (Non-breeding) Falco subbuteo; Eurasian hobby (Breeding) Coturnix coturnix; Common quail (Breeding) Burhinus oedicnemus; Stone-curlew (Breeding)	Ensure that the integrity of the site is maintained or restored as appropriate, and ensure that the site contributes to achieving the aims of the Wild Birds Directive, by maintaining or restoring; • The extent and distribution of the habitats of the qualifying features • The structure and function of the habitats of the qualifying features • The supporting processes on which the habitats of the qualifying features rely • The population of each of the qualifying features, and, • The distribution of the qualifying features within the site.	None

Appendix 2: North Wessex Downs AONB Management Plan adopted policy framework

Note: Text updated after consultation is shown in red; new policy shown in blue.

Vision

The vision for the North Wessex Downs National landscape is a place of vast dramatic, undeveloped and distinct chalk downlands with nationally significant areas of semi-natural chalk grassland, contrasting with well-wooded plateaux, arable farmland, heathland, chalk streams and intimate and secluded valleys, all rich in wildlife and cultural heritage; a high quality landscape of national and international significance which persists despite increasingly urbanised surroundings; a place where people live, work and relax; where visitors are welcomed and contribute to a vibrant rural economy; and access to which supports the health and wellbeing of local residents and visitors alike.

The long-term goal is that the North Wessex Downs National Landscape will be a place:

1. where land use, management and development are driven by an overarching principle of long-term stewardship of the protected landscape; where people have the imagination, skills and energy and resources to accommodate and adapt to change in ways that respect the unique qualities of the North Wessex Downs and deliver wider environmental, economic and social benefits
2. where the highest environmental quality is seen as a key economic driver; where all economic activity is in harmony with maintenance of the landscape and its valued qualities; where new buildings and other forms of development display high design quality worthy of one of England's designated finest landscapes
3. with thriving land-based and other rural enterprises that prioritise conserving and enhancing the valued qualities of the North Wessex Downs. This will ensure a countryside rich in wildlife, heritage, and recreational opportunities, while producing high-quality products through sustainable farming practices that benefit both the local economy and the surrounding countryside
4. with high quality habitats reflecting the distinctive character of the North Wessex Downs and stable and recovering populations of key species; landscapes that are protected, expanded, linked by nature recovery networks, under beneficial management and increasingly resilient to the pressures of climate change
5. with a rich and conserved cultural landscape where the pervasive historic landscape character is understood, appreciated and informs future change; where iconic monuments, both designated and undesignated heritage areas, archaeological sites, buried archaeology and historic landscapes and historic settlements and their settings remain as indelible and visible footprints in an evolving scene, managed to the very highest standards
6. where the integrated management of land conserves and improves high quality healthy soils and water resources whilst retaining the distinctive seasonal winterbourne flows and the nationally and internationally significant chalk streams of the National Landscape
7. where beautiful views delight and inspire all those who experience the landscape, and its visual, scenic and aesthetic qualities are recognised, valued and maintained
8. where a sense of remoteness and tranquillity predominates and where vast night skies can thrill the eye, unaffected by light pollution; where these valued qualities are recognised in development decisions within the setting of the National Landscape, so that the natural beauty of the North Wessex Downs is protected
9. where the landscape's potential to mitigate and adapt to the effects of climate change is realised in ways that conserve and enhance its natural beauty: reducing emissions, storing more carbon and building resilience

10. where development responds to genuine local need and where new buildings show continuity with the past, respecting and complimenting the beauty of the landscape and the character of local vernacular building materials and styles, while embodying high quality contemporary design and sustainable construction 11. where an integrated approach to transport and active travel meets local needs and minimises negative effects on the environment; where the dominance of roads and highway clutter are reduced 12. with vibrant rural communities, where villages and market towns meet the needs of local communities and visitors; where there is great local pride in the landscape and positive local contribution to the stewardship of its valued qualities 13. that is a nationally recognised centre for responsible tourism and enjoyment of the countryside, developed and promoted in ways that are in harmony with the high environmental quality and local community, helping to underpin the broader rural economy 14. that is recognised as a vital community resource, welcoming to local residents and visitors of all backgrounds and abilities, with benefits for physical and mental wellbeing arising from access to nature and the countryside, to a tranquil environment, and to the opportunities it presents for social interaction and volunteering 15. where there is wide public recognition of the protected status and valued qualities of the North Wessex Downs among communities in and around the National Landscape; where all responsible bodies understand and respect the protected status of the area and their active duties towards the National Landscape in their plans and proposals.		
Landscape	1. Conserve and enhance the natural beauty, tranquillity and distinctive landscape character of the North Wessex Downs and its setting.	LA 01 Encourage all partners and other stakeholders to seek to further National Landscape AONB purposes across all relevant policies, programmes, activities and decisions.
		LA 02 Recognise and respond to the main factors that threaten the valued qualities of the National Landscape: e.g. built development; light pollution; water abstraction; agricultural practices including diffuse pollution of watercourses; climate risk; lack of woodland management; damage to historic sites; and poorly managed access, seeking to avoid, minimise, mitigate and reverse them whenever possible.
		LA 03 Use the North Wessex Downs Integrated Landscape Character Assessment to inform policy and decision making across the AONB and its setting.
		LA 04 Support and promote a landscape-led approach across all sectors that conserves and enhances the character and qualities of the North Wessex Downs landscape.
		LA 05 Support and encourage efforts to conserve and interpret the rich heritage of the North Wessex Downs.

		LA 06 All development in or affecting the setting of the National Landscape should conserve and enhance the character, valued qualities and heritage of the North Wessex Downs landscape.
Farming & land management	1. Focus, facilitate and support landscape-scale conservation and land management initiatives that support the purposes of National Landscape designation. 2. Promote National Landscape priorities for targeting and investment in rural land management and development to take advantage of changes arising from the agricultural transition following Brexit. 3. Support the restoration of ancient woodland and creation and restoration of wood pasture, improved management of unmanaged and under-managed woodland across the North Wessex Downs, promoting multiple benefits, including landscape character, wildlife, local economy and skills, recreation and climate change mitigation. 4. Support traditional and emerging land-based enterprises and their markets that respect and promote the special qualities of the North Wessex Downs and its setting. 5. Promote and support sustainable best practice initiatives for farming, woodland management and all country sports. 6. Encourage and support farms/estates to take up ELMS in ways that support National Landscape objectives.	FLM 01 Encourage national, regional and local land management policies to be consistent with the purpose of National Landscape designation.
		FLM 02 Encourage and support farmer-led groups and other joint working and expansion/replication of existing landscape-scale nature recovery and land management projects, both within and beyond the National Landscape, to assist in the delivery of National Landscape and Big Chalk objectives.
		FLM 03 Support sustainable farm diversification and multi-purpose woodland management where it achieves National Landscape objectives and accords with planning policy.
		FLM 04 Support efforts to identify future land use options that are best able to assist farm viability and reflect the environmental objectives of the National Landscape.
		FLM 05 Support local markets for local produce and the development of local supply networks.
		FLM 06 Encourage management of sites in public and tenanted ownership within the North Wessex Downs to be examples of best practice in the delivery of National Landscape objectives.
		FLM 07 Support and promote efforts across the North Wessex Downs to reduce invasive, non-native species or unsustainable populations of species where these threaten the biodiversity and sustainable management of woodland, watercourses and other habitats.
		FLM 08 Encourage the active and environmentally sensitive use of woodland resources for viable products, helping to enhance biodiversity.
		FLM 09 Support and help guide publicly funded investment in rural development.
		FLM 10 Support investment in new agricultural infrastructure and

		redevelopment of farm buildings where it increases the sustainability of local businesses and aligns with National Landscape purposes.
		FLM 11 Encourage awareness of the special qualities of the National Landscape among local businesses to help them understand and embrace their responsibilities alongside running a profitable enterprise.
		FLM 12 Support improved availability, quality, co-ordination and consistency in provision of land management advice across the National Landscape.
		FLM 13 Support efforts to identify and develop the skills required to care for the landscape and its valued qualities, with opportunities for all to acquire such skills.
		FLM 14 Encourage and support the local provision of practical training in traditional land management and the skills necessary to deliver enhanced rural land management and business diversification with clear landscape benefits.
		FLM 15 Encourage good agricultural land management practices and adherence to good practice to contribute to resource protection, such as healthy soil management, preventing flooding from surface water run-off and safeguarding watercourses from nutrient run-off and silt pollution.
		FLM 16 Support the provision of advice on integrated management of grassland to enhance biodiversity as part of equine land management practices.
		FLM 17 Support initiatives such as better routes to market, to achieve sustainable deer populations across the National Landscape through collaborative measures and other stakeholders.
		FLM 18 Encourage and support landowners to develop whole estate plans where suitable to enable long-term, integrated landscape management.
		FLM 19 Encourage and support farmers and land managers to adopt practices that sequester carbon, minimise soil carbon loss and support climate mitigation and

		adaptation through nature-based solutions aligned with National Landscape purposes.
Biodiversity & nature recovery	1. Collaborative action to implement the NWDNL Nature Recovery Plan, aligned with Local Nature Recovery Strategies. 2. Action to meet DEFRA targets and contribute towards 30x30, as set out in this Plan. 3. Develop an expanded and connected nature recovery network in the North Wessex Downs which is resilient to the impacts of climate change and allows the free movement of habitats and species throughout the landscape and beyond. 4. Foster a more equitable partnership between people and their natural environment, ensuring land use decisions respect nature, farming practices share space with nature and recreation is effectively managed to protect vulnerable habitats and species. 5. Enable landscape-scale initiatives that respond to the central position of the North Wessex Downs National Landscape within the geography of the Big Chalk.	BNR01 Support the delivery of NWDNL Nature Recovery Plan priorities and targets in the Protected Landscapes Targets and Outcomes Framework. To ensure effective management of all priority habitats and species in the National Landscape.
		BNR02 Resist proposals which will lead to the direct or indirect degradation or loss of nationally or locally designated wildlife sites, priority habitats or populations of protected and priority species.
		BNR 03 Encourage a co-ordinated and consistent approach by Local Nature Recovery Strategies to nature recovery networks, aligned with North Wessex Downs priorities, across the National Landscape and its setting.
		BNR04 Support farmers and land managers in restoring, creating and maintaining a resilient network habitats with thriving populations of key species, guided by the Nature Recovery Plan and LNRS priorities.
		BNR05 Support efforts to understand and respond to the localised impacts of climate change on vulnerable habitats and species within and surrounding the North Wessex Downs, to improve resilience and adaptation.
		BNR 06 Encourage and support landscape-scale action for habitat management, restoration and creation.
		BNR 07 Support and encourage actions to enable grazing on all the main grassland areas of the National Landscape.
		BNR 08 Support the development of initiatives to safeguard and develop habitat corridors and ecological networks throughout the National Landscape, and in particular to enhance the ecological value of road verges and similar linear features such as public rights of way and National Trails.
		BNR09 Support Catchment Partnerships and other key stakeholders including water companies to promote and deliver projects to conserve, restore and enhance chalk

		streams, rivers and other waterbodies to achieve good ecological status
		BNR10 Encourage and support restoration of Plantations on Ancient Woodland Sites and protection and management of woodland generally for nature recovery, as well as its recreational, carbon storage and economic value.
		BNR11 Encourage the greater connection between people and the natural environment, promoting responsible access to nature in appropriate locations, and effectively communicate its value to people.
		BNR12 Support the County Biological Record Centres and Historic Environment Records Centres serving the North Wessex Downs as the main repositories for information on the biodiversity and cultural heritage of the National Landscape and support initiatives to engage the public in biological recording/monitoring.
		BNR13 Support research, including to understand the causes of declines in key species such as ground-nesting birds and support appropriate action to rebuild populations, and use of tools such as citizen science to monitor the impact of habitat restoration and improved management practices in the National Landscape.
		BNR14 Secure maximum biodiversity gain and protection of ecosystem goods and services through innovative use of emerging environmental mechanisms including Environmental Land Management schemes, natural capital, carbon markets, biodiversity net. gain etc.
		BNR15 Resist proposals which have a likely significant effect (either alone or in combination with other plans and projects) upon a European designated site unless it can be ascertained following an appropriate assessment that they will have no significant adverse effect on the integrity of the site concerned.
		BNR16 Realise the potential for actions that align nature recovery with the rich cultural heritage of the North Wessex Downs, e.g. hedge restoration and management, arable reversion to

		grassland on historic monuments, sensitive woodland management etc..
Historic environment	1. Increase the knowledge and enjoyment of the North Wessex Downs heritage and culture by local residents, visitors and the wider public, and bring a love of heritage to wider parts of society. 2. Seek new discoveries of unknown heritage assets and improve understanding of those already identified, to reveal the significance of the historic environment and cultural heritage of the National Landscape. 3. Develop a better understanding of the current condition of heritage assets of the National Landscape, beyond the Heritage Risk Register 4. Promote wider use and understanding of Historic Landscape Characterisation to inform and guide strategic planning, development decisions, land management practices and other forces for change. 5. Secure greater protection for archaeological and historic features, sites, and their landscape settings in the face of inappropriate development or management practices, or forms of access that can cause damage.	HE 01 Encourage and facilitate work to improve the condition of designated heritage assets that are on Historic England's 'Heritage at Risk' register and explore the designation or greater protection of other heritage assets through work with local Historic Environment Records, Historic England and Natural England.
		HE 02 Encourage and support collaborative activity on poorly understood aspects of the local historic environment, involving professional and voluntary sectors, such as research and advice from historic environment experts and use of citizen science.
		HE 03 Work closely with the Stonehenge and Avebury World Heritage Site Partnership and other groups to develop shared objectives and deliver joint actions in support of the World Heritage Site Management Plan.
		HE 05 Encourage and support the production and publication of 'local lists' of heritage assets.
		HE 06 Encourage owners of designated heritage assets to create Conservation/ Heritage Management Plans and manage/restore assets appropriately.
		HE 07 Promote opportunities to include the historic environment in community-generated Village Design Statements, Parish and Neighbourhood Plans etc., linked where appropriate to Conservation Area Appraisals.
		HE 08 Promote and encourage the use of Historic Landscape and Historic Settlement Characterisation to inform land management, policy making and planning decisions.
		HE 09 Support more, better, and joined-up explanation, interpretation and promotion of the historic environment for residents and visitors.
		HE 10 Encourage the sensitive restoration of historic buildings for new uses, where appropriate and in alignment with National

		Landscape purposes, to ensure their long-term survival.
		HE11 Encourage improvements in agricultural practice to remove or mitigate the threat to archaeological sites from arable cultivation, e.g. through ELMS.
		HE12 Encourage the consistent use of Conservation Area appraisals and management plans as important considerations to inform planning decisions.
Natural Resources	1. Action to ensure that chalk rivers and streams in the National Landscape achieve and are maintained at good ecological status including, for example, appropriate riparian planting to mitigate elevated water temperatures predicted as a consequence of climate change. 2. Collaborative landscape-scale action to mitigate and adapt to the effects of climate change, for example through nature-based solutions (NbS). 3. Develop a Climate Change Adaptation Plan for the North Wessex Downs National Landscape 4. Ensure that all landscape interventions recognise and address the implications of climate change for the valued qualities of the North Wessex Downs and its setting. 5. Secure full recognition by decision makers of the importance of the North Wessex Downs landscape for the value of its natural capital and the environmental goods and services it provides to the economy and society as a whole, including heritage, water quality, healthy soils, food production, wildlife, flood management, carbon storage, recreation, health and well-being.	NR 01 Support co-ordinated action, guidance and measures on soil health issues.
		NR 02 Promote and encourage initiatives for the sustainable management of soil by farmers and other land managers to minimise soil degradation through erosion, compaction, pollution and impoverishment, particularly in the case of the thin chalk downland soils.
		NR 03 Support landscape awareness and understanding among catchment partnerships in and around the North Wessex Downs, and encourage collaborative research, projects and management to protect and improve watercourses and catchments.
		NR 04 Encourage all partners to take water demand and its consequences for landscape, ecology and fisheries fully into account in decisions regarding development, changes to land use or cropping patterns within the North Wessex Downs.
		NR 05 Support the introduction of demand management measures for water use in those settlements that draw on the aquifers of the North Wessex Downs, and measures to monitor and reduce water wastage.
		NR 06 Encourage action to identify and address the sources of diffuse and point pollution within the North Wessex Downs.
		NR 07 Encourage co-ordinated remedial action through the Catchment Sensitive Farming programme and other partnership schemes to restore and enhance degraded river sections within the North Wessex Downs.

		NR 08 Support measures to reduce abstraction and help businesses adopt new mitigation measures.
		NR 09 Promote well designed Sustainable Drainage Systems (SuDS), taking into account unique characteristics of the chalk geology and groundwater levels, which benefit water quality, water quantity, biodiversity and amenity in urban areas. Promote natural flood management initiatives, particularly upstream in the catchment, to maximise multiple benefits to benefit people and wildlife.
		NR 10 Promote restoration and continued maintenance of rivers and river corridors to further biodiversity and amenity objectives – recreating natural river channels and re-linking rivers with their floodplains where this would not damage artificial channels of historic and cultural importance.
		NR 11 Develop a better understanding of the likely implications of climate change on the environment and economy of the North Wessex Downs.
		NR 12 Support reductions in greenhouse gas emissions, such as carbon dioxide, nitrous oxide and methane, from all possible sources.
		NR 13 Support climate mitigation measures including nature-based solutions, energy efficiency improvements, better on-farm management of fertiliser and animal waste, biomass heating from local fuel stocks and small-scale renewable energy generation consistent with conserving and enhancing the natural beauty of the landscape.
		NR 14 Engage with opportunities to improve the availability and accessibility of sustainable modes of transport (e.g. bus and rail services, cycling) recognising in particular the health benefits of active modes (walking, cycling, riding etc) and promote use their use.
		NR 15 Encourage greater use of timber from sustainable woodland, and in particular short local supply chains to support forestry, woodland and wood products businesses in the National Landscape.

		NR 16 Promote carbon sequestration as an objective and benefit of habitat creation and management of woodland and permanent grassland.
		NR 17 Encourage and support simple greenhouse gas and carbon accounting to monitor the effectiveness of changes.
		NR18 Encourage and support knowledge exchange among landowners and farmers to adapt to the impacts of climate change, e.g. including sustainable farming practices, soil health, circular water economy principles (reduced usage, grey water re-use, increased resilience to water shortages), and micro-generation of renewable energy compatible with National Landscape purposes.
Planning & development	1. Ensure that the formulation and implementation of planning policies across the North Wessex Downs take full account of relevant authorities' statutory duty to seek to further the purposes of the National Landscape designation, conserving and enhancing the character and the valued qualities of the North Wessex Downs and its setting. 2. Ensure that all development proposals including allocations at Local Plan stage are landscape-led and development is based on identified need to sustain the vitality of local communities in ways that conserve and enhance the natural beauty of the North Wessex Downs.	DE 01 Development and use changes within the North Wessex Downs and its setting must seek to further the purpose of the National Landscape (to conserve and enhance the Natural beauty of the protected landscape) and should demonstrate how they have had regard to the Management Plan and guidance produced by the North Wessex Downs National Landscape Partnership.
		DE 02 Under the NPPF determining major development is a judgement for the local authority as decision taker; in determining this, plan makers and decision takers should consider the context of the locality and whether the development by reason of its scale, massing, character or nature, has the potential to have a significant adverse impact on the natural beauty and valued qualities of the North Wessex Downs. The potential for significant adverse impacts must include the consideration of both the impact of cumulative development and the individual characteristics of a proposed development or use of land.
		DE 03 A landscape-led approach should be applied at the earliest stages of development of Local Plan policies and all development proposals within the National Landscape and its setting. Natural beauty must be a golden thread throughout all stages of the process and aim to encompass a sense of place. The North Wessex Downs Landscape Character Assessment along with landscape

		sensitivity assessments and landscape visual impact assessments are essential tools in achieving a landscape-led approach.
		DE 04 Development within the National Landscape and its setting should be of high quality which responds to local context, including; historic settlement pattern, height, massing, roof form, density, materials (inc. colour) and local building vernacular. All development should actively seek to conserve and enhance local distinctiveness, sense of place, tranquillity, biodiversity, the historic environment and dark skies.
		DE 05 Historic settlement patterns and valued green spaces within and surrounding settlements form part of the distinctive character and heritage of the North Wessex Downs. Neighbourhood Plans, Development Plan allocations and development proposals should identify these characteristics and ensure their value is recognised and retained.
		DE 06 The surroundings of the North Wessex Downs and the protected landscape itself add value to each other as the landscape and landforms link visually and functionally, joining the surroundings to the National Landscape. Proposals for development or change of use in the setting should, therefore, reflect and respond to the inter-connectivity with the National Landscape, its landscape character, and valued qualities.
		DE 07 Development (apart from exempted development) must encourage, support and promote biodiversity net. gain and contribute to nature recovery by protecting, restoring and providing for new and improved habitats and connected nature recovery networks.
		DE 08 To ensure that dark skies and tranquillity are protected no new uses or developments that individually or cumulatively result in a material increase in lighting, noise, pollution and or activity that fails to conserve and enhance the valued qualities of the National Landscape should be permitted.
		DE 09 To avoid and reduce the potential for light pollution, details of external

		lighting should be submitted alongside a lighting assessment as part of any development or new use within the National Landscape and its setting, to ensure it meets the standards as set out in the NWDNL Good Lighting Guide.
		DE 10 Encourage, support and promote good practice in the design and management of roads in the National Landscape and its setting that conserves and enhances the character of the landscape and settlements. Opportunities should be taken to reduce erosion and maintain or restore the character of rural roads through adoption of a low-key rural design approach to roads across the North Wessex Downs.
		DE 11 Maintain the rural character and valued qualities of the National Landscape by preventing over development of sites and the erosion of local character. The following should be considered: • The overall size, scale and massing of the replacement dwelling and/or extension compared to the original (new dwellings should not be materially larger in terms of volume). • Site context and local context including natural and built character and features, visual prominence and the local vernacular. • Relationship within the local street scene/ rural countryside and potential to unbalance this.
		DE 12 Proposals for farm diversification, including the re-use of buildings, should be considered positively provided they will conserve and enhance the natural beauty of the National Landscape and its setting and: • can demonstrate that they meet a local need; • contribute to the local economy; • add value to land-based products; or form part of a whole farm/estate plan endorsed by the NWDNL unit and the local authority
		DE 13 To help meet net. zero targets, a net zero design approach should be adopted for all new developments. The installation of roof-mounted photovoltaic solar installations and other small-scale renewable energy proposals that are compatible with the purpose of conserving

		and enhancing the natural beauty of the National Landscape should be supported.
		DE 14 Renewable energy schemes determined to be major development must demonstrate that the development is appropriate in location, scale and design which conserves and enhances the local landscape character and natural beauty of the National Landscape. Proposals for renewable energy should not have an adverse impact individually or cumulatively and should make every effort to protect important views and the tranquillity experienced by users of the local public rights of way network.
		DE 15 Encourage the retention of existing and provision of new 'Green and Blue Infrastructure'. Ensure that 'Green and Blue Infrastructure' (including new or enhanced biodiversity assets) is incorporated within the area of all 'major developments', both within and in the setting of the National Landscape.
		DE 16 Any development within the catchment area of watercourses within the National landscape and its setting, or supplied by water abstraction from the aquifers that feed them, must apply a nature-based approach to avoid, and if necessary mitigate, any potential impacts to this valued landscape asset/valued quality. Nutrient neutrality requirements may also apply in some catchments. The North Wessex Downs are home to globally rare chalk streams. These ecosystems are sensitive to change and play a key role in sustaining local biodiversity.
		DE17 New landscape enhancement proposals and/or mitigation should apply a nature-based approach which is informed by local context. The NWDNL Nature Recovery Plan and the relevant Local Nature Recovery Strategy. Non-native or invasive species will not be supported unless a valid reason can be demonstrated, and it meets the priorities of the Nature Recovery Plan and conserves and enhances local landscape and the natural beauty of the National Landscape.
		DE 18 Encourage environmentally sustainable economic growth, new responsible tourism opportunities and diversification of the local economy of a

		scale and nature compatible with conserving and enhancing the natural beauty of the National Landscape.
		DE 19 Breaches of planning controls that undermine the purpose of designation should meet with prompt and robust enforcement action.
Communities	1. Support the development of the North Wessex Downs Landscape Trust in pursuit of its charitable purposes to promote actions which underpin the conservation and enhancement of the National Landscape. 2. Support and facilitate community-led initiatives that help deliver National Landscape purposes and Management Plan objectives. 3. Encourage an enhanced sense of respect and pride in the North Wessex Downs amongst local people and their increased participation in activities that raise the understanding and profile of the National Landscape. 4. Assist the development of connectivity, based on principles of planning and integrating multi-functional green infrastructure assets, from neighbouring urban areas, and within the area, facilitating active and sustainable access to and around the National Landscape to make it easier for communities to experience and benefit from the natural beauty of the North Wessex Downs.	CO 01 Support efforts to raise the profile of the North Wessex Downs National Landscape among communities within and surrounding the area.
		CO 02 Provide parishes and all other relevant community groups and individuals with information and training as necessary to raise awareness of the valued qualities of the National Landscape and the need to conserve and enhance it.
		CO 03 Encourage, support and celebrate local communities' engagement in the planning, conservation and enhancement of their local environment, protecting its natural beauty and enhancing the sense of local pride and ownership.
		CO 04 Support communities play their part in climate change mitigation and adaption, including projects to promote community use of renewable energy sources, consistent with National Landscape objectives.
		CO 05 Publicise relevant community activities and events across the North Wessex Downs.
		CO 06 Support community initiatives aimed at retaining rural services, including the combining of services where this will improve their viability.
		CO 07 Support initiatives to foster awareness, understanding and appreciation of the National Landscape in local schools and encourage greater connectivity with nature and the environment in line with proposals in DEFRA's 25 Year Environment Plan and the 2023 Environmental Improvement Plan.
		CO 08 Support initiatives to address the specific needs of different groups within and around the National Landscape, such as access to training and social activities for young people and engagement with

		under-represented and/or disadvantaged groups.
		CO 09 Support provision of reliable and affordable broadband and mobile telephone connections throughout the North Wessex Downs in ways that respect the valued qualities of the area.
		CO 10 Ensure the development and implementation of transport plans and programmes, including those related to the strategic highway corridors running through the National Landscape, addresses the needs of North Wessex Downs communities, reduces transport impacts on the environment, and conserves and enhances the valued qualities of the landscape
		CO 11 Support measures to enable active travel and provide integrated and demand-responsive passenger transport, including easily accessible information, across the North Wessex Downs that serves the needs of local people and visitors.
		CO 12 Secure Travel Plans for new developments with significant traffic generation potential within the North Wessex Downs to reduce car use and encourage active and sustainable travel.
		CO 13 Support good practice examples of community approaches that respond to locally identified needs and promote them as an inspiration to others (e.g. the establishment of local housing trusts, support for new village shops, community transport schemes, etc).
		CO 14 Support communities in landscape-led approaches to enable the availability of housing for identified local needs that will be -and will remain- genuinely affordable in perpetuity, consistent with National Landscape purposes.
Access, recreation & tourism	1. Facilitate opportunities for more people of all backgrounds and abilities to access and enjoy the North Wessex Downs in ways that respect and promote the valued qualities of the National Landscape and its setting. 2. Greater awareness of the value of access and enjoyment of the North	ART 01 Enable greater accessibility to the North Wessex Downs National Landscape for users of all backgrounds and abilities for quiet enjoyment and improved health and well-being, consistent with National Landscape purposes.
		ART 02 Support local initiatives by communities and businesses to promote responsible recreation and tourism across

	Wessex Downs National Landscape for public health and well being. 3. Develop a strategic framework to guide the use of funding provided to the North Wessex Downs National Landscape for access enhancements. 4. Co-ordinated promotion of the North Wessex Downs National Landscape by the tourism and recreation sector as a destination for responsible access that respects and promotes the valued qualities of the protected landscape and its setting.	the North Wessex Downs National Landscape.
		ART 03 Manage and improve the network of public rights of way, ensuring that relevant plans for development and delivery of access to the area take full account of the local distinctiveness, character and quality of the North Wessex Downs and its setting.
		ART 04 Promote and encourage responsible use of rights of way, including byways, and where desirable restrict or exclude non-essential motorised use, consistent with National Landscape purposes.
		ART 05 Encourage the creation and maintenance of new permissive and definitive routes that link existing routes and enable recreational walkers, cyclists, riders and carriage-drivers to avoid busy roads.
		ART 06 Recognise and protect those areas which are too sensitive to intrusion or disturbance, for example archaeologically or ecologically, for the promotion of public access.
		ART 07 Promote a strategic, collaborative, approach among destination management organisations, Local Visitor Economy Partnerships and other partners to marketing responsible access and tourism and in the North Wessex Downs National Landscape.
		ART 08 Encourage events such as walking festivals that celebrate the valued qualities of the North Wessex Downs, introduce new audiences to the landscape and contribute to the visitor economy
		ART 09 Facilitate signage or other ways of informing visitors and residents that they are in the North Wessex Downs National Landscape, consistent with the purpose of designation.
		ART 10 Encourage greater recognition among commercial transport providers such as train operating companies and bus operators of the recreational / leisure potential of stations in and around the North Wessex Downs, including access from the 'gateway towns' on the edge of the National Landscape.

		ART 11 Support initiatives to help communities and businesses reduce the outflow of revenue, retaining and recycling income from visitors in the area for longer.
		ART 12 Support more and better monitoring of the distribution and demography of visitors and promote management approaches that reduce pressure on sensitive habitats.
		ART 13 Support land managers and the access sector to recognise and manage the potential for tensions between public access and commercially sensitive areas, for example livestock farms or game shoots where disturbance could have a damaging impact.
		ART 14 Enable, encourage and promote active and sustainable transport access, including but not limited to particular 'honeypot' locations which are under stress from car-borne visitors, to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, improve air quality and conserve and enhance the natural beauty of the landscape.

Appendix 3a: Review of the consultation policy cascade

Guidance on Habitats Regulations Appraisal of plans – Classifying No Negative Effect	
A1	Options / policies that will not themselves lead to development e.g., because they relate to design or other qualitative criteria for development, or they are not a land use planning policy.
A2	Options / policies intended to protect the natural environment, including biodiversity
A3	Options / policies intended to conserve or enhance the natural, built or historic environment, where enhancement measures will not be likely to have any negative effect on a Natura 2000 Site
A4	Options / policies that positively steer development away from Natura 2000 Sites and associated sensitive areas
A5	General policy statements or policies that only express general intentions or political aspirations.
Guidance on Habitats Regulations Appraisal of plans – Classifying No Significant Negative Effect	
B	Elements of the plan that could have an effect but the likelihood is there would be no significant negative effect on a European Sites network either alone or in combination with other elements of the same plan, or other plans or projects

Draft Policies	Category A?	Type	Next stage?	Comment
LA 01 Encourage all partners and other stakeholders to have regard for AONB purposes across all relevant policies, programmes and activities.	**Yes**	**A5**	**No**	A general policy statement
LA 02 Seek to identify and address the main factors that threaten the valued qualities of the AONB landscape: e.g. water abstraction, agricultural practices including diffuse pollution of watercourses; lack of woodland management; damage to historic sites, built development.	**Yes**	**A3**	**No**	Supports the conservation of the natural, built or historic environment
LA 03 Use the North Wessex Downs	**Yes**	**A1**	**No**	Relates to design or other qualitative criteria for development

Integrated Landscape Character Assessment to inform policy and decision making across the AONB and its setting.				
LA 04 Support and promote good practice across all sectors that conserves and enhances the character and qualities of the North Wessex Downs landscape.	**Yes**	**A5**	**No**	A general policy statement
LA 05 Support and encourage efforts to conserve and explain the rich heritage of the North Wessex Downs, including archaeological sites.	**Yes**	**A3**	**No**	Supports the conservation of the natural, built or historic environment
LA 06 Ensure that all development in or affecting the setting of the AONB conserves and enhances the character, qualities and heritage of the North Wessex Downs landscape.	**Yes**	**A1**	**No**	Relates to design or other qualitative criteria for development
LA 07 Raise the policy profile of the North Wessex Downs locally, regionally and nationally to secure the co-ordination and resourcing of policies and programmes for the benefit of the AONB.	**Yes**	**A5**	**No**	A general policy statement
FLM 01 Encourage national, regional and local land management policies to be consistent with the purpose of National Landscape designation.	**Yes**	**A5**	**No**	A general policy statement

FLM 02 Encourage and support joint working and expansion / replication of existing landscape-scale nature recovery and land management projects, both within and beyond the National Landscape, to assist in the delivery of National Landscape and Big Chalk objectives.	**Yes**	**A3**	**No**	Supports the conservation of the natural environment
FLM 03 Support sustainable farm diversification and multi-purpose woodland management where it achieves National Landscape objectives and accords with planning policy.	**No**	**B**	**No**	Supports farm diversification and woodland management without ensuring the integrity of a European Site. Two SACs within the area are designated for their woodland interest features and may be affected changes to woodland management but BNR14 will ensure that proposals that have a likely significant effect (either alone or in combination with other plans and projects) upon a European Site are resisted unless it can be found following an appropriate assessment that they will have no significant adverse effect on the integrity of the site concerned.
FLM 04 Support efforts to identify future land use options that are best able to assist farm viability and reflect the environmental objectives of the National Landscape.	**No**	**B**	**No**	The policy supports land use options based on farm viability without ensuring the integrity of a European Site. Policy BNR14 will ensure that proposals that have a likely significant effect (either alone or in combination with other plans and projects) upon a European Site are resisted unless it can be found following an appropriate assessment that they will have no significant adverse effect on the integrity of the site concerned. Applying this policy in combination with the modifying policies within the plan will ensure that there is no significant negative effect on a European Site.
FLM 05 Support local markets for local produce and the development of local supply networks.	**Yes**	**A5**	**No**	A general policy statement
FLM 06 Encourage management of sites in public and tenanted ownership within the North Wessex Downs to be	**Yes**	**A5**	**No**	A general policy statement

examples of best practice in the delivery of National Landscape objectives.				
FLM 07 Support and promote efforts across the North Wessex Downs to reduce invasive, non-native species or unsustainable populations of species where these threaten the biodiversity and sustainable management of woodland, watercourses and other habitats.	**Yes**	**A2**	**No**	A policy intended to protect the natural environment, including biodiversity. Three SACs in the area may be affected by invasive non-native species.
FLM 08 Encourage the active and environmentally sensitive use of woodland resources for viable products, helping to enhance biodiversity.	**No**	**B**	**No**	The policy encourages the use of woodland products whilst helping to enhance biodiversity without ensuring the integrity of a European Site. Two SACs within the area are designated for their woodland interest features and may be affected changes to woodland management but Policy BNR14 will ensure that proposals that have a likely significant effect (either alone or in combination with other plans and projects) upon a European Site are resisted unless it can be found following an appropriate assessment that they will have no significant adverse effect on the integrity of the site concerned. Applying this policy in combination with the modifying policies within the plan will ensure that there is no significant negative effect on a European Site.
FLM 09 Support and help guide publicly funded investment in rural development.	**Yes**	**A5**	**No**	A general policy statement
FLM 10 Support investment in new agricultural infrastructure and redevelopment of farm buildings where it increases the sustainability of local businesses and aligns with National Landscape purposes.	**No**	**B**	**No**	A general statement that supports investment in agricultural infrastructure without ensuring the integrity of a European Site. Policy BNR14 will ensure that proposals that have a likely significant effect (either alone or in combination with other plans and projects) upon a European Site are resisted unless it can be found following an appropriate assessment that they will have no significant adverse effect on the integrity of the site concerned.

				Applying this policy in combination with the modifying policies within the plan will ensure that there is no significant negative effect on a European Site.
FLM 11 Encourage awareness of the special qualities of the National Landscape among local businesses to help them understand and embrace their responsibilities alongside running a profitable enterprise.	**Yes**	**A5**	**No**	A general policy statement
FLM 12 Support improved availability, quality, co-ordination and consistency in provision of land management advice across the National Landscape.	**Yes**	**A5**	**No**	A general policy statement
FLM 13 Support efforts to identify and develop the skills required to care for the landscape and its special qualities, with opportunities for all to acquire such skills.	**Yes**	**A3**	**No**	A policy intended to conserve or enhance the natural, built or historic environment. Policy BNR14 will ensure that proposals that have a likely significant effect (either alone or in combination with other plans and projects) upon a European Site are resisted unless it can be found following an appropriate assessment that they will have no significant adverse effect on the integrity of the site concerned.
FLM 14 Encourage and support the local provision of practical training in traditional land management and the skills necessary to deliver enhanced rural land management and business diversification with clear landscape benefits.	**Yes**	**A5**	**No**	A general policy statement
FLM 15 Encourage good agricultural land management practices and adherence to good practice to contribute to resource protection, such as	**Yes**	**A2**	**No**	A policy intended to protect the natural environment, including biodiversity

healthy soil management and safeguarding watercourses from nutrient run-off and silt pollution.,				
FLM 16 Support the provision of advice on integrated management of grassland to enhance biodiversity as part of equine land management practices.	**Yes**	**A3**	**No**	A policy intended to conserve or enhance the natural, built or historic environment. Policy BNR14 will ensure that proposals that have a likely significant effect (either alone or in combination with other plans and projects) upon a European Site are resisted unless it can be found following an appropriate assessment that they will have no significant adverse effect on the integrity of the site concerned.
FLM 17 Support initiatives such as better routes to market, to achieve sustainable deer populations across the National Landscape through collaborative measures and other stakeholders.	**Yes**	**A5**	**No**	A general policy statement
BNR01 Support the delivery of NWDNL Nature Recovery Plan priorities and targets in the Protected Landscapes Targets and Outcomes Framework. To ensure effective management of all priority habitats and species in the National Landscape.	**Yes**	**A2**	**No**	A policy intended to protect the natural environment, including biodiversity. Strengthened by Policy BNR02 that seeks to resist proposals that will lead to the direct or indirect degradation or loss of nationally or locally designated wildlife sites, priority habitats or populations of protected and priority species.
BNR02 Resist proposals which will lead to the direct or indirect degradation or loss of nationally or locally designated wildlife sites, priority habitats or populations of protected and priority species.	**Yes**	**A2**	**No**	A policy intended to protect the natural environment, including biodiversity.
BNR 03 Encourage a co-ordinated and consistent approach by Local Nature	**Yes**	**A5**	**No**	A general policy statement

Recovery Strategies to nature recovery networks, aligned with North Wessex Downs priorities, across the National Landscape and its setting.				
BNR04 Support farmers and land managers in restoring, creating and maintaining a resilient network habitats with thriving populations of key species.	**Yes**	**A3**	**No**	A policy intended to conserve or enhance the natural environment. Strengthened by Policy BNR02 that seeks to resist proposals that will lead to the direct or indirect degradation or loss of nationally or locally designated wildlife sites, priority habitats or populations of protected and priority species.
BNR05 Support efforts to understand and respond to the localised impacts of climate change on vulnerable habitats and species within and surrounding the North Wessex Downs.	**Yes**	**A3**	**No**	A policy intended to conserve or enhance the natural environment. Strengthened by Policy BNR02 that seeks to resist proposals that will lead to the direct or indirect degradation or loss of nationally or locally designated wildlife sites, priority habitats or populations of protected and priority species.
BNR 06 Encourage and support landscape-scale action for habitat management, restoration and creation.	**No**	**B**	**No**	The policy encourages large scale habitat management and change, without ensuring the integrity of a European Site. Two SACs within the area may be affected by changes to habitat management but Policy BNR14 will ensure that proposals that have a likely significant effect (either alone or in combination with other plans and projects) upon a European Site are resisted unless it can be found following an appropriate assessment that they will have no significant adverse effect on the integrity of the site concerned. Applying this policy in combination with the modifying policies within the plan will ensure that there is no significant negative effect on a European Site.
BNR 07 Support and encourage actions to enable grazing on all the main grassland areas of the National Landscape.	**No**	**B**	**No**	The policy supports grazing on all grassland without ensuring the integrity of a European Site. One SAC within the area may be affected by inappropriate grazing but Policy BNR14 will ensure that proposals that have a likely significant effect (either alone or in combination with other plans and projects) upon a European Site are resisted unless it can be found following an appropriate assessment that they will have no significant adverse effect on the integrity of the site concerned.

				Applying this policy in combination with the modifying policies within the plan will ensure that there is no significant negative effect on a European Site.
BNR 08 Support the development of initiatives to safeguard and develop habitat corridors and ecological networks throughout the National Landscape, and in particular to enhance the ecological value of road verges and similar linear features such as public rights of way and National Trails.	**Yes**	**A3**	**No**	Supports the conservation of the natural environment
BNR09 Support Catchment Partnerships and other key stakeholders to promote and deliver projects to conserve, restore and enhance chalk streams, rivers and other waterbodies to achieve good ecological status.	**Yes**	**A3**	**No**	Supports the conservation of the natural environment
BNR10 Encourage the greater connection between people and the natural environment, promoting responsible access to nature in appropriate locations, and effectively communicate its value to people.	**No**	**B**	**No**	The policy promotes responsible public access to nature in 'appropriate locations' without ensuring the integrity of a European Site. One SAC within the area may be affected by inappropriate public access. Policy ART 06 seeks to recognise and protect those areas that are too sensitive to intrusion or disturbance. In addition, policy BNR14 will ensure that proposals that have a likely significant effect (either alone or in combination with other plans and projects) upon a European Site are resisted unless it can be found following an appropriate assessment that they will have no significant adverse effect on the integrity of the site concerned. Applying this policy in combination with the modifying policies within the plan will ensure that there is no significant negative effect on a European Site.

BNR11 Support the County Biological Record Centres and Historic Environment Records Centres serving the North Wessex Downs as the main repositories for information on the biodiversity and cultural heritage of the National Landscape and support initiatives to engage the public in biological recording/monitoring.	**Yes**	**A5**	**No**	A general policy statement
BNR12 Support research to understand the causes of declines in key species such as ground-nesting birds and support appropriate action to rebuild populations.	**Yes**	**A3**	**No**	Supports the conservation of the natural environment. Strengthened by Policy BNR02 that seeks to resist proposals that will lead to the direct or indirect degradation or loss of nationally or locally designated wildlife sites, priority habitats or populations of protected and priority species.
BNR13 Secure maximum biodiversity gain and protection of ecosystem goods and services through innovative use of emerging environmental mechanisms including Environmental Land Management schemes, natural capital, carbon markets, biodiversity net. gain etc.	**Yes**	**A3**	**No**	Supports the conservation of the natural environment. Strengthened by Policy BNR02 that seeks to resist proposals that will lead to the direct or indirect degradation or loss of nationally or locally designated wildlife sites, priority habitats or populations of protected and priority species.
BNR14 Resist proposals which have a likely significant effect (either alone or in combination with other plans and projects) upon a European designated site unless it can be ascertained following an appropriate assessment that they will have no	**Yes**	**A2**	**No**	A policy intended to protect the natural environment, including biodiversity. This policy serves to mitigate any potential conflicts between the plan and the requirements of the Habitats Regulations.

significant adverse effect on the integrity of the site concerned.				
HE 01 Encourage and facilitate work to improve the condition of assets in order to remove them from 'At Risk' status and explore the designation or greater protection of new assets through work with local Historic Environment Records and Historic England	**Yes**	**A3**	**No**	Supports the conservation of the built or historic environment
HE 02 Encourage and support collaborative activity on poorly understood aspects of the local historic environment, involving professional and voluntary sectors, such as research and advice from historic environment experts and use of citizen science.	**Yes**	**A5**	**No**	A general policy statement
HE 03 Work closely with the Stonehenge and Avebury World Heritage Site Partnership and other groups to develop shared objectives and deliver joint actions in support of the World Heritage Site Management Plan.	**Yes**	**A5**	**No**	A general policy statement
HE 05 Encourage the production and publication of 'local lists' of heritage assets.	**Yes**	**A5**	**No**	A general policy statement
HE 06 Encourage owners of designated heritage assets to create Conservation/ Heritage Management Plans and manage/restore assets appropriately.	**Yes**	**A1**	**No**	A policy that will not lead to development. Any plans created will be subject to the Habitat Regulations.

HE 07 Promote opportunities to include the historic environment in community-generated Village Design Statements, Parish and Neighbourhood Plans etc., linked where appropriate to Conservation Area Appraisals.	**Yes**	**A3**	**No**	Supports the conservation of the built or historic environment
HE 08 Promote and encourage the use of Historic Landscape and Historic Settlement Characterisation to inform land management, policy making and planning decisions.	**Yes**	**A1**	**No**	A policy relating to design or other qualitative criteria for development
HE 09 Support more, better, and joined-up explanation, interpretation and promotion of the historic environment for residents and visitors.	**Yes**	**A5**	**No**	A general policy statement
NR 01 Support co-ordinated action, guidance and measures on soil health issues.	**Yes**	**A5**	**No**	A general policy statement
NR 02 Promote and encourage initiatives for the sustainable management of soil by farmers and other land managers to minimise soil degradation through erosion, compaction, pollution and impoverishment, particularly in the case of the thin chalk downland soils.	**Yes**	**A3**	**No**	Supports the conservation of the natural environment
NR 03 Support landscape awareness and understanding among catchment partnerships in and	**Yes**	**A2**	**No**	Protects the conservation of the natural environment. Three SACs in the area may be affected by inappropriate water levels and hydrological changes. Policy BNR14 will ensure that proposals that have a likely

around the North Wessex Downs, and encourage collaborative research, projects and management to protect and improve watercourses and catchments.				significant effect (either alone or in combination with other plans and projects) upon a European Site are resisted unless it can be found following an appropriate assessment that they will have no significant adverse effect on the integrity of the site concerned.
NR 04 Encourage all partners to take water demand and its consequences for landscape, ecology and fisheries fully into account in decisions regarding development, changes to land use or cropping patterns within the North Wessex Downs.	**Yes**	**A3**	**No**	Supports the conservation of the natural environment. There are two riverine SACs within the area. Policy BNR14 will ensure that proposals that have a likely significant effect (either alone or in combination with other plans and projects) upon a European Site are resisted unless it can be found following an appropriate assessment that they will have no significant adverse effect on the integrity of the site concerned.
NR 05 Support the introduction of demand management measures for water use in those settlements that draw on the aquifers of the North Wessex Downs, and measures to monitor and reduce water wastage.	**Yes**	**A3**	**No**	Supports the conservation of the natural environment. Three SACs in the area may be affected by inappropriate water levels and hydrological changes. Policy BNR14 will ensure that proposals that have a likely significant effect (either alone or in combination with other plans and projects) upon a European Site are resisted unless it can be found following an appropriate assessment that they will have no significant adverse effect on the integrity of the site concerned.
NR 06 Encourage action to identify and address the sources of diffuse and point pollution within the North Wessex Downs.	**Yes**	**A5**	**No**	A general policy statement
NR 07 Encourage co-ordinated remedial action through the Catchment Sensitive Farming programme and other partnership schemes to restore and enhance degraded river sections within the North Wessex Downs.	**Yes**	**A3**	**No**	Supports the conservation of the natural environment. There are two riverine SACs within the area. Policy BNR14 will ensure that proposals that have a likely significant effect (either alone or in combination with other plans and projects) upon a European Site are resisted unless it can be found following an appropriate assessment that they will have no significant adverse effect on the integrity of the site concerned.
NR 08 Support measures to reduce abstraction and help	**Yes**	**A3**	**No**	Supports the conservation of the natural environment. Three SACs in the area may be affected by inappropriate water levels and hydrological changes. Policy BNR14 will

businesses adopt new mitigation measures.				ensure that proposals that have a likely significant effect (either alone or in combination with other plans and projects) upon a European Site are resisted unless it can be found following an appropriate assessment that they will have no significant adverse effect on the integrity of the site concerned.
NR 09 Promote well designed Sustainable Drainage Systems (SUDS) which achieve benefit to water quality, water quantity, biodiversity and amenity in urban areas. Promote natural flood management initiatives, particularly upstream in the catchment. to maximise multiple benefits, to benefit people and wildlife.	**Yes**	**A3**	**No**	Supports the conservation of the natural environment. Three SACs in the area may be affected by inappropriate water levels and hydrological changes. Policy BNR14 will ensure that proposals that have a likely significant effect (either alone or in combination with other plans and projects) upon a European Site are resisted unless it can be found following an appropriate assessment that they will have no significant adverse effect on the integrity of the site concerned.
NR 10 Promote restoration and continued maintenance of rivers and river corridors to further biodiversity and amenity objectives – recreating natural river channels and re-linking rivers with their floodplains where this would not damage artificial channels of historic and cultural importance.	**Yes**	**A3**	**No**	Supports the conservation of the natural and historic environment. There are two riverine SACs within the area. Policy BNR14 will ensure that proposals that have a likely significant effect (either alone or in combination with other plans and projects) upon a European Site are resisted unless it can be found following an appropriate assessment that they will have no significant adverse effect on the integrity of the site concerned.
NR 11 Develop a better understanding of the likely implications of climate change on the environment and economy of the North Wessex Downs.	**Yes**	**A5**	**No**	A general policy statement
NR 12 Support reductions in greenhouse gas emissions, such as carbon dioxide,	**No**	**B**	**No**	The intent is to control the effect of pollutants but the policy does not specify why and does not seek to ensure the integrity of a European Site. Policy BNR14 will ensure that proposals that have a likely significant effect (either

nitrous oxide and methane, from all possible sources.				alone or in combination with other plans and projects) upon a European Site are resisted unless it can be found following an appropriate assessment that they will have no significant adverse effect on the integrity of the site concerned. Applying this policy in combination with the modifying policies within the plan will ensure that there is no significant negative effect on a European Site.
NR 13 Support climate mitigation measures including nature-based solutions, energy efficiency improvements, better on-farm management of fertiliser and animal waste, biomass heating from local fuel stocks and small-scale renewable energy generation consistent with conserving and enhancing the natural beauty of the landscape.	**Yes**	**A3**	**No**	The intent is to support the conservation of the natural environment through the control of pollutants. Policy BNR14 will ensure that proposals that have a likely significant effect (either alone or in combination with other plans and projects) upon a European Site are resisted unless it can be found following an appropriate assessment that they will have no significant adverse effect on the integrity of the site concerned.
NR 14 Engage with opportunities to improve the availability and accessibility of sustainable modes of transport (e.g. bus and rail services, cycling) recognising in particular the health benefits of active modes (walking, cycling, riding etc) and promote use their use.	**Yes**	**A5**	**No**	A general policy statement
NR 15 Encourage greater use of timber from sustainable woodland, and in particular short local supply chains to support forestry, woodland and wood products businesses	**No**	**B**	**No**	The policy encourages woodland management without ensuring the integrity of a European Site. Two SACs within the area are designated for their woodland interest features. Policy BNR14 will ensure that proposals that have a likely significant effect (either alone or in combination with other plans and projects) upon a European Site are resisted unless it can be found following an appropriate assessment that they will have

in the National Landscape.				no significant adverse effect on the integrity of the site concerned. Applying this policy in combination with the modifying policies within the plan will ensure that there is no significant negative effect on a European Site.
NR 16 Promote carbon sequestration as an objective and benefit of habitat creation and management of woodland and permanent grassland.	**Yes**	**A5**	**No**	A general policy statement
NR 17 Encourage simple greenhouse gas and carbon accounting to monitor the effectiveness of changes.	**Yes**	**A5**	**No**	A general policy statement
DE 01 Development and use changes within the North Wessex Downs and its setting must seek to further the purpose of the National Landscape (to conserve and enhance the Natural beauty of the protected landscape) and should demonstrate how they have had regard to the Management Plan and guidance produced by the North Wessex Downs National Landscape Partnership.	**Yes**	**A1**	**No**	A policy relating to design or other qualitative criteria for development
DE 02 Under the NPPF determining major development is a judgement for the local authority as decision taker; in determining this, plan makers and decision takers should consider the context of the locality and whether the development by	**Yes**	**A5**	**No**	A general policy statement

reason of its scale, massing, character or nature, has the potential to have a significant adverse impact on the natural beauty and valued qualities of the North Wessex Downs. The potential for significant adverse impacts must include the consideration of both the impact of cumulative development and the individual characteristics of a proposed development or use of land.				
DE 03 A landscape-led approach should be applied at the earliest stages of development of Local Plan policies and all development proposals within the National Landscape and its setting. Natural beauty must be a golden thread throughout all stages of the process and aim to encompass a sense of place. The North Wessex Downs Landscape Character Assessment along with landscape sensitivity assessments and landscape visual impact assessments are essential tools in achieving a landscape-led approach.	**Yes**	**A1**	**No**	A policy relating to design or other qualitative criteria for development
DE 04 Development within the National Landscape and its setting should be of high quality which responds to local	**Yes**	**A5**	**No**	A general policy statement

context, including; historic settlement pattern, height, massing, roof form, density, materials (inc. colour) and local building vernacular. All development should actively seek to conserve and enhance local distinctiveness, sense of place, tranquillity, biodiversity, the historic environment and dark skies.				
DE 05 Historic settlement patterns and valued green spaces within and surrounding settlements form part of the distinctive character and heritage of the North Wessex Downs. Neighbourhood Plans, Development Plan allocations and development proposals should identify these characteristics and ensure their value is recognised and retained.	**Yes**	**A5**	**No**	A general policy statement
DE 06 The surroundings of the North Wessex Downs and the protected landscape itself add value to each other as the landscape and landforms link visually and functionally, joining the surroundings to the National Landscape. Proposals for development or change of use in the setting should, therefore, reflect and respond to the inter-connectivity with the	**Yes**	**A5**	**No**	A general policy statement

National Landscape, its landscape character, and valued qualities.				
DE 07 Development must encourage, support and promote biodiversity net. gain and contribute to nature recovery by protecting, restoring and providing for new and improved habitats and connected nature recovery networks.	**Yes**	**A2**	**No**	Protects the conservation of the natural environment. Policy BNR14 will ensure that proposals that have a likely significant effect (either alone or in combination with other plans and projects) upon a European Site are resisted unless it can be found following an appropriate assessment that they will have no significant adverse effect on the integrity of the site concerned.
DE 08 To ensure that dark skies and tranquillity are protected no new uses or developments that individually or cumulatively result in a material increase in lighting, noise, pollution and or activity that fails to conserve the valued qualities of the National Landscape should be permitted.	**Yes**	**A5**	**No**	A general policy statement
DE 09 To avoid and reduce the potential for light pollution, details of external lighting should be submitted alongside a lighting assessment as part of any development or new use within the National Landscape and its setting, to ensure it meets the standards as set out in the NWDNL Good Lighting Guide.	**Yes**	**A1**	**No**	A policy relating to design or other qualitative criteria for development
DE 10 Encourage, support and promote good practice in the design and management of roads in the National Landscape and its setting that conserves	**Yes**	**A3**	**No**	Supports the conservation of the natural environment.

and enhances the character of the landscape and settlements. Opportunities should be taken to reduce erosion and maintain or restore the character of rural roads through adoption of a low-key rural design approach to roads across the North Wessex Downs.				
DE 11 Maintain the rural character and qualities of the National Landscape by preventing over development of sites and the erosion of local character. The following should be considered: • The overall size, scale and massing of the replacement dwelling and/or extension compared to the original (new dwellings should not be materially larger in terms of volume). • Site context and local context including natural and built character and features, visual prominence and the local vernacular. • Relationship within the local street scene/ rural countryside and potential to unbalance this.	**Yes**	**A5**	**No**	A general policy statement
DE 12 Proposals for farm diversification, including the re-use of buildings, should be considered positively provided they will conserve and enhance the natural beauty of the	**No**	**B**	**No**	Provides support to farm diversification schemes without ensuring the integrity of a European Site. Policy BNR14 will ensure that proposals that have a likely significant effect (either alone or in combination with other plans and projects) upon a European Site are resisted unless it can be found following an appropriate assessment that they will have

National Landscape and its setting and: • can demonstrate that it meets a local need; • contributes to the local economy; • adds value to land-based products; or forms part of a whole farm/estate plan endorsed by the NWDNL unit and the local authority				no significant adverse effect on the integrity of the site concerned. Applying this policy in combination with the modifying policies within the plan will ensure that there is no significant negative effect on a European Site.
DE 13 To help meet net. zero targets the installation of roof-mounted photovoltaic solar installations and other small-scale renewable energy proposals that are compatible with the purpose of conserving and enhancing the natural beauty of the National Landscape should be supported.	**Yes**	**A1**	**No**	A policy relating to design or other qualitative criteria for development
DE 14 Renewable energy schemes determined to be major development must demonstrate that the development is appropriate in location, scale and design which conserves and enhances the local landscape character and natural beauty of the National Landscape. Proposals for renewable energy should not have an adverse impact individually or cumulatively and should make every effort to protect important views and the tranquillity experienced by users	**Yes**	**A5**	**No**	A general policy statement

of the local public rights of way network.				
DE 15 Encourage the retention of existing and provision of new 'Green and Blue Infrastructure'. Ensure that 'Green and Blue Infrastructure' (including new or enhanced biodiversity assets) is incorporated within the area of all 'major developments', both within and in the setting of the National Landscape.	**Yes**	**A5**	**No**	A general policy statement
DE 16 The North Wessex Downs are home to globally rare chalk streams. These ecosystems are sensitive to change and play a key role in sustaining local biodiversity. Any development within the catchment area of watercourses within the National landscape and its setting, or supplied by water abstraction from the aquifers that feed them, must apply a nature-based approach to avoid, and necessary mitigate, any potential impacts to this valued landscape asset/valued quality.	**Yes**	**A2**	**No**	A policy intended to protect the natural environment, including biodiversity
DE17 New landscape enhancement proposals and/or mitigation should apply a nature-based approach which is informed by local context. Non-native or invasive species will not be supported unless a valid reason	**Yes**	**A1**	**No**	A policy that will not in itself lead to development

can be demonstrated, and it meets the priorities of the Nature Recovery Plan and conserves and enhances local landscape and the natural beauty of the National Landscape.				
DE 18 Encourage environmentally sustainable economic growth, new responsible tourism opportunities and diversification of the local economy of a scale and nature compatible with conserving and enhancing the natural beauty of the National Landscape.	**No**	**B**	**No**	To provide support to new tourism and diversification schemes without ensuring the integrity of a European Site. Policy BNR14 will ensure that proposals that have a likely significant effect (either alone or in combination with other plans and projects) upon a European Site are resisted unless it can be found following an appropriate assessment that they will have no significant adverse effect on the integrity of the site concerned. Applying this policy in combination with the modifying policies within the plan will ensure that there is no significant negative effect on a European Site.
CO 01 Support efforts to raise the profile of the North Wessex Downs National Landscape among communities within and surrounding the area.	**Yes**	**A5**	**No**	A general policy statement
CO 02 Provide parishes and all other relevant community groups and individuals with information and training as necessary to raise awareness of the special qualities of the National Landscape and the need to conserve and enhance it.	**Yes**	**A5**	**No**	A general policy statement
CO 03 Encourage, support and celebrate local communities' engagement in the planning, conservation and enhancement of their local environment, protecting its natural beauty and	**Yes**	**A5**	**No**	A general policy statement

enhancing the sense of local pride and ownership.				
CO 04 Support projects to promote community use of renewable energy sources consistent with National Landscape objectives.	**No**	**B**	**No**	A policy to provide support to renewable energy schemes without ensuring the integrity of a European Site. Policy BNR14 will ensure that proposals that have a likely significant effect (either alone or in combination with other plans and projects) upon a European Site are resisted unless it can be found following an appropriate assessment that they will have no significant adverse effect on the integrity of the site concerned. Applying this policy in combination with the modifying policies within the plan will ensure that there is no significant negative effect on a European Site.
CO 05 Publicise relevant community activities and events across the North Wessex Downs.	**Yes**	**A5**	**No**	A general policy statement
CO 06 Support community initiatives aimed at retaining rural services, including the combining of services where this will improve their viability.	**Yes**	**A1**	**No**	A policy that will not in itself lead to development
CO 07 Support initiatives to foster awareness, understanding and appreciation of the National Landscape in local schools and encourage greater connectivity with nature and the environment in line with proposals in DEFRA's 25 Year Environment Plan and the 2023 Environmental Improvement Plan.	**Yes**	**A5**	**No**	A general policy statement
CO 08 Support initiatives to address the specific needs of different groups within and around the National Landscape,	**Yes**	**A1**	**No**	A policy that will not in itself lead to development

such as access to training and social activities for young people and engagement with under-represented and/or disadvantaged groups.				
CO 09 Support provision of reliable and affordable broadband and mobile telephone connections throughout the North Wessex Downs in ways that respect the special qualities of the area.	**No**	**B**	**No**	The policy advocated infrastructure development without ensuring the integrity of a European Site. Policy BNR14 will ensure that proposals that have a likely significant effect (either alone or in combination with other plans and projects) upon a European Site are resisted unless it can be found following an appropriate assessment that they will have no significant adverse effect on the integrity of the site concerned. Applying this policy in combination with the modifying policies within the plan will ensure that there is no significant negative effect on a European Site.
CO 10 Ensure the development and implementation of transport plans and programmes addresses the needs of North Wessex Downs communities, reduces transport impacts on the environment, and conserves and enhances the special qualities of the landscape.	**Yes**	**A3**	**No**	Supports the conservation of the natural environment.
CO 11 Support measures to provide integrated passenger transport, including easily accessible information, across the North Wessex Downs that serves the needs of local people and visitors.	**Yes**	**A1**	**No**	A policy that will not in itself lead to development
CO 12 Secure Travel Plans for new developments with significant traffic generation within the North Wessex Downs to encourage active	**Yes**	**A1**	**No**	A policy that will not in itself lead to development

and sustainable travel.				
CO 13 Support good practice examples of community approaches that respond to locally identified needs and promote them as an inspiration to others (e.g. the establishment of local housing trusts, support for new village shops, community transport schemes, etc).	**Yes**	**A5**	**No**	A general policy statement
CO 14 Support communities in landscape-led approaches to enable the availability of housing for identified local needs that will be -and will remain- genuinely affordable in perpetuity, consistent with National Landscape purposes.	**Yes**	**A5**	**No**	A general policy statement
ART 01 Enable greater accessibility to the North Wessex Downs National Landscape for users of all backgrounds and abilities for quiet enjoyment and improved health and well-being.	**No**	**B**	**No**	A policy to increase public access to the countryside without ensuring the integrity of a European Site. One SAC within the area may be affected by public access and disturbance. Policy ART 06 seeks to recognise and protect those areas that are too sensitive to intrusion or disturbance. In addition, policy BNR14 will ensure that proposals that have a likely significant effect (either alone or in combination with other plans and projects) upon a European Site are resisted unless it can be found following an appropriate assessment that they will have no significant adverse effect on the integrity of the site concerned. Applying this policy in combination with the modifying policies within the plan will ensure that there is no significant negative effect on a European Site.
ART 02 Support local initiatives by communities and businesses to promote responsible recreation and	**No**	**B**	**No**	A policy to increase public access to the countryside without ensuring the integrity of a European Site. One SAC within the area may be affected by public access and disturbance. Policy ART 06 seeks to recognise and protect those areas that are too sensitive

tourism across the North Wessex Downs National Landscape.				to intrusion or disturbance. In addition, policy BNR14 will ensure that proposals that have a likely significant effect (either alone or in combination with other plans and projects) upon a European Site are resisted unless it can be found following an appropriate assessment that they will have no significant adverse effect on the integrity of the site concerned. Applying this policy in combination with the modifying policies within the plan will ensure that there is no significant negative effect on a European Site.
ART 03 Manage and improve the network of public rights of way, ensuring that relevant plans for development and delivery of access to the area take full account of the local distinctiveness, character and quality of the North Wessex Downs and its setting.	**Yes**	**A3**	**No**	Supports the conservation of the natural environment.
ART 04 Promote and encourage responsible use of rights of way, including byways, consistent with National Landscape purposes.	**Yes**	**A5**	**No**	A general policy statement
ART 05 Encourage the creation and maintenance of new permissive and definitive routes that link existing routes and enable recreational walkers, cyclists, riders and carriage-drivers to avoid busy roads.	**No**	**B**	**No**	A policy to increase public access to the countryside without ensuring the integrity of a European Site. One SAC within the area may be affected by public access and disturbance. Policy ART 06 seeks to recognise and protect those areas that are too sensitive to intrusion or disturbance. In addition, policy BNR14 will ensure that proposals that have a likely significant effect (either alone or in combination with other plans and projects) upon a European Site are resisted unless it can be found following an appropriate assessment that they will have no significant adverse effect on the integrity of the site concerned. Applying this policy in combination with the modifying policies within the plan will ensure that there is no significant negative effect on a European Site.
ART 06 Recognise and protect those	**Yes**	**A4**	**No**	A policy to steer development away from European Sites.

areas which are too sensitive to intrusion or disturbance, for example archaeologically or ecologically, for the promotion of public access.				
ART 07 Promote a strategic, collaborative, approach among destination management organisations, Local Visitor Economy Partnerships and other partners to marketing responsible access and tourism and in the North Wessex Downs National Landscape.	**Yes**	**A5**	**No**	A general policy statement
ART 08 Encourage events such as walking festivals that celebrate the valued qualities of the North Wessex Downs, introduce new audiences to the landscape and contribute to the visitor economy	**No**	**B**	**No**	A policy to increase public access to the countryside without ensuring the integrity of a European Site. One SAC within the area may be affected by public access and disturbance. Policy ART 06 seeks to recognise and protect those areas that are too sensitive to intrusion or disturbance. In addition, policy BNR14 will ensure that proposals that have a likely significant effect (either alone or in combination with other plans and projects) upon a European Site are resisted unless it can be found following an appropriate assessment that they will have no significant adverse effect on the integrity of the site concerned. Applying this policy in combination with the modifying policies within the plan will ensure that there is no significant negative effect on a European Site.
ART 09 Facilitate signage or other ways of informing visitors and residents that they are in the North Wessex Downs National Landscape, consistent with the purpose of designation.	**Yes**	**A1**	**No**	A policy that will not in itself lead to development
ART 10 Encourage greater recognition among commercial	**Yes**	**A5**	**No**	A general policy statement

transport providers such as train operating companies and bus operators of the recreational / leisure potential of stations in and around the North Wessex Downs.				
ART 11 Support initiatives to help communities and businesses reduce the outflow of revenue, retaining and recycling income from visitors in the area for longer.	**Yes**	**A5**	**No**	A general policy statement
ART 12 Support more and better monitoring of the distribution and demography of visitors and promote management approaches that reduce pressure on sensitive habitats.	**Yes**	**A2**	**No**	A policy intended to protect the natural environment, including biodiversity

Appendix 3b: Review of those policies amended or added after consultation

Guidance on Habitats Regulations Appraisal of plans – Classifying No Negative Effect	
A1	Options / policies that will not themselves lead to development e.g., because they relate to design or other qualitative criteria for development, or they are not a land use planning policy.
A2	Options / policies intended to protect the natural environment, including biodiversity
A3	Options / policies intended to conserve or enhance the natural, built or historic environment, where enhancement measures will not be likely to have any negative effect on a Natura 2000 Site
A4	Options / policies that positively steer development away from Natura 2000 Sites and associated sensitive areas
A5	General policy statements or policies that only express general intentions or political aspirations.
Guidance on Habitats Regulations Appraisal of plans – Classifying No Significant Negative Effect	
B	Elements of the plan that could have an effect but the likelihood is there would be no significant negative effect on a European Sites network either alone or in combination with other elements of the same plan, or other plans or projects

Draft Policies	Category A?	Type	Next stage?	Comment
LA 01 Encourage all partners and other stakeholders to seek to further National Landscape AONB purposes across all relevant policies, programmes, activities and decisions.	**Yes**	**A5**	**No**	A general policy statement
LA 02 Recognise and respond to the main factors that threaten the valued qualities of the National Landscape: e.g. built development; light pollution; water abstraction; agricultural practices including diffuse pollution of watercourses; climate risk; lack of woodland management; damage to historic sites; and poorly	**Yes**	**A3**	**No**	Supports the conservation of the natural, built or historic environment. Seeks to avoid, minimise, mitigate and reverse threats to the valued qualities.

managed access, seeking to avoid, minimise, mitigate and reverse them whenever possible.				
LA 04 Support and promote a landscape-led approach across all sectors that conserves and enhances the character and qualities of the North Wessex Downs landscape.	**Yes**	**A5**	**No**	A general policy statement
LA 05 Support and encourage efforts to conserve and interpret the rich heritage of the North Wessex Downs.	**Yes**	**A3**	**No**	Supports the conservation of the natural, built or historic environment
LA 06 All development in or affecting the setting of the National Landscape should conserve and enhance the character, valued qualities and heritage of the North Wessex Downs landscape.	**Yes**	**A1**	**No**	Relates to design or other qualitative criteria for development
~~LA 07~~				Deleted after consultation
FLM 02 Encourage and support farmer-led groups and other joint working and expansion/replication of existing landscape-scale nature recovery and land management projects, both within and beyond the National Landscape, to assist in the delivery of National Landscape and Big Chalk objectives.	**Yes**	**A3**	**No**	Supports the conservation of the natural environment
FLM 13 Support efforts to identify	**Yes**	**A3**	**No**	A policy intended to conserve or enhance the natural, built or historic environment. Policy

and develop the skills required to care for the landscape and its valued qualities, with opportunities for all to acquire such skills.				BNR15 will ensure that proposals that have a likely significant effect (either alone or in combination with other plans and projects) upon a European Site are resisted unless it can be found following an appropriate assessment that they will have no significant adverse effect on the integrity of the site concerned.
FLM 15 Encourage good agricultural land management practices and adherence to good practice to contribute to resource protection, such as healthy soil management, preventing flooding from surface water run-off and safeguarding watercourses from nutrient run-off and silt pollution.	**Yes**	**A2**	**No**	A policy intended to protect the natural environment, including biodiversity
FLM 18 Encourage and support landowners to develop whole estate plans where suitable to enable long-term, integrated landscape management.	**Yes**	**A5**	**No**	A general policy statement
FLM 19 Encourage and support farmers and land managers to adopt practices that sequester carbon, minimise soil carbon loss and support climate mitigation and adaptation through nature-based solutions aligned with National Landscape purposes.	**Yes**	**A2**	**No**	A policy intended to protect the natural environment by reducing CO_2 in the atmosphere.
BNR04 Support farmers and land managers in restoring, creating and maintaining a resilient network habitats with thriving populations of key	**Yes**	**A3**	**No**	A policy intended to conserve or enhance the natural environment. Strengthened by Policy BNR02 that seeks to resist proposals that will lead to the direct or indirect degradation or loss of nationally or locally designated wildlife sites, priority habitats or populations of protected and priority species.

species, guided by the Nature Recovery Plan and LNRS priorities.				
BNR05 Support efforts to understand and respond to the localised impacts of climate change on vulnerable habitats and species within and surrounding the North Wessex Downs, to improve resilience and adaptation.	**Yes**	**A3**	**No**	A policy intended to conserve or enhance the natural environment. Strengthened by Policy BNR02 that seeks to resist proposals that will lead to the direct or indirect degradation or loss of nationally or locally designated wildlife sites, priority habitats or populations of protected and priority species.
BNR09 Support Catchment Partnerships and other key stakeholders including water companies to promote and deliver projects to conserve, restore and enhance chalk streams, rivers and other waterbodies to achieve good ecological status	**Yes**	**A3**	**No**	Supports the conservation of the natural environment
BNR10 Encourage and support restoration of Plantations on Ancient Woodland Sites and protection and management of woodland generally for nature recovery, as well as its recreational, carbon storage and economic value.	**Yes**	**A2**	**No**	A policy intended to protect woodland
BNR13 Support research, including to understand the causes of declines in key species such as ground-nesting birds and support appropriate action to rebuild populations, and use of tools such as citizen science to monitor the impact	**Yes**	**A3**	**No**	Supports the conservation of the natural environment. Strengthened by Policy BNR02 that seeks to resist proposals that will lead to the direct or indirect degradation or loss of nationally or locally designated wildlife sites, priority habitats or populations of protected and priority species.

of habitat restoration and improved management practices in the National Landscape.				
BNR16 Realise the potential for actions that align nature recovery with the rich cultural heritage of the North Wessex Downs, e.g. hedge restoration and management, arable reversion to grassland on historic monuments, sensitive woodland management etc..	**Yes**	**A5**	**No**	A general policy statement
HE 01 Encourage and facilitate work to improve the condition of designated heritage assets that are on Historic England's 'Heritage at Risk' register and explore the designation or greater protection of other heritage assets through work with local Historic Environment Records, Historic England and Natural England.	**Yes**	**A3**	**No**	Supports the conservation of the built or historic environment
HE 05 Encourage and support the production and publication of 'local lists' of heritage assets.	**Yes**	**A5**	**No**	A general policy statement
HE 10 Encourage the sensitive restoration of historic buildings for new uses, where appropriate and in alignment with National Landscape purposes, to ensure their long-term survival.	**Yes**	**A5**	**No**	A general policy statement
HE11 Encourage improvements in agricultural practice	**Yes**	**A3**	**No**	A policy intended to conserve and enhance the historic environment.

to remove or mitigate the threat to archaeological sites from arable cultivation, e.g. through ELMS.				
HE12 Encourage the consistent use of Conservation Area appraisals and management plans as important considerations to inform planning decisions.	**Yes**	**A1**	**No**	A policy relating to design or other qualitative criteria for development
NR 09 Promote well designed Sustainable Drainage Systems (SuDS), taking into account unique characteristics of the chalk geology and groundwater levels, which benefit water quality, water quantity, biodiversity and amenity in urban areas. Promote natural flood management initiatives, particularly upstream in the catchment, to maximise multiple benefits to benefit people and wildlife.	**Yes**	**A3**	**No**	Supports the conservation of the natural environment. Three SACs in the area may be affected by inappropriate water levels and hydrological changes. Policy BNR15 will ensure that proposals that have a likely significant effect (either alone or in combination with other plans and projects) upon a European Site are resisted unless it can be found following an appropriate assessment that they will have no significant adverse effect on the integrity of the site concerned.
NR 17 Encourage and support simple greenhouse gas and carbon accounting to monitor the effectiveness of changes.	**Yes**	**A5**	**No**	A general policy statement
NR18 Encourage and support knowledge exchange among landowners and farmers to adapt to the impacts of climate change, e.g. including sustainable farming practices, soil health, circular water economy principles (reduced	**Yes**	**A5**	**No**	A general policy statement

usage, grey water re-use, increased resilience to water shortages), and micro-generation of renewable energy compatible with National Landscape purposes.				
DE 07 Development (apart from exempted development) must encourage, support and promote biodiversity net. gain and contribute to nature recovery by protecting, restoring and providing for new and improved habitats and connected nature recovery networks.	**Yes**	**A2**	**No**	Protects the conservation of the natural environment. Policy BNR14 will ensure that proposals that have a likely significant effect (either alone or in combination with other plans and projects) upon a European Site are resisted unless it can be found following an appropriate assessment that they will have no significant adverse effect on the integrity of the site concerned.
DE 08 To ensure that dark skies and tranquillity are protected no new uses or developments that individually or cumulatively result in a material increase in lighting, noise, pollution and or activity that fails to conserve and enhance the valued qualities of the National Landscape should be permitted.	**Yes**	**A5**	**No**	A general policy statement
DE 11 Maintain the rural character and valued qualities of the National Landscape by preventing over development of sites and the erosion of local character. The following should be considered: • The overall size, scale and massing of the replacement dwelling and/or	**Yes**	**A5**	**No**	A general policy statement

extension compared to the original (new dwellings should not be materially larger in terms of volume). • Site context and local context including natural and built character and features, visual prominence and the local vernacular. • Relationship within the local street scene/ rural countryside and potential to unbalance this.				
DE 12 Proposals for farm diversification, including the re-use of buildings, should be considered positively provided they will conserve and enhance the natural beauty of the National Landscape and its setting and: • can demonstrate that they meet a local need; • contribute to the local economy; • add value to land-based products; or form part of a whole farm/estate plan endorsed by the NWDNL unit and the local authority	**No**	**B**	**No**	Provides support to farm diversification schemes without ensuring the integrity of a European Site. Policy BNR15 will ensure that proposals that have a likely significant effect (either alone or in combination with other plans and projects) upon a European Site are resisted unless it can be found following an appropriate assessment that they will have no significant adverse effect on the integrity of the site concerned. Applying this policy in combination with the modifying policies within the plan will ensure that there is no significant negative effect on a European Site.
DE 13 To help meet net. zero targets, a net zero design approach should be adopted for all new developments. The installation of roof-mounted photovoltaic solar installations and other small-scale renewable energy proposals that are compatible with the	**Yes**	**A1**	**No**	A policy relating to design or other qualitative criteria for development

purpose of conserving and enhancing the natural beauty of the National Landscape should be supported.				
DE17 New landscape enhancement proposals and/or mitigation should apply a nature-based approach which is informed by local context. The NWDNL Nature Recovery Plan and the relevant Local Nature Recovery Strategy. Non-native or invasive species will not be supported unless a valid reason can be demonstrated, and it meets the priorities of the Nature Recovery Plan and conserves and enhances local landscape and the natural beauty of the National Landscape	**Yes**	**A1**	**No**	A policy that will not in itself lead to development
DE 19 Breaches of planning controls that undermine the purpose of designation should meet with prompt and robust enforcement action.	**Yes**	**A5**	**No**	A general policy statement
CO 02 Provide parishes and all other relevant community groups and individuals with information and training as necessary to raise awareness of the valued qualities of the National Landscape and the need to conserve and enhance it.	**Yes**	**A5**	**No**	A general policy statement
CO 04 Support communities play	**No**	**B**	**No**	A policy to provide support to renewable energy schemes without ensuring the integrity

their part in climate change mitigation and adaption, including projects to promote community use of renewable energy sources, consistent with National Landscape objectives.				of a European Site. Policy BNR15 will ensure that proposals that have a likely significant effect (either alone or in combination with other plans and projects) upon a European Site are resisted unless it can be found following an appropriate assessment that they will have no significant adverse effect on the integrity of the site concerned. Applying this policy in combination with the modifying policies within the plan will ensure that there is no significant negative effect on a European Site.
CO 09 Support provision of reliable and affordable broadband and mobile telephone connections throughout the North Wessex Downs in ways that respect the valued qualities of the area.	**No**	**B**	**No**	The policy advocated infrastructure development without ensuring the integrity of a European Site. Policy BNR15 will ensure that proposals that have a likely significant effect (either alone or in combination with other plans and projects) upon a European Site are resisted unless it can be found following an appropriate assessment that they will have no significant adverse effect on the integrity of the site concerned. Applying this policy in combination with the modifying policies within the plan will ensure that there is no significant negative effect on a European Site.
CO 10 Ensure the development and implementation of transport plans and programmes, including those related to the strategic highway corridors running through the National Landscape, addresses the needs of North Wessex Downs communities, reduces transport impacts on the environment, and conserves and enhances the valued qualities of the landscape	**Yes**	**A3**	**No**	Supports the conservation of the natural environment.
CO 11 Support measures to enable active travel and provide integrated and demand-responsive passenger transport, including easily accessible	**Yes**	**A1**	**No**	A policy that will not in itself lead to development

information, across the North Wessex Downs that serves the needs of local people and visitors.				
CO 12 Secure Travel Plans for new developments with significant traffic generation potential within the North Wessex Downs to reduce car use and encourage active and sustainable travel.	**Yes**	**A1**	**No**	A policy that will not in itself lead to development
ART 01 Enable greater accessibility to the North Wessex Downs National Landscape for users of all backgrounds and abilities for quiet enjoyment and improved health and well-being, consistent with National Landscape purposes.	**No**	**B**	**No**	A policy to increase public access to the countryside without ensuring the integrity of a European Site. One SAC within the area may be affected by public access and disturbance. Policy ART 06 seeks to recognise and protect those areas that are too sensitive to intrusion or disturbance. In addition, policy BNR15 will ensure that proposals that have a likely significant effect (either alone or in combination with other plans and projects) upon a European Site are resisted unless it can be found following an appropriate assessment that they will have no significant adverse effect on the integrity of the site concerned. Applying this policy in combination with the modifying policies within the plan will ensure that there is no significant negative effect on a European Site.
ART 04 Promote and encourage responsible use of rights of way, including byways, and where desirable restrict or exclude non-essential motorised use, consistent with National Landscape purposes.	**Yes**	**A5**	**No**	A general policy statement
ART 10 Encourage greater recognition among commercial transport providers such as train operating companies and bus operators of the recreational / leisure potential of	**Yes**	**A5**	**No**	A general policy statement

stations in and around the North Wessex Downs, including access from the 'gateway towns' on the edge of the National Landscape.				
ART 13 Support land managers and the access sector to recognise and manage the potential for tensions between public access and commercially sensitive areas, for example livestock farms or game shoots where disturbance could have a damaging impact.	**Yes**	**A5**	**No**	A general policy statement but could protect the natural environment through reducing disturbance.
ART 14 Enable, encourage and promote active and sustainable transport access, including but not limited to particular 'honeypot' locations which are under stress from car-borne visitors, to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, improve air quality and conserve and enhance the natural beauty of the landscape.	**Yes**	**A5**	**No**	A general policy statement

Appendix 4: Précis of consultation responses

Natural England

20th June 2025

….. Natural England's advice is that the Management Plan, as submitted, is not directly connected with or necessary to the conservation management of these European Sites but is not likely to have a significant effect (excluding any mitigating measures designed to avoid harmful effects on the site) on the features for which the above-mentioned sites have been designated. The management plan will not therefore undermine the European Sites' conservation objectives. Our reasons for this advice are as follows: The policies within the management plan are worded and designed to be consistent with the primary purpose of its AONB designation, which is conserving and enhancing the natural beauty of the area in accordance with Section 114 of the National Parks and Access to the Countryside act 1949. The Act states that natural beauty "shall be construed as including references to the preservation or … conservation of its flora, fauna and geological or physiographical features". In addition, policy BNR14 within the management plan will ensure that proposals that have a likely significant effect (either alone or in combination with other plans and projects) upon a European Site are resisted unless it can be found following an appropriate assessment that they will have no significant adverse effect Natural England advises that your Authority is not required to undertake an appropriate assessment under regulation 63 of the Habitats Regulations on this occasion. Your Authority must however come to its own decision as the competent authority. …..

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Local Government Reorganisation – Full Proposal for Oxfordshire and West Berkshire

Committee considering report:	Executive
Date of Committee:	12 November 2025
Portfolio Member:	Councillor Justin Pemberton
Report Author:	Sarah Clarke
Forward Plan Ref:	EX4717

1 Purpose of the Report

1.1 The English Devolution White Paper published on the 16 December 2024, outlined the government's plans to reset the relationship with local and regional government. The government stated that rebuilding and reforming local government would be the foundation of devolution, with a focus on getting the basics right.

1.2 On the 5 February, the government wrote to the Leaders of all two-tier councils (the five district councils and the county council) in Oxfordshire. This was a formal invitation to those Leaders to develop a proposal for local government reorganisation and to provide 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.

1.3 On the 10 February, West Berkshire Council received a formal request on behalf of South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse Councils to consider the option of a new unitary council covering the three areas. That resulted in the development of an Interim Proposal, that was approved by West Berkshire Council's Executive at a meeting on 19 March 2025.

1.4 The government invited the submission of full proposals by the 28 November, and this report proposes the approval by Executive of the Full Proposal, produced at Appendix A, for submission to Government.

2 Recommendations

It is recommended that Executive:

a) Is informed that since the statutory invitation to all councils in two tier areas, significant work has been undertaken by all Oxfordshire Councils and West Berkshire Council.

b) Is informed that there has been significant engagement and collaboration on the development of these proposals by Cherwell District Council, South Oxfordshire

District Council, West Berkshire Council, West Oxfordshire District Council and the Vale of White Horse District Council.

c) Is informed that two other proposals will be submitted, one proposed by Oxfordshire County Council covering the Oxfordshire area (but excluding West Berkshire) and one from Oxford City Council covering the Oxfordshire and West Berkshire area.

d) Approves the submission to Government of a full proposal as detailed at Appendix A, 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 covering the entire existing boundaries of Cherwell and West Oxfordshire District Councils and Oxford City Council, with a working title of 'Oxford & Shires'.

e) Subject to recommendation d) being approved, notes that Cherwell District Council, South Oxfordshire District Council, Vale of White Horse District Council and West Oxfordshire District Councill will submit the full proposal directly to Government in line with the Oxfordshire invitation letter.

3 Implications and Impact Assessment

Implication	**Commentary**
Financial:	None arising directly from this decision. This report seeks approval to submit a proposal to government for consideration, and government will make the final decision, following consultation, as to what changes will be made to local government in West Berkshire. Consultancy fees have been incurred on a shared basis between the 5 authorities promoting this proposal, which will be offset in part by the funding approved by the government for councils undertaking local government reorganisation work in response to the governments invitation to do so. Consideration will be given to the potential application of transformation funding to fund the balance of the Council's contribution. The two unitary model proposal includes a full financial case based on work undertaken by PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC), CIPFA (the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy), People Too and this has been reviewed by the Section 151 officers from across the five councils supporting the two unitary model. Additional work will be required going forward, and it should be noted that the process of local government reorganisation

	coincides with the fair funding review, resulting in a lack of clarity over future levels of government funding for all councils.			
Human Resource:	None arising directly from this decision. This report seeks approval to submit a proposal to government for consideration, and government will make the final decision, following consultation, as to what changes will be made to local government in West Berkshire.			
Legal:	The government have invited any principal authority in the area of the county of Oxfordshire, to submit a proposal for a single tier of local government proposals under Part 1 of the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007 ('the 2007 Act')			
Risk Management:	There is a risk that government will not support the proposal detailed in this report.			
Property:	None arising directly from this decision. This report seeks approval to submit a proposal to government for consideration, and government will make the final decision, following consultation, as to what changes will be made to local government in West Berkshire.			
Policy:	This proposal will support the governments devolution agenda and will meet the stated aims and criteria for local government reorganisation.			
	Positive	**Neutral**	**Negative**	**Commentary**
Equalities Impact:				

A Are there any aspects of the proposed decision, including how it is delivered or accessed, that could impact on inequality?		X		There are many benefits arising from this proposal as outlined in the proposal document, but at this point, the decision is limited to the submission of a proposal and the government will subsequently determine which option to progress.
B Will the proposed decision have an impact upon the lives of people with protected characteristics, including employees and service users?		X		There are many benefits arising from this proposal as outlined in the proposal document, but at this point, the decision is limited to the submission of a proposal.
Environmental Impact:		X		There are many benefits arising from this proposal as outlined in the proposal document, but at this point, the decision is limited to the submission of a proposal.
Health Impact:		X		There are many benefits arising from this proposal as outlined in the proposal document, but at this point, the decision is limited to the submission of a proposal.
ICT Impact:		X		There are many benefits arising from this proposal as outlined in the proposal document, but at this point, the decision is limited to the submission of a proposal.
Digital Services Impact:		X		There are many benefits arising from this proposal as outlined in the proposal document, but at this point, the decision is limited to the submission of a proposal.
Council Strategy Priorities:		X		There are many benefits arising from this proposal as outlined in the proposal document, but at this point, the decision is limited to the submission of a proposal.
Core Business:		X		There are many benefits arising from this proposal as outlined in the proposal

				document, but at this point, the decision is limited to the submission of a proposal. There are also a number of Shared Service Arrangements that are in place between West Berkshire Council and other councils. Any existing shared service arrangements would continue following reorganisation, and future arrangements would be for the new authority to consider.
Data Impact:		X		There are many benefits arising from this proposal as outlined in the proposal document, but at this point, the decision is limited to the submission of a proposal.
Consultation and Engagement:	There has been significant consultation and engagement, as fully detailed in chapter 11 of the Proposal Document at Appendix A. Between **4 June** and **16 July 2025**, people shared their views through an online survey, **21 drop-in events**, and parish/town council sessions. **2,147** people responded to the survey – along with feedback from local councils, businesses and community groups across Oxfordshire and West Berkshire, in respect of the proposal detailed in this report. There has been additional engagement activity more recently in West Berkshire, following the resolution of Reading Borough Council in response to LGR, to seek the annexation into Reading of five wards at the eastern boundaries of West Berkshire. The proposals have also been considered by Members of the Devolution Advisory Group.			

4 Executive Summary

4.1 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 (devolution).

4.2 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.

4.3 Following the submission of the Interim Plan in 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'.

5 Supporting Information

Introduction and Background

5.1 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.

5.2 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.

5.3 At its meeting on the 19 March 2025 West Berkshire Council resolved to support, alongside Cherwell District Council, South Oxfordshire District Council Vale of White Horse District Council and West Oxfordshire District Council, the 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 these authorities and in multiple teams to develop the Full Proposal, which is produced at Appendix A to this report.

5.4 The Government indicated that they expected engagement work to be undertaken by Councils in developing recommendations so that any proposals submitted could demonstrate how they had regard to the views expressed. A significant engagement exercise was undertaken, hosting drop in events across the District, and additionally inviting town and parish councils and other partners to attend online events. These events highlighted a clear preference amongst those living, working and learning in West Berkshire, to be part of a Ridgeway Council.

Proposals

5.5 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

5.6 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 here Local government reorganisation and devolution | Oxfordshire County Council. 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 here www.oxford.gov.uk .

5.7 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 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 as **Appendix A.**

5.8 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.

5.9 It is considered that the Two Unitary model best meets the governments criteria for reorganisation, by proposing two councils that will big enough to deliver financial stability whilst being small enough to be representative and responsive to the communities that we serve. Importantly, this proposal will result in the creation of two new councils that

will be ideally placed to drive growth and fully support the governments devolution agenda.

6 Other options considered

6.1 The government has not formally invited West Berkshire Council to submit a proposal for Local Government Reorganisation, and it could therefore do nothing. However, government has stated its intention to reorganise small unitary councils so that these operate with a population size of about 500k residents, which means that West Berkshire Council will be subject to reorganisation proposals. The Council has rejected the 'do nothing' option as this would close all future options to working with the existing Councils in Oxfordshire, and the strength of the business case and engagement activity has highlighted a strong future option for the Council.

6.2 Another option for West Berkshire Council to meet the government's plans for reorganisation, would be the potential to merge with a number of the existing Berkshire unitary councils.

6.3 It is considered, for all the reasons set out in the Full Proposal, that there are compelling arguments which support the Full Proposal, which highlights why a two unitary council model of local government will meet both the governments objectives, but also provides the best opportunity to ensure sustainable, responsive, and effective local government services to all our communities.

7 Conclusion

7.1 It is recommended that West Berkshire Council support the submission to government of the proposal for the creation of two unitary councils across Oxfordshire and West Berkshire, for the reasons that have been fully detailed in Appendix A.

8 Appendices

8.1 Appendix A – Full Proposal for a Two Unitary Local Government Model across Oxfordshire and West Berkshire

Background Papers:

1. Report to Executive dated 19 March 2025 - 4. LGR Ridgeway Report - Final March 2025.pdf
2. Interim Proposal for LGR in Oxfordshire and West Berkshire approved by Executive on 19 March 2025 - 4. Ridgeway Interim Proposal UPDATED FINAL Clean.pdf

Subject to Call-In:

Yes: ☐ No: ☒

The item is due to be referred to Council for approval ☒

Delays in implementation could have serious financial implications for the Council	☐
Delays in implementation could compromise the Council's position	☒
Considered or reviewed by one of the Council's Scrutiny Committees or associated Task Groups within the preceding six months	☒
Item is Urgent Key Decision	☐
Report is to note only	☐

Wards affected: All

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Two Councils. One better future.

The two unitary Local Government Reorganisation proposal for **Oxfordshire and West Berkshire**



Cherwell District Council North Oxfordshire

South Oxfordshire District Council Listening Learning Leading

Vale of White Horse District Council

West Berkshire Council

West Oxfordshire District Council

Oxford & Shires | Ridgeway
Local Government Reorganisation Proposal

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1. Foreword

1.1 Joint letter from the Leaders of Cherwell District, South Oxfordshire District, Vale of White Horse District, West Berkshire Unitary and West Oxfordshire District Councils

This is an ambitious proposal for Oxfordshire and West Berkshire that will benefit local communities for decades to come. We are excited by the transformational opportunity to deliver two new councils for one better future.

We have embraced the chance to propose the only viable solution that is positive, innovative, and provides a sustainable model for local government reorganisation in both Oxfordshire and West Berkshire.

It is clear that reorganising local government presents a once-in-a-generation opportunity for our communities, the region and the country. We will be able to deliver better council services more efficiently and manage sustainable growth to deliver more jobs, homes and infrastructure.

Our residents have told us that they have clear priorities in terms of the change they want to see, especially in areas such as highways, planning, adult social care, and SEND. They have also been clear that they want us to be efficient and to be more representative of the communities we serve. Local government can and will do better. We will be innovative and proactive to manage the increasing demand and deliver the services our communities need.

We have approached this process not with a view to protecting what we already do, or with political boundaries in mind, but rather with a focus on how local government can deliver the best possible outcomes for all of the communities across Oxfordshire and West Berkshire.

We believe our proposal is the only suitable option that meets all of the Government's criteria. It will empower stronger communities giving all areas a voice. It will deliver tangible efficiencies and improved financial sustainability. This will provide a platform for redesigning high quality and transformed services. It will create two councils that will be the right size and geography to be effective and viable and small enough to be representative and responsive to the communities they serve. They will be ideally placed to drive effective devolution with others across the region, to fully support the Government's growth agenda.

Creating two new councils for one better future is an opportunity we will embrace with vigour, dedication and care for all our communities.

2. Executive Summary

2.1 A once in a generation opportunity to deliver two new unitary councils for Oxfordshire and West Berkshire

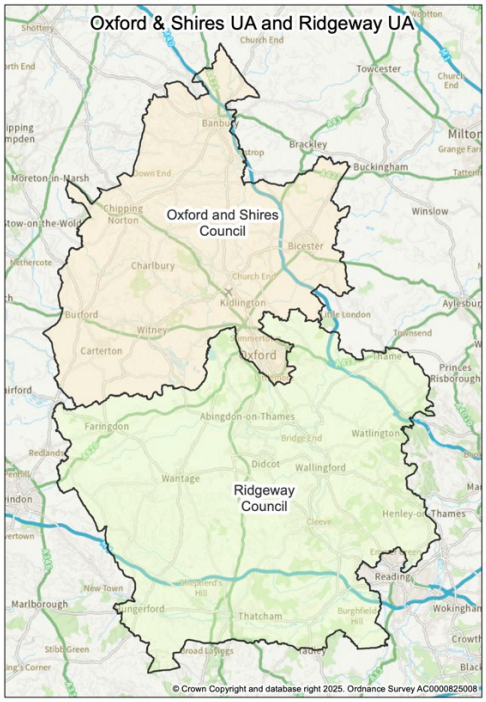
"A new council needs to be bold and visionary in how the area is to retain and improve its standing as an excellent place to call home, to work and to play."

Our area is one of high-quality landscape and thriving economies, with the unique globally renowned and historic Oxford city working in harmony with high-tech science and engineering industries in a mix of rural and market town settings.

Following extensive engagement, people told us they want:

- **Better services - not just more of the same.**
- **Better value for money and efficiency.**
- **Councils that are locally focused and responsive.**
- **Local accountability, identity and voice.**
- **Growth enabled in a way that protects the nature of our communities.**

Our proposal **meets the government criteria** and sets out a clear, evidence-based plan for creating two new unitary councils across the Oxford & Shires and Ridgeway areas — to deliver better, more efficient, and more locally accountable public services.



Oxford & Shires 471,716 population
Ridgeway 482,703 population

Government Criteria	
1. A **single tier and sensible geography** to improve housing supply and outcomes avoiding creating (dis/)advantaged areas	✓
2. Unitary local government must be the **right size** to achieve efficiencies, improve capacity and withstand financial shocks	✓
3. Prioritise the delivery of **high quality and sustainable public services** to citizens	✓
4. Councils work together in coming to a view that **meets local needs and is informed by local views**	✓
5. New unitary structures must support **devolution** arrangements	✓
6. Enable **stronger community engagement** and deliver genuine opportunity for neighbourhood empowerment	✓

2.2 Our case for change

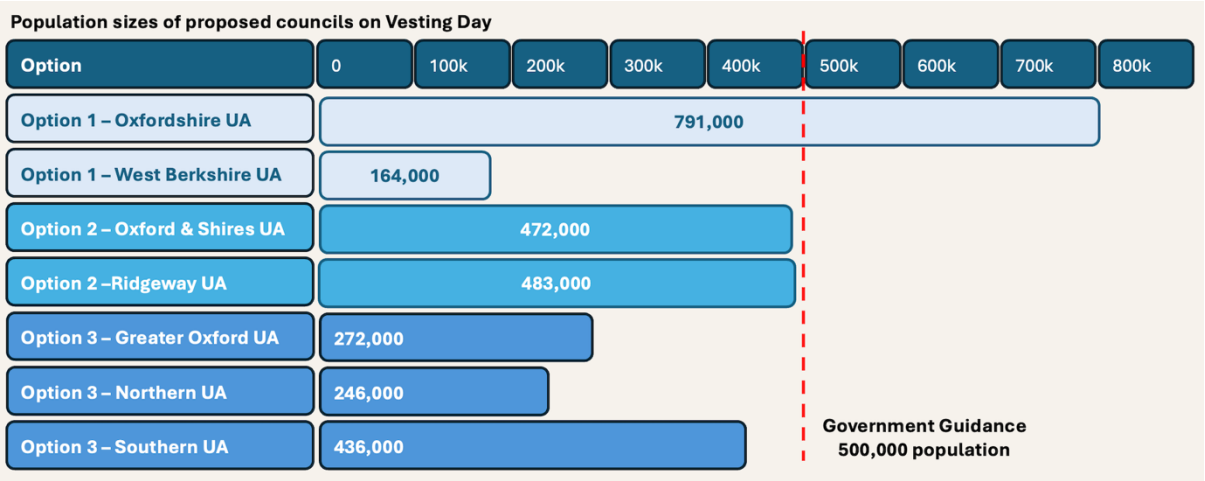
The Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) invited the principal Oxfordshire authorities in February 2025 to submit proposals for the establishment of unitary local government across Oxfordshire, with the option of also including neighbouring authorities. Oxfordshire and West Berkshire (which is already a unitary area) make up a coherent geography for Local Government Reorganisation (LGR) with strong and historic connections from a social, economic and physical perspective. This led us to the conclusion that **a broader geography than Oxfordshire alone would be beneficial for the Thames Valley region**.

Local government across Oxfordshire and West Berkshire is under pressure. Population growth, ageing communities, and rising service demand are driving up costs and stretching services far beyond manageable levels. The current system is too complex and stretched over geographies and populations that are too large, and the current setup of multiple councils faces significant financial challenges.

Residents, businesses and communities want simpler, more local decision-making and better value for money, and **we support this need for change**. We want to deliver clearer accountability and consistent and co-ordinated service delivery with greater flexibility in service design to meet local need. Our proposal will enable greater strategic capacity whilst eliminating duplication, and it will deliver stronger alignment and collaboration at a strategic partnership level. Overall, we have a strong ambition to build a more sustainable model of government for the benefit of the communities that we serve.

2.3 Two unitaries - delivering the best outcomes for our communities

Creating two new councils offers the right balance between efficiency and local identity. Each would serve around 450–500,000 people — **large enough to be efficient and stable, but small enough to stay connected to communities**. Two other proposals are being considered for Oxfordshire, one proposal that leaves West Berkshire unchanged, but would create one council for Oxfordshire that is too large to balance the criteria that the government has set out. The other proposal is a three unitary model covering Oxfordshire and West Berkshire, but would create councils that will lack the scale and financial resilience to address the challenges we currently face.



Our options appraisal shows that only the two unitary model – Oxford & Shires and Ridgeway – meets the requirement for **strong local accountability alongside financial sustainability**. The two new councils would strike a good balance between achieving the advantages of scale in two similarly sized authorities, while establishing a strong locality working model that makes community empowerment intrinsic to the way the councils would work.

MHCLG Headline Criteria	Option 1 – Oxfordshire UA & West Berkshire UA	Option 2 – Oxford & Shires and Ridgeway UAs	Option 3 – Greater Oxford UA & two other UAs
1. A **single tier and sensible geography** to improve housing supply and outcomes avoiding creating (dis/)advantaged areas	Does not meet the criteria	Fully meets the criteria	Does not meet the criteria
2. Unitary local government must be the **right size** to achieve efficiencies, improve capacity and withstand financial shocks	Does not meet the criteria	Fully meets the criteria	Does not meet the criteria
3. Prioritise the delivery of **high quality and sustainable public services** to citizens	Partially meets the criteria	Partially meets the criteria	Does not meet the criteria
4. Councils work together in coming to a view that **meets local needs and is informed by local views**	Does not meet the criteria	Partially meets the criteria	Does not meet the criteria
5. New unitary structures must support **devolution** arrangements	Partially meets the criteria	Fully meets the criteria	Partially meets the criteria
6. Enable **stronger community engagement** and deliver genuine opportunity for neighbourhood empowerment	Partially meets the criteria	Fully meets the criteria	Fully meets the criteria

Independent financial testing shows that the two-unitary model is the only viable choice. The two unitary model pays back its transition costs in just over four years, and once long-term transformational savings are taken into consideration, our model would **save around £59.8 million a year**.

Potential Annual Recurring Benefits from Local Government Reorganisation and Ambitious Transformation from PwC modelling

Option	£0m	£10m	£20m	£30m	£40m	£50m	£60m	£70m	
Option 1 – Oxfordshire UA & West Berkshire UA	Reorganisation Benefits			Transformation Benefits					TOTAL Recurring Annual Benefits £58.4m p.a.
Option 2 – Oxford & Shires and Ridgeway UAs	Reorganisation Benefits			Transformation Benefits					TOTAL Recurring Annual Benefits £59.8m p.a.
Option 3 – Greater Oxford UA & two other UAs	Re-organisation Benefits			Transformation Benefits					TOTAL Recurring Annual Benefits £47.7m p.a.

Furthermore, an assessment of the risks around future financial resilience based on the current financial baseline against the CIPFA Financial Resilience Index, concludes that **the two unitary model represents the lowest risk option to secure financial resilience.**

Total Risk Scores for Local Government Reorganisation options from the CIPFA Financial Resilience Index analysis

Option	CIPFA Financial Resilience Index Risk Score
Option 1 – Oxfordshire UA & West Berkshire UA	43.8
Option 2 – Oxford & Shires and Ridgeway UAs	24.1
Option 3 – Greater Oxford UA & two other UAs	35.3

These ongoing improvements and savings mean the two unitary proposal has the potential to generate **highest overall financial benefits of any of the options, with the least risk and supports financial sustainability across the whole of Oxfordshire and West Berkshire.**

2.4 Supporting devolution and driving growth

The two new councils will **provide a robust growth offer and a strong locally connected base for the Mayoral Strategic Authority (MSA)** for the Thames Valley. We want to ensure close, improved and valued business relationships, engaging with key sectors and clusters to strengthen the economy of Oxfordshire and West Berkshire.

Working together we can focus on growth linked to Oxford's world-class innovation and industry and the wider area's world class engineering sector and booming rural economy around the A40 and A44 corridors. We will make the most of the area's advanced research, science and technology sector, strong rural enterprise, and connectivity across the M4 and A34 corridors. Our proposal will support housing delivery, better transport links, and local job creation while protecting the very character of towns and villages that makes this area thrive.

2.5 Transforming public services for a better future

We know that people want **better public services that are responsive and locally focused**. Our proposal responds to the Government's priorities, but also the priorities of those we have engaged with as we have developed this proposal. Every service will be safe and legal from day one but will also be designed to transform over time to make the most of the cost-savings and service improvements from a more sustainable geography, and to maximise benefits of existing high-performing services.

Social care transformation will **focus on prevention**, benefiting from the local teams enabled by a more manageable geography than existing services, and from the smarter use of technology. Children's Services and SEND will also benefit from more **early intervention, better commissioning, and shared best practice**. Housing and Homelessness services will be integrated, opening the door to more affordable homes and stronger local partnerships. **Joined up system working** to prevent harm and reduce inequalities will boost Public Health and Safety. **Increased collaboration with partners, providers and communities** will help align and shape development and infrastructure delivery to enable growth. Delivering integrated best-in class transport solutions that integrate Oxfordshire's strategic highways asset approach with West Berkshire's innovative, responsive and effective highways operations, improves public transport accessibility and responds to Net Zero ambitions.

We're committed to improving public services, by delivering them closer to and in more integrated ways, with and for the communities they serve.

2.6 Empowering our communities

At their hearts, each council will be **locally accountable** and will have a firm basis in locality working. They will be **accessible while being strategically capable and effective** at representing their communities. Our model strengthens local leadership and accountability – ensuring decisions are made by representatives who understand their communities. We want to encourage deeper community engagement, convening expertise and local insight to develop a detailed understanding of the hopes and concerns of residents, businesses and visitors and then advocate for change.

We want to champion strong local voices, celebrate rural, market-town and urban distinctiveness and empower local communities. We will collaborate with individuals, our communities and partners to develop **a locality working model that works for everyone** across Oxfordshire and West Berkshire.

2.7 Two new councils. One better future.

The proposal for two new councils — Oxford & Shires and Ridgeway — will provide the best long-term financial value, alongside improved services while protecting local accountability. At the heart of the proposal is the creation of a robust and innovative foundation for devolution and growth. It will provide the strongest voice for our communities in a model that also provides a rational, sensible scale of local government.

It is a plan for stronger councils, improved customer focussed services, a fairer future, and a better future for everyone living, working and learning in Oxfordshire and West Berkshire.

Chapter 3 Context and Background in a nutshell

Quick Chapter Summary

- When looking at Local Government Reorganisation (LGR) it makes sense to consider the natural geography of Oxfordshire and West Berkshire combined. West Berkshire offers complementary economic strengths, experience of running unitary services and there is a clear opportunity to improve financial resilience across the whole area
- The current approach to local government is not best suited to deal with rising demand, stretched finances and ambitions around devolution and growth.
- Partnership working and driving public sector reform is key. Our new local government model must reflect community identity, geography and local economies, ensuring services are better tailored to residents.
- Without change, duplication will persist, costs will continue to rise, and outcomes for residents will not improve.

What people told us

“...the joining of the existing smaller councils will assist in reducing inefficiencies and duplications. The cost savings can then be put towards chronic underfunding of services especially adult social care and children’s services/ education.”

“If the geographic area covered by a council is too large, it will have more potential for conflict over priority needs from different parts of the council population and one area may feel ignored to the benefit of another.

The two unitary model will:

- **Balance scale and locality:** It needs to be efficient and resilient, and connected to communities, reflecting identity and being rooted in local economies and geographies.
- **Avoid extremes in size:** It should not be a remote “mega-council” nor fragmented, small councils lacking capacity, in line with the government guidance of 500,000 residents per council
- **Improve outcomes for residents:** Services are tailored to the place and need.
- **Improve financial sustainability:** Strong enough to withstand financial shocks and deliver service efficiency where duplication is reduced, and decisions are made faster.
- **Provide strong local leadership:** Councillors are closer to the communities they serve.
- **Be resilient:** Giving an evidence-based, proportionate model aligned with geography and economy.

3. Context and Background

3.1 Oxfordshire and West Berkshire

The combined profile of Oxfordshire and West Berkshire is one of a high-quality landscape (located within three National Landscapes and designated greenbelt) and thriving market towns connected to a rural tapestry of villages and hamlets. At the centre of this combined geography is Oxford City with its globally renowned and historic University, which is one of the UK's most visited locations.

Economically strong, with a variety of high-functioning sectors and business clusters, the area is supported by a network of transport corridors that ensure connections into, through and out to key cities and logistics hubs. Generally affluent, Oxfordshire and West Berkshire offer residents a high quality of life. However, challenges around pockets of deprivation, housing affordability and the economic ramifications of this persist. The area has high potential to address these inequalities and deliver inclusive growth that benefits all communities.

Profiling the area

Oxfordshire and West Berkshire make up a coherent geography for LGR, with strong and historic connections from a social, economic and physical perspective. Key indicators show that the two areas complement each other while bringing different relative strengths that will be beneficial to combine in considering the future of local government across the area.



Together, the area of Oxfordshire and West Berkshire is an internationally significant region, known for its world-class research institutions, vibrant communities, and high-value economy.
Together, Oxfordshire and West Berkshire are home to over 900,000 residents across a mix of urban, rural and market town communities. Oxfordshire currently operates under a two-tier system, with Oxfordshire County Council delivering county-wide services and five district councils. West Berkshire is a unitary authority, providing all services to around 163,000 residents.

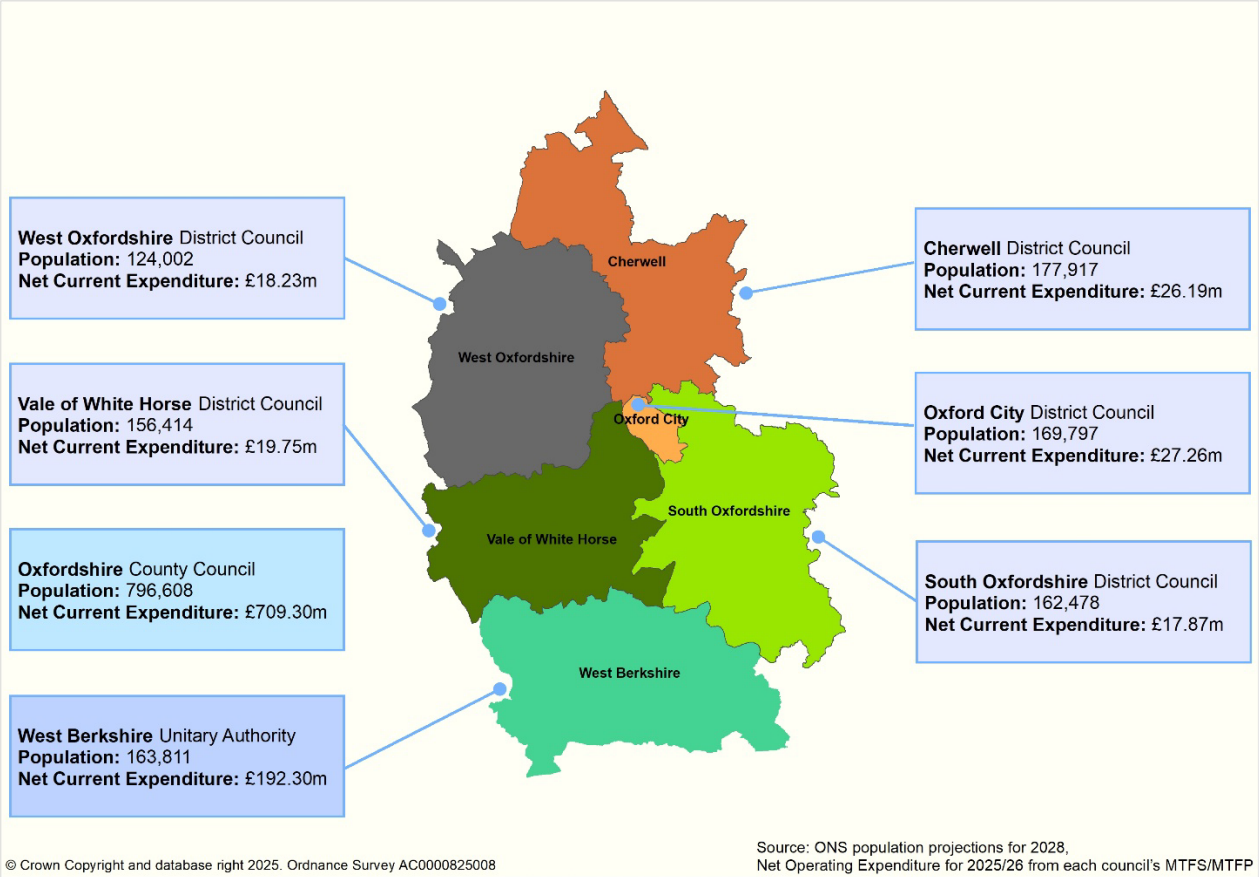
The region is a vital contributor to the South East's economy, with strong transport links including the M4 and A34 corridors, proximity to London and Heathrow, and access to key rail routes. Oxfordshire is internationally recognised for its academic excellence, innovation clusters, and science parks, while West Berkshire hosts significant logistics and defence operations.

Despite its strengths, the area faces challenges such as housing affordability, transport connectivity, and disparities in access to services. Local government reorganisation presents a chance to address these issues more holistically, equitably and collectively. This reorganisation aims to reduce duplication, improve financial resilience and ensure decisions remain close to the communities they affect. It offers an opportunity to align services more effectively, enhance local accountability, and create a more sustainable governance model.

The area at a glance

Area	Gross Value Added (GVA)	Business Growth	Employment	Digital Propensity Index	Children in Low-Income Families	Deprivation	Overall Health Index	Household Benefit Claim Rate
Oxfordshire	**£41.30**	**0.14%**	**61.3%**	**94.97%**	**9,643**	**11.58**	**112.8**	**11.75%**
West Berkshire	**£54.10**	**-0.80%**	**63.0%**	**95.00%**	**9,257**	**9.89**	**114.2**	**13.87%**
England	**£42.40**	**0.24%**	**57.4%**	**94.00%**	**18,981**	**21.67**	**100.8**	**21.3%**
Units	£ per hour worked, 2023	% change, 2023/2024	% employed, 2021/2022	% DPI, 2021/2022	Per 100k, 2023/2024	IMD, 2019/2020	2021	%, 2023/2024
Source	GVA per hour, ONS	Business Demography, ONS	Economic Activity Status, ONS	Digital Propensity Index, ONS	Stat-Xplore (requires log in)	English indices of deprivation, MHCLG	Health Index scores, England, ONS	DWP benefits, GOV.UK (requires log in)

Oxfordshire and West Berkshire are home to over 900,000 people across their seven councils. These are comprised of one unitary authority, West Berkshire Council, and Oxford County Council and its five districts: Cherwell, West Oxfordshire, South Oxfordshire, Oxford City and Vale of White Horse - operating a two-tier system.

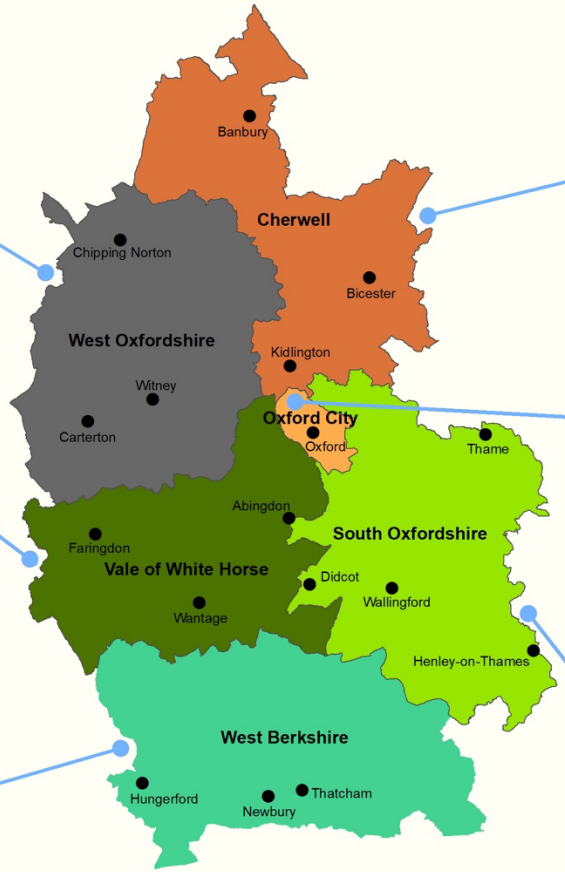


Each of the different areas of Oxfordshire and West Berkshire has a distinct identity.

West Oxfordshire is the second most sparsely populated district in the South East of England with residents living in over 120 villages and hamlets scattered across the district or in one of three towns, Witney, Carterton and Chipping Norton. One third of the district lies in the Cotswold National Landscape. Whilst deprivation is lower than average, the dispersed nature of the district means that despite general affluence, some areas are considered the most deprived in the UK in terms of access to services and facilities.

Vale of White Horse spans a mix of rural and urban areas between the River Thames and the Ridgeway, including three historic market towns of Abingdon, Faringdon and Wantage, Botley at Oxford's edge and the large village of Grove. The north of the area is on the fringes of Oxford and the North Wessex Downs National Landscape covers the southern part of the district. The district is generally affluent, with low deprivation and high life expectancy. It has the lowest housing affordability ratio in Oxfordshire.

West Berkshire comprises three main towns, Newbury, Thatcham and Hungerford and several suburban and rural communities. 74% of the area is covered by the North Wessex Downs National Landscape. Most of the population live along the Kennet Valley and in suburban areas to the west of, or adjacent to, Reading. The area is relatively affluent, with low levels of deprivation and good health outcomes. Housing affordability is lower than in Oxfordshire.



Cherwell has a growing population, encompassing a mix of market towns, villages and rural settings. The majority of residents live in the three urban areas of Banbury, Bicester and Kidlington, with the remainder living in over 70 rural villages. Whilst generally affluent, with high levels of employment compared to the South East average, there are pockets of deprivation, most notably within Banbury. Housing affordability remains a challenge in the district, as does a lower than average economic inactivity rate.

Oxford includes several key neighbourhoods in close proximity to the historic city centre, all bound by the Oxford Green Belt. Oxford's cultural identity is closely linked to the University of Oxford. The population includes a large student population (over 36,000). Oxford is a city of contrasts. Boasting high levels of education and affluence, it also contains some of the most deprived areas in Oxfordshire. Homelessness is a particular challenge along with acute housing affordability leading to high levels of commuting from adjacent districts and beyond.

South Oxfordshire has four main towns – Didcot, Henley, Thame and Wallingford, and a significant number of villages. Much of the district is rural and 70% has a Green Belt designation or resides in either the Chilterns or North Wessex Downs National Landscapes. It is generally affluent, with low deprivation and high life expectancy, however it has a high housing affordability ratio. There is also a lower than national average economic inactivity rate.

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3.2 The need for change

MHCLG invited the principal Oxfordshire authorities in February 2025 to submit proposals for the establishment of unitary local government across Oxfordshire with the aim of replacing the current two-tier system. This proposal has been developed in direct response to this invitation.

Local government is currently facing a series of systemic challenges, and the move to a unitary model is a once-in-a-generation operational opportunity to deliver meaningful and lasting change to help alleviate these issues. The key challenge to be addressed is improving the financial sustainability of local government in the area that will be well placed to meet residents' needs over the longer term. These considerations have led us to the conclusion that a broader geography than Oxfordshire alone would be beneficial for the Thames Valley region. This proposal therefore considers a geography that includes the current council area of West Berkshire (which is already a unitary council). West Berkshire offers a range of strengths including strong economic performance and complementary high tech business clusters.

Together, Oxfordshire and West Berkshire provide the opportunity to address financial resilience issues in local government, by creating two new unitary councils of the right size to withstand financial shocks. This responds to the government's intentions to address as a priority the challenge of small unitary authorities which are in financial distress. A second determining factor is the opportunity to redesign services to ensure delivery of these is maximised to address the needs of our communities now and into the future.

Councils across Oxfordshire and West Berkshire have a strong track record of collaboration to deliver services that meet shared community priorities. This legacy remains a virtue and continues to underpin effective and innovative service delivery. Despite this, as in many parts of the country, public services are coming under increasing strain. While the current two-tier system in Oxfordshire has supported innovation and proactive, interventionist approaches, there is a growing recognition that it faces long-term sustainability challenges in the face of mounting financial and operational pressures.

The changing policy direction of government towards single-tier local government presents a strategic opportunity to explore how alternative governance arrangements could offer greater resilience and efficiency, while building on the strengths of the existing system, and continuing to embed a 'prevention' approach to address service demand.

Demand for services varies across Oxfordshire and West Berkshire, reflecting the diverse demographic profiles and accessibility of rural and urban communities. Adult social care, Children's services and SEND continue to consume an ever-increasing share of limited upper-tier resources, driven by demographic change, rising demand, inflation and increasingly complex needs. Challenges at district level include surging demand for (and escalating costs) in housing and homelessness. Inflation and rising running costs further exacerbate financial vulnerabilities.

Trends in future demand for public services

Cherwell, Oxford City, and West Oxfordshire show distinct demographic patterns that will shape future service needs. Oxford City's younger demographic and high density will drive demand for education, transport, and healthcare services. Cherwell has seen rapid growth due to housing development, attracting working-age adults and families, which will increase pressure on schools, GP practices, and community infrastructure. West Oxfordshire's rurality and growing older population will require expanded adult social care, rural transport solutions, and mobile health services. This area will be required to rise to its distinct challenges of tackling high-cost, complex demand and urban deprivation.

South Oxfordshire, Vale of White Horse, and West Berkshire are experiencing steady population growth and demographic shift to a rising proportion of older residents, which will increase demand for health and social care services, age-friendly housing, and accessible transport. The rural and semi-urban nature of these areas presents challenges for service delivery, especially in remote communities, and ensuring that continued housing-led development and infrastructure expansion in education, healthcare, and community services continue. This area will need to focus on meeting the needs of the ageing population, rural access and unit cost inflation.

3.3 Making the case for creating unitary councils through LGR

Choosing the right option for reorganising local government in Oxfordshire and West Berkshire has the potential to significantly improve efficiency and achieve cost savings. A single-tier system in Oxfordshire and West Berkshire will eliminate the duplication of services and administration that can occur when two tiers of councils are responsible for the same area, but the levels of improvement will be dependent on the nature of the new councils that are created. Efficiency savings will be essential in meeting current and future demand and cost pressures. Some LGR options can also enhance the financial stability of existing unitary authorities, where they merge with others to make larger councils that can be better placed to raise revenue and manage costs.

By bringing all services under one roof, a unitary council of the optimal size and scale can coordinate public services more effectively. This is particularly important for complex issues, such as social care, where seamless collaboration between different departments (e.g., adult social care and housing) is crucial for providing high-quality support to residents. It will also reunite services like waste management, where at present responsibilities for strategic planning, operational delivery and tactical efforts are split across different layers of local government.

With a unitary council, residents know exactly who is responsible for a providing local services. This simplifies the democratic process, making it easier for people to hold their elected officials accountable for local decisions. There will be no more confusion over whether to contact the county council or the district council about a specific issue.

As we move to a single tier, there is the opportunity to secure a range of benefits. These would not be automatic, and their realisation would depend on strong governance, effective implementation and consistent and persistent focus on needs and priorities. Through maintaining this focus, we would expect:

- **More consistent and coordinated service delivery** through policy and practice alignment, standards and processes across the whole area
- **Clear accountability** giving transparent lines of responsibility and streamlined decision-making processes
- **Greater flexibility in service design** enabling more responsive, proactive, bespoke approaches that best address need and respond at a neighbourhood level
- **Securing economies of scale** in back-office functions, thus freeing up resources for frontline priorities
- **Effective collaboration with strategic partners** from other public services (health, police, fire and rescue, education), the Voluntary and Community Sector and the commercial/business sector
- **Stronger alignment with regional governance** thus enabling impactful representation of local priorities, including on growth, in regional forums, such as the MSA.
- **A shared and skilled workforce** equipped to meet evolving demands and with capacity for innovation
- **Alignment of strategic planning** to deliver inclusive growth and creation of prosperous places in partnership with the MSA.

3.4 The importance of working in partnership in LGR

The delivery of public services across Oxfordshire and West Berkshire is enabled and enhanced by a wide network of partnership working between local councils, statutory bodies, education providers, businesses and voluntary organisations.

Rising demand for services, together with increasing complexity of need and escalating costs is placing considerable strain on system capacity and the long-term sustainability of these services. It is therefore critical that the two future unitary councils for Oxfordshire and West Berkshire build on this legacy of partnership working, to address the operational and financial pressures all partners face and improve outcomes for our communities.

Health

Buckinghamshire, Oxfordshire and Berkshire West Integrated Care Board (BOB ICB) currently covers the majority of the Oxfordshire and West Berkshire area. A small part of the Vale of White Horse area is covered by the Bath and North East Somerset Integrated Care Board (BANES ICB).

Health is undergoing its own reform agenda, involving major changes to ICB structures, commissioning arrangements, funding models and service delivery structures. The 10-Year Health Plan and the reorganisation of Integrated Care Boards will reshape the design and delivery of health services, increasing emphasis on community-based care, digital transformation and prevention. This will involve the introduction of new integrated neighbourhood clusters, which will continue to operate mainly on a District footprint. These provide an opportunity for continued partnership working with the sector on local interventions.

Policing

Thames Valley Police serves the counties of Buckinghamshire, Berkshire, and Oxfordshire and therefore includes the whole geography considered in this proposal. Operationally, the force is structured into five Local Command Units (LCUs) responsible for delivering core policing functions, including patrol, criminal investigations, and neighbourhood policing. Oxfordshire and Berkshire West are two of these. Importantly, the Police and Crime Commissioner would continue to oversee the entire area under this revised governance model.

Well-established Community Safety Partnerships (currently West Berkshire and all district and city councils in Oxfordshire have one) will continue to work jointly with the statutory and voluntary sectors to prevent crime and disorder, support victims, and protect vulnerable people.

Fire and Rescue

Statutory Fire and Rescue Service arrangements, providing fire prevention, protection and emergency response services, are currently provided by two fire and rescue services. West Berkshire is served by the Royal Berkshire Fire and Rescue Service. Oxfordshire is served by the Oxfordshire Fire and Rescue Service.

There are well-functioning partnership arrangements between the Fire and Rescue Services and local authorities in place for community resilience and emergency planning. The Joint Oxfordshire Resilience Team provides this structure for Oxfordshire. In West Berkshire, community resilience is facilitated through the Thames Valley Local Resilience Forum and emergency planning, which is overseen by the Joint Emergency Planning Unit, supports 3 councils across Berkshire.

The current direction of travel for the Oxfordshire Fire and Rescue Service and Royal Berkshire Fire and Rescue Service is already working towards a harmonised approach across the Thames Valley (and in line with a new Mayoral Strategic Authority), to include systems, equipment and procedures, building on the joint control room that has been operational across Berkshire, Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire since 2015.

Town and Parish Councils

Town and parish councils have a vital role in delivering services to meet local needs, giving the community a voice and representation and improving quality of life and community wellbeing. Across Oxfordshire and West Berkshire, the number of town and parish councils/meetings in each geographic area is:

- Cherwell – 79
- Oxford – 4
- South Oxfordshire – 85
- Vale of White Horse – 69
- West Berkshire – 62
- West Oxfordshire – 81

In Oxfordshire, a Councils Charter was agreed in May 2024, providing a voluntary framework to help shape how Oxfordshire councils can work together in partnership to support better service delivery and outcomes and ensure thriving local democracy. In West Berkshire a District Parish Conference takes place twice a year to promote and facilitate effective dialogue and partnership working. There has been joint working over many years, with certain powers available to be devolved to Towns and Parishes when requested, which are now detailed in the Town and Parish 'Directory'. An ongoing commitment remains to working better together to empower vibrant democracy across Oxfordshire and West Berkshire.

Voluntary and Community Sector

Oxfordshire and West Berkshire benefit from a strong and active Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS), which is a long-standing partner of both tiers of local government, delivering bespoke support to a wide range of local groups and initiatives. This targeted localised support is greatly valued, and the need for a robust, well-functioning VCS at the neighbourhood scale is essential. Funding volatility and rising demand are specific challenges. The sector plays a crucial role in supporting vulnerable groups and delivering preventative services but is having to adapt to new commissioning expectations while operating in increasingly complex environments, so it is not without strain and challenges.

Oxfordshire Community Voluntary Action provides a forum for the sector and a range of public sector partners, including all Oxfordshire local authorities. West Berkshire benefits from two active VCS infrastructure organisations: Volunteer Centre West Berkshire and the Greenham Trust. These organisations, alongside supporting local charities, distribute significant funding to the sector.

National Landscapes

The Oxfordshire and West Berkshire area includes three National Landscapes: Cotswolds, Chilterns and North Wessex Downs. These designations bestow a statutory duty upon any future unitary authority under the Countryside and Rights of Way Act (2000) to ensure all decisions have regard for the purpose of conserving and enhancing the natural beauty of the National Landscape/s. In doing so, the National Landscape/s will continue to deliver essential benefits for nature, people and the economy. Long-term management of their beautiful scenery and unique geological, ecological and cultural features supports tourism and farming, enhances people's physical and mental health and provides a stable foundation for nature recovery.

Businesses

Oxfordshire and West Berkshire businesses are key stakeholders, and continued engagement and support will be crucial going forward to support strong economic growth. These range from small start-ups, small to medium enterprises, large-scale employers of global significance, including the University of Oxford and the research ecosystem that surrounds it. Structures that replaced the Local Enterprise Partnerships (Enterprise Oxfordshire and the Berkshire Shared Prosperity Board) provide this secured forum and a strong voice for the business community. The Oxfordshire Local Visitor Economy Partnerships (LVEP) (Experience Oxfordshire and Cotswolds Plus) and Berkshire LVEP, provide this function for Tourism, which is a key sector in Oxfordshire and West Berkshire. These business bodies will be crucial in helping us to establish two successful new unitary councils.

It will be vital as the unitary model, and the Mayoral Strategic Authority above it, are established that this level of collaboration and partnership continues. The unitary authorities understand the imperative to work closely to enable joined-up service delivery, foster intelligence sharing, and pursue opportunities for integrated planning. The Mayoral Strategic Authority provides a platform for broader regional coordination on shared priorities, including infrastructure, skills, public services and strategic initiatives such as net zero, procurement and commissioning.

Chapter 4 Options Appraisal in a nutshell

Quick chapter summary

- We tested the three options that are being put forward by the principal councils in Oxfordshire and West Berkshire, against the tests set out by MHCLG, on a like for like basis.
- **Only the two-unitary model — Oxford & Shires and Ridgeway — meets the requirements** for strong local accountability alongside financial sustainability. It balances scale and identity: large enough for efficiency and resilience, but small enough to remain accountable and truly connected to local communities.
- Financial modelling shows recurring annual savings of up to £60m for transition and transformation, helping to address financial challenges across the area, with a payback of between three and four years. This represents the highest potential savings of any of the three options.
- The option being put forward by Oxfordshire County Council is for **one large Oxfordshire unitary and leaving a small unchanged unitary in West Berkshire.**
- This provides savings but creates an overly large, remote Oxfordshire authority and leaves West Berkshire in a significantly disadvantaged position. It involves the lowest initial disruption but the risk is that this results in very little transformation and does not strategically address ongoing and escalating challenges around SEND and social care.
- The option being put forward by Oxford City Council is for **three unitaries – growing the existing city boundary to create Greater Oxford and leaving two other authorities** in the north and the south of the area.
- This fragments the area, introduces two new small unitary councils that are significantly under the government guidance level, carries significant disaggregation costs and risks, weakens resilience and delivers the poorest financial return.

What people told us

“If the geographic area covered by a council is too large, it will have more potential for conflict over priority needs from different parts of the council population and one area may feel ignored to the benefit of another

The two-unitary model will:

- **Support devolution:** two credible building blocks for a future Mayoral Strategic Authority.
- **Improve outcomes for residents:** services shaped around local needs, supported by prevention and locality models.
- **Increase financial sustainability:** recurring savings reinvested into frontline services and prevention, building long-term resilience.
- **Improve service delivery efficiency:** duplication removed, decisions quicker, services digitised.
- **Provide strong local leadership:** councillors accountable and closer to communities.
- **Enhance resilience and deliverability:** balanced councils aligned with geography, economy and identity, supported by a phased plan and with capacity to modernise services.

When looking at Oxfordshire and West Berkshire as a whole, only **Option 2** delivers sustainable savings, protects frontline services, and provides a balanced platform for devolution. The other options fail either on being a sensible geography, local accountability or financial resilience.

4. Options Appraisal

4.1 Introduction

This chapter presents an analysis of the three options for Local Government Reorganisation being considered by the principal councils in Oxfordshire, following the invitation from the minister received in February 2025.

The strengths and weaknesses of the different options have been evaluated against the published criteria and subsequent guidance. An overall evaluation and preferred option are set out at the end of this chapter.

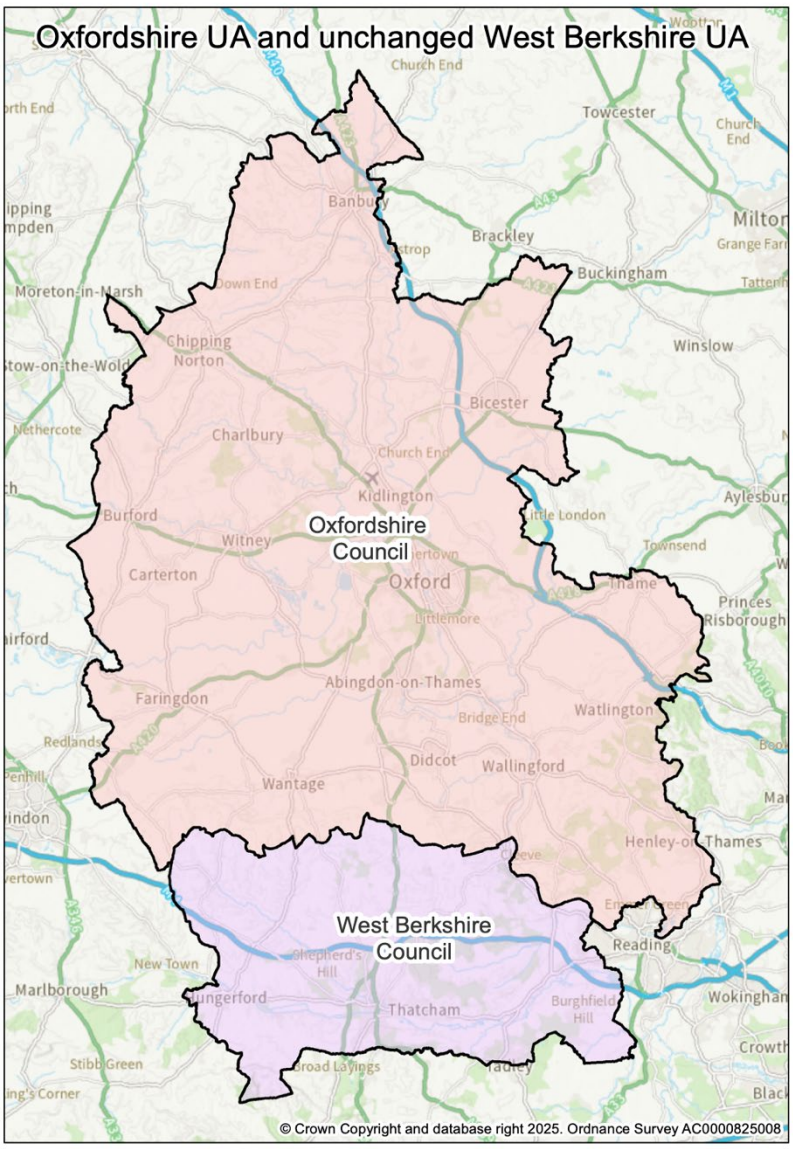
All three options have implications for the neighbouring unitary authority of West Berkshire. Options 2 and 3 include West Berkshire in the proposed new unitary authorities for Oxfordshire. Option 1 does not include West Berkshire in the proposal and so, by default, leaves it unchanged. West Berkshire has been actively supporting the two-unitary bid from the outset of this process and has been fully involved in the development of this proposal.

To ensure consistency across this options appraisal, all three options have been analysed using the same geography of Oxfordshire and West Berkshire. This broader definition of ‘the whole geographical area’ has been consistently used in assessing the proposals against the criteria. This whole area is also wholly within the emergent MSA model area, as well as the current Health and Police geographies.

Each option is set out on the following pages with a map showing the boundaries being proposed.

4.2 Options under consideration

Option 1 – Oxfordshire Unitary council and no change to West Berkshire Unitary council



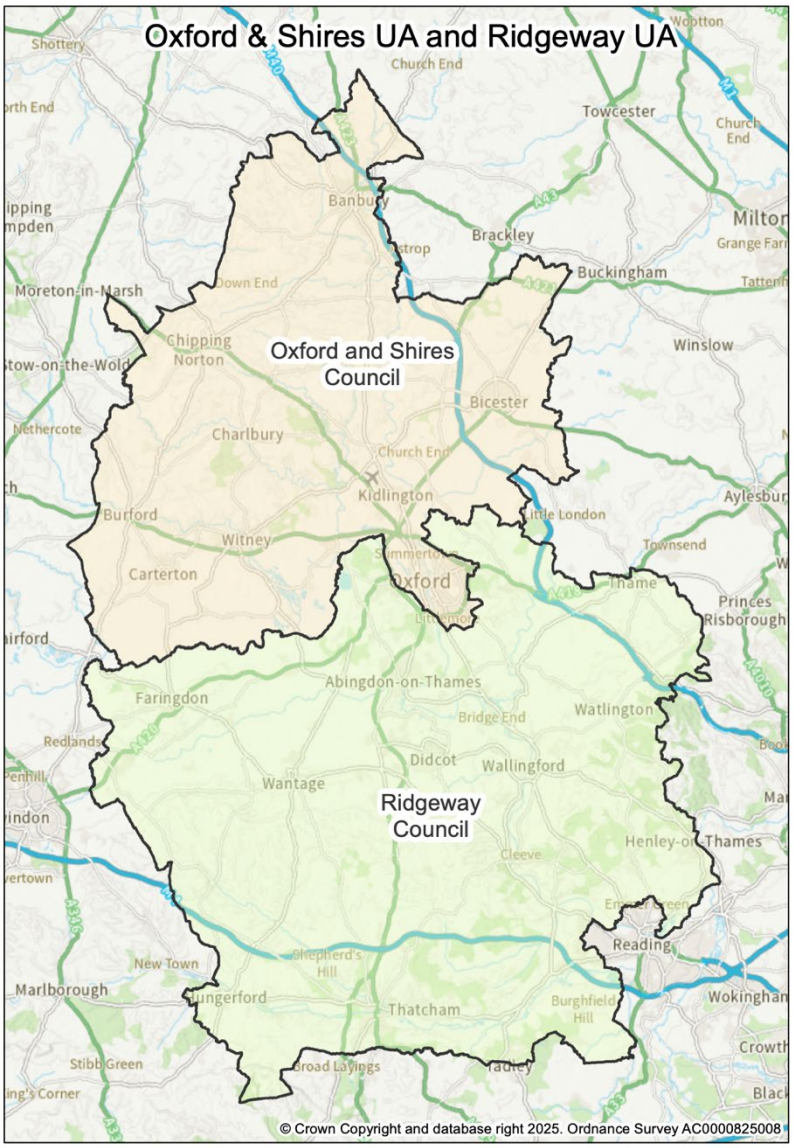
This would create **a large unitary council** (c. 790,000 population) and leave **a small unitary council** (under 165,000 population)

This option proposes the establishment of:

- **Oxfordshire Council** – replacing the six current councils with one large unitary council covering the whole of the current Oxfordshire County area c. 790,608 [1] population on vesting day based on ONS 2028 projections
- **West Berkshire Council** unitary would remain unchanged c. 163,811 population

[1] based on ONS 2028 projections. 2028 population figures have been used when describing the size of the councils that would be created on vesting day. 2025 population figures have been used in analysis by PwC, Newton, PeopleToo etc.

Option 2 – Oxford & Shires and Ridgeway councils



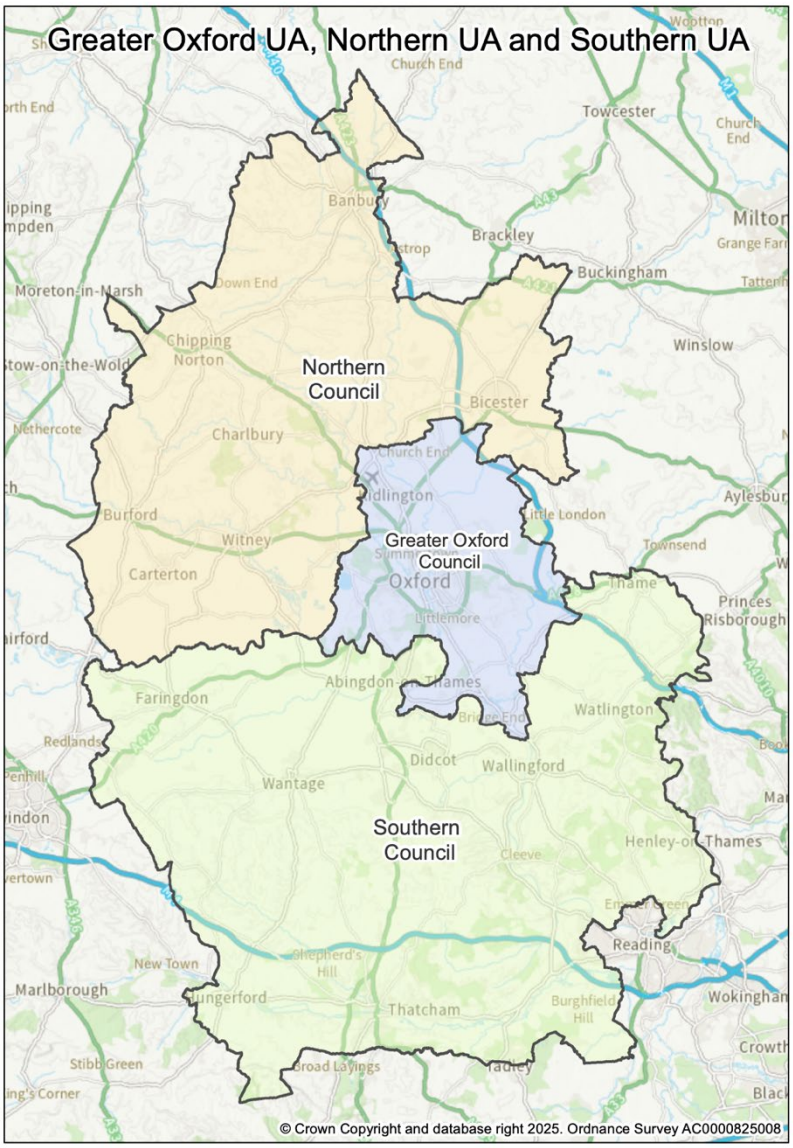
This would create **two similar sized new unitary councils** (c. 465,000 population)

This option proposes the establishment of two new unitary councils:

- **Oxford & Shires** area follows the existing boundaries of the Cherwell District, West Oxfordshire District and Oxford City councils. 471,716 population

- **Ridgeway** area follows the existing boundaries of the South Oxfordshire District, Vale of White Horse District and West Berkshire unitary councils. 482,703 population

Option 3 – Greater Oxford and two additional councils



This would create **two small** (c. 260,000 population) **and one larger new unitary councils** (c. 430,000 population)

This option proposes the establishment of three new unitary councils:

- The '**Greater Oxford'** council area 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 c. 272,000;
- The second **'Northern'** council area would cover the remaining parts of the existing Cherwell and West Oxfordshire districts councils that would not be covered by the Greater Oxford council c. 246,000; and
- The third **'Southern'** council would cover the remaining parts of the existing South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse district councils that would not be covered by the Greater Oxford council and West Berkshire unitary council area c. 436,000.

4.3 Socio-Economic and Demographics

The following tables provide an overview of some the key supporting socio-economic and demographic data for the Oxfordshire and West Berkshire areas. These have been used to inform the Options Appraisal and other elements of the proposal. Further details can be found in Appendix A.

Population projections based on ONS 2023-24 figures

	2024	2025	2026	2027	2028	2029	2030	2031	2032
Oxfordshire	**766,129**	**773,131**	**778,869**	**784,525**	**790,608**	**797,209**	**803,838**	**810,363**	**816,697**
West Berkshire	**163,540**	**163,712**	**163,754**	**163,725**	**163,811**	**163,953**	**164,123**	**164,303**	**164,507**
South Oxfordshire	156,126	157,893	159,508	160,995	162,478	163,954	165,404	166,825	168,232
Vale of White Horse	148,246	150,552	152,620	154,532	156,414	158,299	160,110	161,864	163,566
Ridgeway	**467,912**	**472,157**	**475,882**	**479,252**	**482,703**	**486,206**	**489,637**	**492,992**	**496,305**
Cherwell	170,119	172,283	174,214	176,065	177,917	179,804	181,661	183,507	185,337
Oxford City	171,899	171,498	170,562	169,946	169,797	170,096	170,562	171,052	171,425
West Oxfordshire	119,739	120,905	121,965	122,987	124,002	125,056	126,101	127,115	128,137
Oxford & Shires	**461,757**	**464,686**	**466,741**	**468,998**	**471,716**	**474,956**	**478,324**	**481,674**	**484,899**

Population figures across Oxfordshire and West Berkshire show an average growth of 5.5% between 2024 and 2032. Cherwell, South Oxfordshire, Vale of White Horse and West Oxfordshire all see growth between 7% and 11% over that period whilst West Berkshire and Oxford City are effectively static in terms of growth. Population growth is well balanced between Oxford & Shires (5%) and Ridgeway (6.1%). Although precise figures for the Option 3 authorities is not shown, the figures suggest that there would more of an imbalance in population growth given the static numbers in the city area.

Key socio-demographic measures

	GVA	Business Growth	Employment	Homelessness	Deprivation	Overall Health Index	Household Benefits Claim Rate
Oxfordshire	**£41.30**	**0.14%**	**61.27%**	**0.10%**	**11.58**	**112.8**	**11.75%**
West Berkshire	**£54.10**	**-0.80%**	**63.00%**	**0.11%**	**9.89**	**114.2**	**13.87%**
South Oxfordshire	£45.70	0.00%	62.90%	0.05%	8.33	120.2	11.67%
Vale of White Horse	£45.70	-0.56%	63.00%	0.07%	8.38	116.4	11.33%
Ridgeway	**£49.30**	**-0.46%**	**62.98%**	**0.09%**	**8.92**	**116.9**	**11.60%**
Cherwell	£37.80	0.40%	65.10%	0.10%	14.47	106.2	11.69%
Oxford City	**£40.30**	**0.46%**	**53.60%**	**0.18%**	**16.99**	**101.4**	**12.60%**
West Oxfordshire	£38.00	0.42%	62.80%	0.10%	8.77	119.8	11.45%
Oxford & Shires	**£39.00**	**0.43%**	**60.15%**	**0.12%**	**13.78**	**109.1**	**11.91%**
England	**£42.40**	**0.24%**	**57.39%**	**0.19%**	**21.67**	**100.8**	**21.33%**
Units	£ per hour worked, 2023	% change, 2023/2024	% employed, 2021/2022	%, 2024	IMD, 2019/2020	2021	%, 2023/2024
Source	GVA per hour, ONS	Business Demography, ONS	Economic Activity Status, ONS	Statutory homelessness in England, ONS	English indices of deprivation, MHCLG	Health Index scores, England, ONS	DWP benefits, GOV.UK (requires log in)

Variations in these indicators is not significant in scale, especially when considered to the England averages however, they do serve to demonstrate the potential value of being able to address specific issues in particular geographical areas. This needs to be balanced with the scale of the council and resources that are available to be financially sustainable in responding to the opportunities and challenges that are presented. GVA is materially higher in West Berkshire compared to Oxfordshire supporting the decision to include that area in the overall LGR considerations. Whilst the Ridgeway area has higher GVA, Oxford & Shires sees higher business growth across the whole of the area – not just the city. Rates of homelessness and deprivation are higher in the city and overall health and levels of employment are lower. These issues may prove problematic for a smaller council to deal with but still need specific policies without the risk of these being overshadowed by other issues in a very large authority.

4.4 Analysis against the MHCLG criteria

Overall summary of the options appraisal

This headline appraisal summarises the more detailed appraisal of all of the sub-criteria that is set out on the following pages. This appraisal has been conducted on a like-for-like basis considering the whole area covered by Oxfordshire and West Berkshire.

MHCLG Headline Criteria	Option 1 – Oxfordshire UA & West Berkshire UA		Option 2 – Oxford & Shires and Ridgeway UAs		Option 3 – Greater Oxford UA & two other UAs	
1. A **single tier and sensible geography** to improve housing supply and outcomes avoiding creating (dis/)advantaged areas	R	Positive for housing supply and outcomes in Oxfordshire. West Berkshire remains disadvantaged in terms of financial sustainability	G	Enables housing supply and outcomes over across whole area and does not create material (dis)advantaged areas	R	Challenges around nature and deliverability of housing supply. Creates (dis)advantaged areas based on financial analysis
2. Unitary local government must be the **right size** to achieve efficiencies, improve capacity and withstand financial shocks	R	Creates one of the larger unitary councils in England and leaves one which is significantly below the guidance level	G	Creates two unitary councils at the optimal scale to achieve efficiencies, create capacity and avoid the risks of being too large	R	Creates two unitary councils that are materially smaller than the guidance level limiting scope to achieve efficiencies
3. Prioritise the delivery of **high quality and sustainable public services** to citizens	A	Avoids disruption to key services but also risks little improvement through keeping too much of the status quo	A	Some short term alignment will need to be managed but scale and existing services offer the chance to really tailor and improve outcomes	R	Wholesale disaggregation of county & district services (with boundary change) will be required delaying improvements & increasing costs
4. Councils work together in coming to a view that **meets local needs and is informed by local views**	R	Concerns over engagement of West Berkshire and in rural areas in Oxfordshire	A	Clear support for considering West Berkshire along with Oxfordshire in shaping the future of local government in the area	R	Concerns over the extent of engagement beyond city and issues over protecting the greenbelt
5. New unitary structures must support **devolution** arrangements	A	Risk of distinct economic strengths being lost in a large Oxfordshire and leaves an imbalance of UAs in the Combined Authority context	G	Coherent economic geographies to support effective growth and devolution aims – with optimal sized unitary authorities	A	Could be seen to provide a strong growth hub around city but would leave small authorities in relation to Combined Authority
6. Enable **stronger community engagement** and deliver genuine opportunity for neighbourhood empowerment	A	Risk that scale and lack of effective community engagement at that level could result in poor community engagement	G	Strong localities model building on proven track record of effective community engagement and growth	G	Likely to resolve issues in terms of community engagement within the city

R Does not meet the criterion A Partially meets the criterion G Meets the criterion

Overall summary commentary on each of the options

Option 2 – Oxford & Shires and Ridgeway UAs	Green
Option 1 – Oxfordshire UA and West Berkshire UA (unchanged)	Amber
Option 3 – Greater Oxford, Northern and Southern UAs	Red

Option 2 scores well in terms of the potential to improve housing supply and outcomes by taking a more strategic view on where development should happen across Oxfordshire and would also extend this reach across the West Berkshire area. It would also offer the opportunity to create more financially sustainable local government across the whole area. Devolution ambitions in the region could be materially enhanced by this proposal, based on the establishment of two optimally sized councils with distinct economic characteristics and strengths to contribute to a Strategic Authority. The risk of short-term disruption to crucial services is higher in Option 2, than in Option 1, but so is the opportunity to use more significant change as a catalyst for new thinking, culture refresh, and material improvement over 'business as usual". The two new councils would strike a good balance between achieving the advantages of scale in two similarly sized authorities, while establishing a strong locality working model that makes community empowerment intrinsic to the way the councils would work. This is likely to benefit a broad range of services and can explicitly support better outcomes and unit costs in the key care service areas.

Option 1 would provide an opportunity to improve housing supply and outcomes across Oxfordshire, but would do nothing to secure similar improvements across West Berkshire. The financial challenges in West Berkshire (and specifically the current need for Exceptional Financial Support - EFS) are not addressed by this option. Devolution ambitions in the region could be enhanced by this proposal, but the significant imbalance in the size of the councils between Oxfordshire and Berkshire may prove problematic, with West Berkshire being less influential at a regional level due to its smaller size. While the risk of short-term disruption to crucial care services would be minimised under this option, there is a material risk that the opportunity to transform these services would be missed without the catalyst of more significant change. An Oxfordshire unitary would achieve significant scale, which could be an advantage in some respects but would need to guard against the risk of being too remote and lacking meaningful engagement at the locality level. Evidence suggests that, in relation to care services, the large scale of the Oxfordshire unitary risks higher unit costs and poorer outcomes when compared to smaller unitaries. West Berkshire would remain with significant challenges around scale, being considerably below the government guidance population level.

Option 3 scores less well in terms of the potential to improve housing supply, with the constraints of the greenbelt area and new unitary boundaries at risk of exacerbating the challenge of accommodating housing growth in and around Oxford. Creating a Greater Oxford council may provide a strong growth hub to stimulate regional growth, but it is less clear how the economic strengths of the remaining areas across Oxfordshire and West Berkshire would be harnessed effectively. The risk of short-term disruption to crucial services is higher than in both Option 1 and 2, with the need to create three new approaches to the provision of these services and/or shared arrangements between the new authorities. This would entail a highly significant change, which could provide a catalyst for new thinking, but the risks may outweigh the potential benefits. The three new councils would have a smaller scale that may help in establishing locality working and may simplify arrangements with respect to managing the city of Oxford. By being materially smaller than the government guidance, these councils risk not achieving economies of scale, meaningful benefits and ongoing financial sustainability.

Summary commentary on each of the criteria

Criterion 1 – A single tier and sensible geography to improve housing supply and outcomes, while avoiding creating (dis/)advantaged areas – overview

MHCLG Headline Criterion #1	A single tier and sensible geography to improve housing supply and outcomes avoiding creating (dis/)advantaged areas					
Sub-criteria / Overall rating #1	**Option 1 – Oxfordshire UA & West Berkshire UA**		**Option 2 – Oxford & Shires and Ridgeway UAs**		**Option 3 – Greater Oxford UA & two other UAs**	
Sensible economic geography with tax base that doesn't create dis/advantaged areas	R	A single unitary council for Oxfordshire would be significantly advantaged in comparison to West Berkshire in terms of economic geography and financial sustainability	G	Does not create a financial (dis)advantage to councils when the balance of factors are taken into account	A	Creates a degree of (dis)advantage between the council areas but helps to address the issue of West Berkshire sustainability
Sensible geography to increase housing supply	A	Positive for housing supply across Oxfordshire in terms of dissolving current district boundaries, but no change in supply for West Berkshire	A	Positive impact of housing geographies across Oxfordshire and West Berkshire with a need to only manage issues across one new boundary	R	Challenges around nature and deliverability of housing supply due to Greater Oxford boundaries encompassing most of the designated Green Belt area
Supported by robust analysis and articulation of expected outcomes including costs/benefits	G	Robust analysis and articulation of expected outcomes including cost/benefits expected	G	Robust analysis and articulation of expected outcomes including cost/benefits included	G	Robust analysis and articulation of expected outcomes including cost/benefits expected
How proposal works for the whole area and how outcomes will be achieved	R	Clear articulation of proposal and outcomes for Oxfordshire expected but risk that West Berkshire is not addressed (adequately)	G	Clear articulation of proposal and outcomes for the whole area of Oxfordshire and West Berkshire included	R	Clear articulation of proposal and outcomes for Greater Oxford expected but risk that the rest of Oxfordshire and West Berkshire is not addressed (adequately)

R Does not meet the criterion A Partially meets the criterion G Meets the criterion

Criterion 1 – A single tier and sensible geography to improve housing supply and outcomes, while avoiding creating (dis/)advantaged areas - commentary

Option 2 – Oxford & Shires and Ridgeway UAs	Green
Option 1 – Oxfordshire UA and West Berkshire UA (unchanged)	Red
Option 3 – Greater Oxford, Northern and Southern UAs	Red

Option 2 does not create councils that would be materially (dis)advantaged in terms of income, expenditure, assets, liabilities and current/future demand for services and this is supported by the financial modelling undertaken by PwC to support this case. In terms of housing supply, Option 2 offers many of the potential advantages of Option 1, across the whole of Oxfordshire, but also includes West Berkshire, which increases the opportunity across the whole of the area. Moving towards two Local Plans across this larger area would help simplify the process of agreeing on how housing targets can be best met without having to reach an agreement across multiple authorities. The two new authorities will need to collaborate closely to manage planning, infrastructure and supply issues arising between the two council areas. The smaller scale of the council reduces the risk of stifling innovative approaches to enabling housing supply that have been proven to work through schemes such as Graven Hill in Bicester, the UK's largest self and custom-build housing development.

This reduced risk of inhibiting creative and agile approaches also applies to securing outcomes, without sacrificing the benefits of economies of scale offered through aggregation of services. These will enable improvements in outcomes across the entire Oxfordshire and West Berkshire geography[2]. While there will be scope to collaborate across the two new authorities, successful delivery of positive outcomes will not be entirely dependent and can be designed to be more locally appropriate. Both new councils will have their own existing upper-tier services to use as a foundation for further transformation.

Option 1 provides the opportunity to make improvements in housing supply across the Oxfordshire geography. The creation of an Oxfordshire Local Plan could help to simplify the process of agreeing on how housing targets can best be met without having to reach an agreement across multiple authorities. Translating local plan intentions into the delivery of actual housing supply will still require innovative and agile approaches that have been proven to work at a more local scale. There is a risk that these local delivery approaches do not translate well to a larger scale authority, but that would need to be carefully managed. It is important to note that Option 1 will do nothing to secure similar improvements across West Berkshire.

[2] More information on how we ensure agile approaches in Chapter 5 (Vision and Ambition) and Chapter 8 (How the new councils will work)

In a similar manner, Option 1 also provides the opportunity to make improvements across the Oxfordshire geography. The aggregation of current district services, alongside existing upper-tier responsibilities, over a large geography should enable economies of scale but there is a risk that will need to be managed with such a large geographic area. Flexible and creative ways of working that deliver successful outcomes at a more local scale may not translate and flourish in a larger geography. Again, it is also important to note that Option 1 will do nothing to secure similar improvements across West Berkshire and will leave that area at a disadvantaged position in relation to financial challenges in comparison with a large Oxfordshire unitary council. This disadvantage is clearly illustrated by the CIPFA Financial Resilience analysis below which shows West Berkshire having a 39.9 risk score compared to an Oxfordshire unitary authority score of just 3.9.

Option 3 creates some material risks in the potential to significantly improve housing supply across the whole of the area being considered. Unmet housing need in the city has remained high for years, and housing supply is likely to be heavily restricted across the Greater Oxford council area because of the existing space pressures and the constraints of the Oxford greenbelt (which can take years to release new sites within). This will mean that the challenge of accommodating housing growth in and around Oxford will be dependent on arrangements between the three new councils, replicating many of the existing issues. The opportunity to have more balanced growth across the whole area will be diminished. The smaller-scale councils may be more adept at delivering on local plans, but the challenges of agreeing on the plans in the first place may outweigh any advantages.

The potential to improve outcomes is also likely to be reduced with the three new councils that would be created under Option 3. The benefits of aggregation and economies of scale will be smaller (just £9.5m, in comparison to £21.9m for Option 2), while the need to create another set of upper-tier services, as well as change the two existing ones across the geography, adds a degree of complexity that is likely to make improvements harder to achieve. Option 3 does actively include West Berkshire in the proposal, meaning that the benefits to housing supply and outcomes that can be achieved will extend beyond the current Oxfordshire boundary.

Option 3 also creates important imbalances Day 1 and Financial Resilience positions in the modelling from PwC and CIPFA respectively. Taken with the small size of two of the proposed new authorities, means that there is a material risk of creating (dis)advantaged areas through this approach.

Criterion 2 – Unitary local government must be the right size to achieve efficiencies, improve capacity and withstand financial shocks – overview part 1

MHCLG Headline Criterion #2 – Part 2	Unitary local government must be the right size to achieve efficiencies, improve capacity and withstand financial shocks					
Sub-criteria / Overall rating #2	**Option 1 – Oxfordshire UA & West Berkshire UA**		**Option 2 – Oxford & Shires and Ridgeway UAs**		**Option 3 – Greater Oxford UA & two other UAs**	
Proposals should set out how an area will seek to manage transition & transformation costs	A	The proposal is anticipated to set out a sensible approach to managing transition and transformation costs across the area but it is unclear if this will include West Berkshire	A	The proposal sets out a sensible approach to managing transition and transformation costs across the whole area. One-off transition costs are forecast to be slightly higher than the one unitary option	R	The proposal is anticipated to set out a sensible approach to managing transition and transformation costs across the whole area but the scale of those costs will be much higher than for the other two options
Best Value intervention and/or in receipt of Exceptional Financial Support to be addressed	R	The proposal does not include West Berkshire and will therefore not address their Exceptional Financial Support	G	The proposal sets out an approach to dealing with the Exceptional Financial Support being received by West Berkshire Council	A	It is not yet clear whether the proposal will set out an approach to dealing with the Exceptional Financial Support being received by West Berkshire Council but due to lower overall benefits the scope to do so will be lower
No proposal for council debt to be addressed centrally or written off as part of reorganisation	G	Proposal is not anticipated to suggest writing off debt or addressing it centrally	G	Proposal does not suggest writing off debt or addressing it centrally	G	Proposal is not anticipated to suggest writing off debt or addressing it centrally

R Does not meet the criterion A Partially meets the criterion G Meets the criterion

Criterion 2 – Unitary local government must be the right size to achieve efficiencies, improve capacity and withstand financial shocks – overview part 2

MHCLG Headline Criterion #2 – Part 2	Unitary local government must be the right size to achieve efficiencies, improve capacity and withstand financial shocks					
Sub-criteria / Overall rating #2	**Option 1 – Oxfordshire UA & West Berkshire UA**		**Option 2 – Oxford & Shires and Ridgeway UAs**		**Option 3 – Greater Oxford UA & two other UAs**	
Proposals should set out how an area will seek to manage transition & transformation costs	A	The proposal is anticipated to set out a sensible approach to managing transition and transformation costs across the area but it is unclear if this will include West Berkshire	A	The proposal sets out a sensible approach to managing transition and transformation costs across the whole area. One-off transition costs are forecast to be slightly higher than the one unitary option	R	The proposal is anticipated to set out a sensible approach to managing transition and transformation costs across the whole area but the scale of those costs will be much higher than for the other two options
Best Value intervention and/or in receipt of Exceptional Financial Support to be addressed	R	The proposal does not include West Berkshire and will therefore not address their Exceptional Financial Support	G	The proposal sets out an approach to dealing with the Exceptional Financial Support being received by West Berkshire Council	A	It is not yet clear whether the proposal will set out an approach to dealing with the Exceptional Financial Support being received by West Berkshire Council but due to lower overall benefits the scope to do so will be lower
No proposal for council debt to be addressed centrally or written off as part of reorganisation	G	Proposal is not anticipated to suggest writing off debt or addressing it centrally	G	Proposal does not suggest writing off debt or addressing it centrally	G	Proposal is not anticipated to suggest writing off debt or addressing it centrally

R Does not meet the criterion A Partially meets the criterion G Meets the criterion

Criterion 2 – Unitary local government must be the right size to achieve efficiencies, improve capacity and withstand financial shocks – commentary

Option 2 – Oxford & Shires and Ridgeway UAs	Green
Option 3 – Greater Oxford, Northern and Southern UAs	Red
Option 1 – Oxfordshire UA and West Berkshire UA (unchanged)	Red

Option 2 proposal would create the balance of two unitary councils at the optimal scale (over 470,000 at vesting day, based on projected 2028 figures and forecasted to grow rapidly). The logic of the 'guiding principle' is evident in the context of the two-unitary proposal. The reorganisation would create two balanced councils that are the right size to deliver effective growth and devolution aims, by acting independently and as part of a Strategic Authority. The scale of the two unitary councils will create scope for efficiencies, without some of the risks associated with being too large. All parties involved will have a strong catalyst for change through the reorganisation.[3] This proposal will also help create new opportunities in West Berkshire to achieve efficiencies, create capacity, and avoid financial shocks, thereby removing the current need for Exceptional Financial Support from government.[4] **Option 2 creates the potential for a Transition and Stretch Benefits total of £59.8m which are the highest total recurring benefits of any of the options**. This is made up of transition benefits of £21.9m and higher transformation benefits than Option1 at £25.6m (base) and £37.9m (stretch).

Option 3 would create three unitary councils, with two of them being at a population level that is materially lower than the 'guiding principle' figure (c.260,000). The rationale for creating such small unitary councils is not immediately clear beyond a desire to expand and build a strong growth hub around the city of Oxford. The scale of the three unitary councils is likely to limit their ability to create efficiencies, improve capacity and withstand financial shocks.[5] This proposal should, however, assist in creating new efficiencies and resilience in the West Berkshire area, and there should also be a significant catalyst for change for all parties. The ongoing cost of running additional upper-tier services with Option 3 means that it will create much lower transition benefits than the other options of £9.5m. This is offset, to a certain extent, by slightly higher transformation benefits than Option 2 at £25.8m (base) and £38.2m (stretch) but is forecast to create materially lower benefits for the area overall. One-off implementation costs are also the highest of any option at £59.2m (stretch).

[3] Our approach to maximising the benefits of a fresh start is outlined in Chapter 8 (How the new councils will work)
[4] For more detail see Appendix B (PwC Analysis)
[5] For more detail see Appendix B (PwC Analysis)

Option 1 proposes that Oxfordshire would become the largest non-metropolitan unitary council in England (c. 790,000) prior to the implementation of any reorganisation in the current round. It also leaves the existing West Berkshire unitary at a population level (c. 165,000), which is significantly below the 'guiding principle' figure of 500,000. There is also a risk that distinct economic strengths of different parts of the geography are overlooked in a large Oxfordshire unitary context, where 'second-order opportunities' are missed in favour of the city of Oxford's major industries. The scale of the Oxfordshire unitary should afford scope for improving capacity, withstanding financial shocks and achieving efficiencies, however there are a number of material risks to achieving this. The first is, the risk of 'business as usual' thinking prevailing, especially in the big spend services related to adults and children. LGR should be a catalyst for change and this will be less of an imperative with this option compared to other options where redesign will be essential. The second risk relates to the scale of aggregation required to bring district and city services into a coherent unitary of this size. Multiple systems, delivery models, contracts and teams will need to be reconciled, and the number of disparate approaches will be highest with Option 1. Even if these risks are well managed, Option 1 will mean that West Berkshire, will still be left at a scale that makes addressing these issues exceptionally challenging. It is anticipated that a sensible approach to managing transition and transformation costs across the Oxfordshire will be put forward, but this will not include West Berkshire. Option 1 will create the highest transition benefits of £27.3m but transformation benefits are lower than other options, which include the whole geography, at £20.9m (base) and £31.1m (stretch).

Criterion 3 – Prioritise the delivery of high quality and sustainable public services to citizens – overview

MHCLG Headline Criterion #3	Prioritise the delivery of high quality and sustainable public services to citizens							
Sub-criteria / Overall rating #3	**Option 1 – Oxfordshire UA & West Berkshire UA**		**Option 2 – Oxford & Shires and Ridgeway UAs**		**Option 3 – Greater Oxford UA & two other UAs**			
Improve service delivery and should avoid unnecessary fragmentation of services	A	The proposal is anticipated to identify service delivery improvements and will avoid the risk of fragmentation of services. There is however a risk that improvements are more limited through keeping too much of the status quo approaches	A	Proposes a range of service delivery improvements. Whilst a degree of fragmentation of current Oxfordshire services may be perceived this is deemed as necessary to build more effective services across the two new councils	R	The proposal is anticipated to identify service delivery improvements however the establishment of three smaller unitary councils is highly likely to lead to the fragmentation of services. This will need careful management
Opportunities to deliver public service reform and better VFM should be identified	G	The proposal is anticipated to identify opportunities to deliver public service reform and better VFM but many of the crucial services will largely remain on the same course as present	G	The proposal identifies a range of opportunities to deliver public service reform and better VFM by leveraging more local accountability along with some of the advantages of sensible scale	A	The proposal is anticipated to identify opportunities to deliver public service reform and better VFM. The extent to which these opportunities will be achievable through the creation of three smaller unitary councils is unclear
Impact on crucial services e.g. social care, children's services, SEND, homelessness, public safety	A	Any potentially negative impact on crucial services is likely to be avoided in the short term. A risk remains that continuation of the current approaches misses the opportunity to use LGR as a catalyst for medium to longer term transformation	A	The proposal sets out a clear transition plan to avoid any short term disruption. Many disaggregation challenges are negated by having two sets of crucial services already. Size affords economies of scale and effective place based delivery	R	It is unclear how the three unitary proposal can avoid wholesale disaggregation of county & district services (with boundary change) or the establishment of complex partnership arrangements. Either delay improvements & increase costs

R Does not meet the criterion

A Partially meets the criterion

G Meets the criterion

Criterion 3 – Prioritise the delivery of high quality and sustainable public services to citizens - commentary

Option 1 – Oxfordshire UA and West Berkshire UA (unchanged)	Amber
Option 2 – Oxford & Shires and Ridgeway UAs	Amber
Option 3 – Greater Oxford, Northern and Southern UAs	Red

Option 1 creates opportunities to secure some service delivery improvements and better value for money; however, research suggests that this is more difficult to achieve for care services for councils of this scale.[6] It is strong in avoiding the risk of unnecessary fragmentation of upper tier services. There may also be scope to improve broader public service reform; however, there is a risk that improvements are more limited if 'business as usual' thinking is adopted around existing upper-tier services. Any potentially negative impact on care and education services is likely to be avoided in the short term due to not needing to disaggregate many key services. A risk remains that continuing the current approaches will miss the opportunity to use LGR as a catalyst for medium to longer-term transformation. Again, this proposal will not support West Berkshire in improving its approach to delivering high-quality public services or achieving broader public service reform.

Option 2 provides a strong platform for securing a range of service delivery and Value for Money improvements. While a degree of disaggregation of current Oxfordshire services will be necessary, these are likely to be offset by the improved resilience and consolidation of similar services from a West Berkshire perspective. The two new authorities will create a fresh dynamic for public service reform across both Oxfordshire and Berkshire, with a clear catalyst for improvement.[7] Option 2 entails a level of risk around disaggregation of several crucial services, including Adult Social Care, Children's Services, Education and SEND. The challenges associated with disaggregation are reduced significantly by the fact that there are already two sets of all the crucial services functioning across the Oxfordshire and West Berkshire areas. Risks of disruption will need to be managed through a clear transition plan to avoid any short-term disruption to service users, the voluntary sector, other partners, and staff. However, this will be far more straightforward than in many disaggregation scenarios. Our research shows that authorities of this scale are better placed to focus on specific demand issues and local resolution of them, than larger councils, leading to lower unit costs and improved outcomes.

[6] For more detail see Appendix E (PeopleToo Analysis))
[7] Our approach to maximising the benefits of a fresh start is outlined in Chapter 8 (How the new councils will work)

Option 3 is anticipated to identify service delivery improvements; however, the establishment of three smaller unitary councils is highly likely to lead to the fragmentation of services. This will need careful management. The proposal is anticipated to identify opportunities to deliver public service reform and better value for money. The extent to which these opportunities will be achievable through the creation of three smaller unitary councils is unclear. It is also unclear how the three-unitary proposal can avoid the wholesale disaggregation of county and district services (with boundary change) or the establishment of complex partnership arrangements. It will either delay improvements or increase costs.

Criterion 4 – Councils work together in coming to a view that meets local needs and is informed by local views – overview

MHCLG Headline Criterion #4	Councils work together in coming to a view that meets local needs and is informed by local views					
Sub-criteria / Overall rating #4	**Option 1 – Oxfordshire UA & West Berkshire UA**		**Option 2 – Oxford & Shires and Ridgeway UAs**		**Option 3 – Greater Oxford UA & two other UAs**	
Evidence of locally meaningful and constructive engagement	A	The proposal has been prepared with a reasonable level of locally meaningful engagement across the councils in Oxfordshire and West Berkshire and with other interested parties	A	The proposal has been prepared with a reasonable level of locally meaningful engagement across the councils in Oxfordshire and West Berkshire and with other interested parties	A	The proposal has been prepared with a reasonable level of locally meaningful engagement across the councils in Oxfordshire and West Berkshire and with other interested parties
Consider issues of local identity and cultural and historic importance	A	The proposal is anticipated to consider the local identity and cultural importance of the current Oxfordshire boundary. The historic importance of the traditional Berkshire geography is still valued by some of the population	G	The proposal considers the local identity and cultural importance of the current Oxfordshire boundary and also embraces the historic importance of the some of the traditional Berkshire geography	A	The identity and historic importance of the city of Oxford is expected to figure heavily in this proposal. It is unclear if all residents of the proposed Greater Oxford feel part of the city and whether the broader area has been fully considered
Evidence local engagement and how concerns will be addressed	R	It is not clear the extent to which meaningful engagement has happened in some rural parts of Oxfordshire and whether the concerns of the broader population including West Berkshire have been addressed	A	A good level of meaningful engagement has happened across Oxfordshire and West Berkshire with the proposal seeking to address the concerns by the broader population	R	It is not clear the extent to which meaningful engagement has happened beyond the city of Oxford and whether the concerns of the broader population have been addressed. Specific issues over protecting the greenbelt are key

R Does not meet the criterion

A Partially meets the criterion

G Meets the criterion

Criterion 4 – Councils work together in coming to a view that meets local needs and is informed by local views - commentary

All three proposals have been prepared with a reasonable level of meaningful local engagement across the councils in Oxfordshire and West Berkshire, as well as with other interested parties. Regular dialogue has been held, with data and information shared to assist in the preparation of the three proposals.

Option 2 – Oxford & Shires and Ridgeway UAs	Amber
Option 1 – Oxfordshire UA and West Berkshire UA (unchanged)	Red
Option 3 – Greater Oxford, Northern and Southern UAs	Red

Option 2 considers the local identity and cultural importance of two distinct parts of Oxfordshire. It also embraces the historic importance of some of the traditional Berkshire geography, which is partially restored through this proposal. A high level of meaningful engagement has happened across Oxfordshire and West Berkshire, with the proposal seeking to address the concerns of the broader population (see Chapter 11).

Option 1 is anticipated to strongly consider the local identity and cultural importance of the current Oxfordshire boundary. It is unlikely to address the historic importance of the traditional Berkshire geography that is still valued by some of the population and would be partially addressed by the other proposals. It is not clear the extent to which meaningful engagement has happened beyond Oxfordshire and whether the concerns of the broader population, including West Berkshire, have been addressed.

Option 3 features the identity and historic importance of the city of Oxford heavily in this proposal, but with less focus on the other parts of Oxfordshire and West Berkshire that would make up the remaining two authorities. It is unclear if all residents of the proposed Greater Oxford authority feel part of the city, or whether they identify more strongly with the rest of the Oxfordshire area. Engagement has occurred across the city of Oxford, other parts of Oxfordshire and a little in West Berkshire but it is not clear that the concerns of the broader population have been adequately addressed. Specific concerns over protecting the greenbelt are key.

Criterion 5 – New unitary structures must support devolution arrangements- overview

MHCLG Headline Criterion #5	New unitary structures must support devolution arrangements					
Sub-criteria / Overall rating #5	**Option 1 – Oxfordshire UA & West Berkshire UA**		**Option 2 – Ridgeway UA and Oxford & Shires UA**		**Option 3 – Greater Oxford UA & two other UAs**	
Show support from any existing CA/CCA/Mayor and how arrangements will need to change		N/A		N/A		N/A
Where no CA/CCA is already established then set out how it will help unlock devolution	A	The proposal for a large Oxfordshire unitary council has some strengths but risks the distinct economic strengths of different parts of the area being lost and could miss the opportunity to include Berkshire	G	The proposal is to create two unitary councils based around distinct and coherent economic geographies. These have been designed to best support effective growth and devolution aims – with sensible sized UAs	A	The proposal could be seen as attractive in that it has the potential to provide a strong growth hub around city. The risks are however that the focus may be placed too heavily on the city and the strengths of others may not have been fully considered
Sensible population size ratios between local authorities and any strategic authority	A	The difference in size between the large Oxfordshire UA and the other smaller authorities would be significant and could hinder the operation of the new CA/CCA.	G	The Oxford & Shires and Ridgeway UAs would be of a very similar size and a sensible population building block for the new CA/CCA	A	The Greater Oxford proposal would create three smaller unitary councils that whilst similar in size are probably smaller than the ideal population building block for the new CA/CCA

R Does not meet the criterion

A Partially meets the criterion

G Meets the criterion

Criterion 5 – New unitary structures must support devolution arrangements – commentary

Option 2 – Oxford & Shires and Ridgeway UAs	Green
Option 1 – Oxfordshire UA and West Berkshire UA (unchanged)	Amber
Option 3 – Greater Oxford, Northern and Southern UAs	Amber

Option 2 proposes two unitary councils with complementary geographies to help drive local, regional, and national ambitions around devolution. The Oxford & Shires council connects Cherwell and West Berkshire to Oxford along the A40, A44, A4260 and A41 corridor, while the Ridgeway area connects well to the wider Thames Valley along the M4, A34, M40 and A420 and re-establishes important historic ties with parts of Berkshire. Both councils will be able to build a strong delivery record on their long history of effective collaboration and joint working. The Oxford & Shires and Ridgeway UAs would be of a very similar size and a sensible population building block (c. 470,000) for a new Strategic Authority (1.5m population target).

Option 1 and the proposal for a large Oxfordshire unitary council has some strengths in terms of creating a strong voice for the current county area but risks the distinct economic strengths of different parts of the area being lost. It could also miss the opportunity to harness the strengths of West Berkshire and the role it could play in engaging Oxfordshire more fully with Berkshire. While many of the constituent districts have strong track records of delivering local growth, this is much less evident in delivery at the county level. An Oxfordshire Unitary Authority would need to manage the risk of perpetuating sub-optimal delivery and attempt to scale the more locally based approaches over a much larger geography. The difference in size between the large Oxfordshire UA (790,000) and the other smaller authorities, including West Berkshire (164,000) would be significant and could hinder the operation of the new Strategic Authority (1.5m population target).

Option 3 is expected to focus heavily on the creation of a Greater Oxford authority. It is anticipated to demonstrate strong ambitions around housing and economic growth and to be a driver of broader devolution goals. While this focus on the city may have some strengths in terms of creating a strong growth hub around the city, it also risks some significant shortcomings. The risks related to housing supply, planning issues, and the protection of the greenbelt have been outlined above. In terms of economic growth, an undue focus on the city of Oxford risks misunderstanding the interconnected links that it has with other parts of the Oxfordshire and West Berkshire geography. From a practical perspective, two out of the three councils that would be created under the Greater Oxford proposal would be smaller than the ideal population building blocks for the new Strategic Authority (1.5m population target).

Criterion 6 – Enable stronger community engagement and deliver genuine opportunity for neighbourhood empowerment - overview

MHCLG Headline Criterion #6	Enable stronger community engagement and deliver genuine opportunity for neighbourhood empowerment					
Sub-criteria/overall rating #6	**Option 1 – Oxfordshire UA & West Berkshire UA**		**Option 2 – Ridgeway UA and Oxford & Shires UA**		**Option 3 – Greater Oxford UA & two other UAs**	
Show plans to make sure that communities are engaged	A	The proposal is anticipated to include proposals to show how communities will be better engaged with a new unitary council. There is however a risk that the scale of the new authority could impede effective mechanisms engagement	G	The proposal sets out a strong localities model that will enable effective community engagement across the two new councils. This will go beyond simple engagement and be built into the decision making and service delivery, where appropriate	G	The proposal is anticipated to include proposals to show how communities will be better engaged with a new unitary councils. It expected to be particularly strong in how it deals with the challenge of engagement across the city
Explain how any existing arrangements will enable strong community engagement	A	The county council has a less well defined track record of some aspects of community engagement and "more of the same" is a risk. It will be important to build on district approaches and to scale them up to the whole Oxfordshire scale	G	Several of the councils making this proposal already have strong localities models and have a proven track record of effective community engagement and growth e.g. Bicester Local Area Committee	G	The proposal is anticipated to include examples of good practice in terms engaging with communities It expected to be particularly strong in terms of current engagement across the city

R Does not meet the criterion

A Partially meets the criterion

G Meets the criterion

Criterion 6 – Enable stronger community engagement and deliver genuine opportunity for neighbourhood empowerment – commentary

Option 2 – Oxford & Shires and Ridgeway UAs	Green
Option 3 – Greater Oxford, Northern and Southern UAs	Green
Option 1 – Oxfordshire UA and West Berkshire UA (unchanged)	Amber

Option 2 builds on the fact that several of the existing councils making this proposal already have strong localities models and a proven track record of effective community engagement and growth, e.g. Bicester Local Area Committee. Option 2 includes a strong localities model that will enable effective community engagement across the two new authorities and help to restore public trust in government. To be effective, this will need to go beyond simple engagement and be built into the decision-making and service delivery of the new councils.

The size of the proposed Oxfordshire unitary council in **Option 1** will immediately create an inherent risk of communities feeling remote in terms of engagement, whether that is perceived or actual. The county council has a less well-defined track record in certain aspects of community engagement, so it will be important to build on district approaches and to attempt to scale them up to the whole Oxfordshire area. These approaches will need to work more effectively than in smaller council areas to overcome challenges related to a lack of trust in government bodies and perceptions of remoteness from communities and their local neighbourhoods.

While the size of the unitary councils proposed in **Option 3** has some serious weaknesses in terms of other criteria, for community engagement, it could be an inherent strength, whether that is perceived or actual. Option 3 is anticipated to include proposals to show how communities will be better engaged and is expected to be particularly strong in addressing the challenge of engagement across the city. The creation of a Greater Oxford unitary would also help partially resolve the challenges of how best to engage communities and neighbourhoods in a collective way across the city area.

4.5 Financial comparison of the options

PwC cost-financial benefit modelling for LGR transition and transformation

Option	Level of change	Recurring net financial benefits (£m)	One-off costs (£m)	Payback period (years)	Addresses financial sustainability issues across Oxfordshire and West Berks
Option 1 Oxfordshire Unitary council and no change to West Berkshire Unitary council	Transition	27.3	23.8	3.1	No
	Basic Transformation (Base)	20.9	14.6	1.7	
	Transition plus Basic Transformation	**48.2**	**38.4**	**2.8**	
	Ambitious Transformation (Stretch)	31.1	21.7	1.7	
	Transition plus Ambitious Transformation	**58.4**	**45.5**	**2.7**	
Option 2 Oxford & Shires and Ridgeway councils	Transition	21.9	30.4	4.2	Yes
	Basic Transformation (Base)	25.6	17.9	1.7	
	Transition plus Basic Transformation	**47.5**	**48.3**	**3.4**	
	Ambitious Transformation (Stretch)	37.9	26.5	1.7	
	Transition plus Ambitious Transformation	**59.8**	**56.9**	**3.2**	
Option 3 Greater Oxford, Northern and Southern councils	Transition	9.5	32.5	8.7	Partially
	Basic Transformation (Base)	25.8	18.1	1.7	
	Transition plus Basic Transformation	**35.3**	**50.6**	**4.7**	
	Ambitious Transformation (Stretch)	38.2	26.7	1.7	
	Transition plus Ambitious Transformation	**47.7**	**59.2**	**4.2**	

Our work with PwC has included a financial appraisal of the three options under consideration – on a like-for-like basis.

The **recurring annual net financial benefits**[8] reflect the savings that the modelling shows are expected from:

- **Transition** to the new structures including:
  - aggregating and rationalising services, assets, contracts, roles, etc, in transitioning to the new councils
  - minus any additional recurring costs required to create new functions that have been disaggregated into smaller services; plus
- **Basic or more Ambitious Transformation** opportunities following initial transition including:
  - improving service delivery models; and
  - transforming ways of working supported by technology and culture change

In terms of transition and basic (base) transformation, Option 1 and Option 2 are very similar in terms of recurring annual benefits and implementation costs, with Option 1 paying back slightly quicker. Critically, though, this option does nothing to address the current financial challenges in West Berkshire, whereas Option 2 creates sufficient savings to resolve them, at least in the short to medium term. **When transition and more ambitious (stretch) transformation benefits are considered, Option 2 has the potential to deliver the highest annual recurring benefits of £59.8m p.a.** Option 3 can help address the West Berkshire financial challenge to a certain extent, but the lower overall benefits mean that the improvement in financial resilience prospects will not be as significant. The financial analysis shows that the lower aggregation benefits and higher additional disaggregation costs associated with creating three new unitary authorities under Option 3 result in a materially lower recurring annual benefit and a significantly longer payback period.

It should be noted that the analysis for this Options Appraisal used publicly available data and consistent assumptions applied in the same way across all three proposals for local government reorganisation. More detailed analysis was undertaken for the Detailed Financial Case of the Oxford & Shires and Ridgeway proposal to further develop anticipated benefits and costs, using local insights and tailored assumptions. That more detailed analysis resulted in more refined and slightly more prudent totals that have been included in the Detailed Financial Case. It is anticipated that the councils preparing proposals for other options will have refined their more detailed financial cases in a similar way.

[8] A more detailed breakdown of costs and benefits for transition and transformation can be found in Appendix B – PwC Financial Options Appraisal

PwC financial viability modelling

PwC have also assisted in modelling the Day 1 position of the proposed councils under the three options by analysing the projected income and expenditure for each.

Option	Day 1 Income (£m)	Day 1 Expenditure (£m)	Difference (£m)	Difference % of income
Option 1				
Oxfordshire UA	881.5	906.6	-25.1	-2.8%
West Berkshire UA	205.6	210.6	-5.0	-2.4%
Option 2				
Oxford & Shires UA	537.6	555.9	-18.3	-3.4%
Ridgeway UA	549.5	561.3	-11.8	-2.1%
Option 3				
Greater Oxford UA	316.2	320.8	-4.6	-1.5%
Northern UA	309.1	320.6	-11.5	-3.7%
Southern UA	461.8	475.8	-14.0	-3.0%

The modelling shows that collectively there will be a £30.1m difference between income and expenditure on Day 1 and this will be split in different ways across the proposed councils dependent on the geographical boundaries being put forward. Option 1 has the largest differences in absolute terms but the most balanced when considered as a percentage of population. This needs to be considered in conjunction with the risks around financial resilience of West Berkshire as shown in the CIPFA modelling below. Option 2 shows a level of imbalance in Day 1 position between the two proposed authorities, although this would be balanced in the short-term using reserves whilst changes and transformation take place. Option 3 shows the largest imbalance with Greater Oxford inheriting a more advantageous Day 1 position than the other two proposed authorities.

CIPFA Financial Resilience Index [9]

Option	New authority	Comprised of	Total Risk Score	Top 3 risk metrics
Option 1	Oxfordshire UA	All districts and Oxfordshire CC, minus West Berkshire	43.79	Growth Above Baseline, Fee Charges to Expenditure Ratio, Child Social Care to Expenditure Ratio
	West Berkshire UA (unchanged)	West Berkshire		Interest Payable to Expenditure Ratio, Change in Reserves, Change in Earmarked Reserves
Option 2	Oxford & Shires UA	Oxford, West Oxfordshire, Cherwell and 63% of Oxfordshire CC	24.12	Fee Charges to Expenditure Ratio, Council Tax to Expenditure Ratio, Unallocated Reserves
	Ridgeway UA	Vale of White Horse, South Oxfordshire, West Berkshire and 37% of Oxfordshire CC		Child Social Care to Expenditure Ratio, Social Care Ratio, Adult Social Care to Expenditure Ratio
Option 3	Greater Oxford	Greater Oxford and 27% of Oxfordshire CC	35.28	Overspend (£000), Council Tax to Expenditure Ratio, MRP/CFR
	Southern UA	Vale of White Horse, South Oxfordshire, West Berkshire and 37% of Oxfordshire CC		Child Social Care to Expenditure Ratio, Social Care Ratio, Adult Social Care to Expenditure Ratio
	Northern UA	West Oxfordshire, Cherwell and 36% of Oxfordshire CC		Fee Charges to Expenditure Ratio, Change in HRA Reserves, Total Assets / NRE

The data used for this analysis does not reflect the impact of the Fair Funding reforms, but it gives an indication of future financial resilience based on the current financial baseline. The challenges around the ongoing financial sustainability of West Berkshire are clear. Option 1 does not address these challenges and leaves West Berkshire with a very high-risk score in comparison to any of the other proposed authorities. This imbalance is significantly reduced with Option 2 and this represents the lowest overall risk score. Option 3 creates a marked imbalance, this time between the proposed Northern authority and other two proposed authorities and a high overall risk score when compared to Option 2.

[9] The CIPFA financial sustainability tool pulls together data from a range of different data sources, to calculate 24 different metrics which are relevant to a council's financial sustainability. Each of the metrics touches on a different aspect of councils' finances, for example MRP/CFR, reserve levels, and debt ratios. These metrics are then processed to calculate an overall risk score for each council. The data primarily comes from the Revenue Summary and the Capital Outturn Return The latest year of complete financial data we have available is 2023-24

4.6 Overall evaluation and recommendations

Summary of the overall evaluation of each option

Option 2 fully meets the government criteria when they are applied to the Oxfordshire and West Berkshire geography. The proposal would see the creation of two, well balanced unitary authorities, that are at the optimal scale to withstand financial shocks, improve efficiency and drive devolution as part of a new Mayoral Strategic Authority. This is reflected in this option having the highest potential overall transition and transformation recurring annual benefits (£59.8m) when more ambitious change plans are achieved. Not only are these the highest overall benefits, but this proposal directly addresses the Exceptional Financial Support and financial resilience issues in West Berkshire by including them in the proposed Ridgeway authority. The proposal also scores well in terms of improving public services and meeting local need. The scale of the new authorities is ideal in terms of being large enough to benefit from economies of scale and yet small enough to benefit from a more direct connection to local need and provision. Many of the challenges of two unitary solutions are resolved with this proposal because of the fact that the authorities involved already have two sets of upper tier services to act as a foundation for the new councils in ensuring the delivery of safe and legal services from day one, but will still have the catalyst of reorganisation to drive further transformation.

Option 1 partially meets the government criteria when they are applied to the Oxfordshire and West Berkshire geography which has been used as the common basis for this appraisal. Whilst there may be some merits in a single unitary for the whole of Oxfordshire in terms of providing a positive benefit position for transition, in a relatively short timescale, there are a number of major drawbacks with this proposal. Critically, Option 1 would create a relatively large unitary authority for Oxfordshire and leave a very small unitary in West Berkshire. This is considerably below the government guidance level and it is already struggling with financial sustainability issues that would not be addressed by Option 1. Notwithstanding this missed opportunity, a unitary as large as the one proposed in Option 1 could face some considerable challenges. As unitary councils increase in size, the risks of becoming remote from local communities increases significantly. Research also shows that both outcomes and costs of critical services such as Adult Social Care can be less favourable despite the potential benefits of economies of scale. From a transformation perspective, benefits are lower than with the other two options. There is also a material risk that many of the crucial services identified in the Government criteria will not have the same catalyst for change, as with the other options, as they will remain largely unchanged in terms of structural reorganisation.

Option 3 does not meet the government criteria when applied to the same geography in the same way. The proposal would see the creation of one unitary that may have the necessary scale to succeed but two smaller councils that would face significant financial challenges from the outset. These challenges would be compounded by the proposal creating the lowest transition benefits (£9.5m) and a payback period of nearly nine years. The creation of duplicated services in areas such as Adult Social Care would be costly at a time when demand for such services is already causing material challenges for all upper tier councils. There is a significant concern that this option has been developed with a significant focus on the city of Oxford and with inadequate focus on the rest of the Oxfordshire and West Berkshire area and two other authorities. Some of the apparent benefits of the focus on Greater Oxford in terms of improving growth in housing supply also appear flawed as the requirements to redesignate greenbelt land will take significant time delaying any potential benefits. There is also strong local concern about the expansion of the urban area of Oxford and the removal of the greenbelt, and this does not appear to have been adequately reflected in the proposals.

Chapter 5 Vision and Ambition in a nutshell

Quick Chapter Summary

This chapter sets out each of the two new unitary councils' visions and ambitions

The current system cannot meet rising demand or deliver services in ways residents now expect. The vision for reform is clear: councils designed around people and places, not bureaucracy:

- Two new unitary councils that put communities at the heart of decision-making, delivering better outcomes, sustainable services and inclusive growth.
- Prevention-first services, modern digital platforms, and locality-led delivery.
- Large enough to plan effectively for housing, infrastructure and growth, while keeping services local, responsive and accountable.

What people told us

"It is very important for a council to be close wherever possible to the community it seeks to serve."

"Accountability to residents is very important. Large councils have been shown not to be sympathetic to local requirements."

The two-unitary model will:

- **Have ambition that goes beyond reducing costs.** It is about **transforming services** - investing in early intervention and prevention to reduce demand on high-cost services like social care.
- **Provide digital-first platforms that make access simple, modern and efficient.**
- **Establish locality teams** that join up housing, health, social care and community support.
- **Build stronger partnerships** to tackle housing, skills and climate challenges.
- **Put people and neighbourhoods first**: making sure towns, villages and rural areas get a strong voice.
- **Create councils that will be trusted by residents:** moving from councils "talking at people" to genuinely empowering them to shape decisions.
- **Make every pound work harder:** using data and digital tools to cut waste and improve services.
- **Drive economic growth will be inclusive and sustainable**: utilising the benefits of Oxford city but also preventing it from being too focused by also harnessing the high-powered economies across the rural towns, villages and rural areas.

Together, the two councils will give people better services, better value, and a stronger local voice – while helping the whole region grow fairly and sustainably.

5. Vision and Ambition

5.1 Our Proposed Visions

In this chapter, we set out our vision for each new unitary authority and how we see two unitaries as the best way of securing improved outcomes for the communities, places and economies of Oxfordshire, West Berkshire and the broader region.

These long-term visions act as a guide and will help to shape all functions and activities for the new councils, not just the delivery of statutory services. They will enhance accountability and transparency in the decisions taken and provide a 'north star' to direct the changes and transformations needed as the unitary authorities shift from transition to sustained improvement. Our visions and the content of this proposal demonstrates how the proposed authorities will meet the government's six criteria and go beyond this in their ambition to improve the lives of people in Oxfordshire and West Berkshire.

Our vision for the two unitaries

The councils of Oxfordshire and West Berkshire have a long track record of reimagining their functions and approaches, which has been built upon in this LGR proposal. We believe that our two-unitary proposal offers tangible benefits to those who live, learn, work and play in the area, through sensible population size and a shared service ethos.

Our visions are built around being able to respond to place and neighbourhood while operating at a scale that achieves efficient and effective service delivery. We see a clear opportunity to recharge, renew and refocus our activities to deliver growth and change while protecting what is special about the communities and places of Oxfordshire and West Berkshire.

Our Vision for Oxford & Shires

Our vision is that:

- We will create a modern council that will hold communities at the heart of all that we do, promoting neighbourhood-based service delivery championing climate action. Our **localities model** will prioritise participation, partnership and prevention across our city, our market towns and our thriving villages
- Trusted by residents, we will develop our historic towns and urban centres to make them great places to live, work and visit. We will seek to preserve our rural places, building cohesive and sustainable communities across Oxford & Shires, **shifting from community engagement to community empowerment** ensuring no one and nowhere is left behind
- We will harness the global reputation of Oxford City and the economic excellence within North and West Oxfordshire including our world class innovation and engineering heartlands to unlock greater potential and establish genuinely **inclusive growth.** This will support new and existing industries, including our strong visitor economy, across the whole of Oxford & Shires, bringing prosperity and a higher quality of life to all of our residents and communities, across towns and rural places alike.

Our Vision for Ridgeway

Our key vision statements are:

- We will create a **modern and effective** council that puts people and communities at the heart of strong, healthy and robust local government, all while providing a firm base for wider regional growth.
- Our Localities approach will be tailored to **strengthen local voice, build resilience, and celebrate the distinctiveness of our towns and villages**. We will be trusted partners, working hand-in-hand with residents, parish and town councils, and the voluntary sector to co-produce solutions that meet local needs.
- We will be known as a **responsive, high-performing council** that makes the most of its resources. By being digitally confident and evidence-led, we will simplify access to services, ensure fairness across our communities, and make every pound work harder to deliver sustainable, affordable, and effective local government.

"We welcome the proposals for Ridgeway Council, which aim to strengthen and support our local communities. By improving services, investing in sustainable initiatives, and promoting efficiency and collaboration, these measures provide a practical framework for positive change. Greenham Trust looks forward to the opportunities this new council will bring."
Chris Boulton, CEO Greenham Trust.

These ambitions for new unitary authorities for Oxfordshire and West Berkshire are fully complementary. By establishing two new authorities, we can not only deliver well against the government's six criteria, but more importantly, refocus and recharge the role of local government. Modelling service delivery based on two broadly similar-sized organisations will be the best platform for reducing cost uncertainty, engaging and empowering local solutions and underpinning the economic opportunities derived from the larger mayoral authority they will sit within.

5.2 How we will help secure better outcomes

When the government invited Oxfordshire councils to bring forward proposals for new unitary councils in our area, rather than starting with an end goal and engineering the evidence to fit it, we looked at the make-up of local authorities in our area and asked ourselves – how can we make this jigsaw puzzle fit together to achieve the best outcomes for our communities, and help the government achieve its ambitions for reorganisation and ultimately devolution?

Our assessment:

- Including West Berkshire means that we can build on two existing upper-tier authorities and create two right-sized unitary councils with the optimum fit against the government criteria.
- Two councils for an area approaching a million residents at vesting day delivers resilience whilst remaining close to our local communities.
- A proposal for two councils meets the government's criteria and ambitions and has the significant bonus of taking an existing, smaller unitary authority out of receiving exceptional financial support from the government.
- A single unitary council for Oxfordshire meets some of the government criteria for LGR but it will be a very large authority, with housing growth over the next decade, and sheer scale alone will not generate efficiency and stability. It would not take the opportunity to transform and improve services prolonging existing problems of poor service delivery and financially inefficient upper-tier services. Importantly, a large unitary authority would not support local needs of the communities it serves in the most effective manner.
- More than two councils for this area would exacerbate the existing problems of small unitaries the government is seeking to eradicate. It would be costly and financially unsecure. It would not meet the government's criteria, nor would it resolve any of the more significant challenges we face.

Our proposal for new councils will create two distinct but coherent individual unitary councils that work for the communities and provide a firm basis for devolution.

- **Oxford & Shires Council** would be able to tackle the county's most complex social care and children's services challenges, as well as areas with urban deprivation in places such as Oxford, Banbury and Bicester. It would do this while using the transformational opportunities reorganisation brings to allow us to bring existing, costly services in the north of our area back to a rational and manageable scale. It would provide a firm platform for economic and housing growth to help the city of Oxford meet its needs and support the surrounding area.
- **Ridgeway Council** would focus on the needs of its older and more rural communities, improving access to care, housing and local services. It would do this while using existing strong, cost-effective services as a robust base for expansion and transformation. The area's advanced science and high-tech industries will provide a firm basis for the Ridgeway economy, while continuing to support the city and its university, and ultimately contributing to a diverse and prosperous economic growth for the wider Mayoral Strategic Authority Area.
- **Together**, these two authorities would be the right size and would create a more responsive, efficient and sustainable system.

Our two-council proposal is the strongest viable option available. It delivers genuine transformation and value for money and gives residents clearer accountability for local services. With two strong councils working in partnership, it would strengthen local democracy, provide a solid foundation for future devolution, and ensure the whole area benefits from better services, stronger communities and sustainable growth.

Chapter 6 Planning for Devolution – Our Growth Offer in a nutshell

Quick chapter summary

- Our proposal commits to meeting the government's housing aspiration as a foundation and driver of economic growth – in particular on affordable housing, which was also a key issue coming out of our community engagement.
- Oxford & Shires with its high-performing engineering, and Ridgeway with its advanced science, space and nuclear research industries provide two distinct but coherent economies to support strategic economic development at the MSA level.
- We will build on extensive local experience and expertise of using Local Development Orders to speed up planning and unlock economic growth and business development.
- By strengthening accountability and providing the right balance of scale and local knowledge we can ensure growth is aligned with national ambitions and local priorities.

What people told us:

"Focusing on small businesses is vital, attract larger ones where practicable with insistence on long term full time jobs."

"I believe benefits will come from councils supporting economic growth, through transport improvement and attracting investment. All the other priorities will then be achieved through the increased prosperity."

"We need to ensure we are part of a larger geographic footprint i.e. mayoral combined authority to ensure the regional voice we are part of is strong."

"Investment in where we live is key to the wealth and health of our communities"

The two-unitary model will:

- **Have a strong focus on the distinct strengths** of the two proposed council areas and how they can independently and collaboratively contribute to driving growth across the Thames Valley
- **Build on proven track records** of delivery in each proposed area
- **Create councils that are the ideal size as building blocks for the new MSA**

Our two new councils will have a single, accountable role in shaping local places and prioritising investment. Oxford & Shires will harness the economic strengths of Cherwell and West Oxfordshire and manage growth linked to Oxford. Ridgeway will coordinate larger-scale projects across shared growth corridors, ensuring transport, housing and skills investment are aligned.

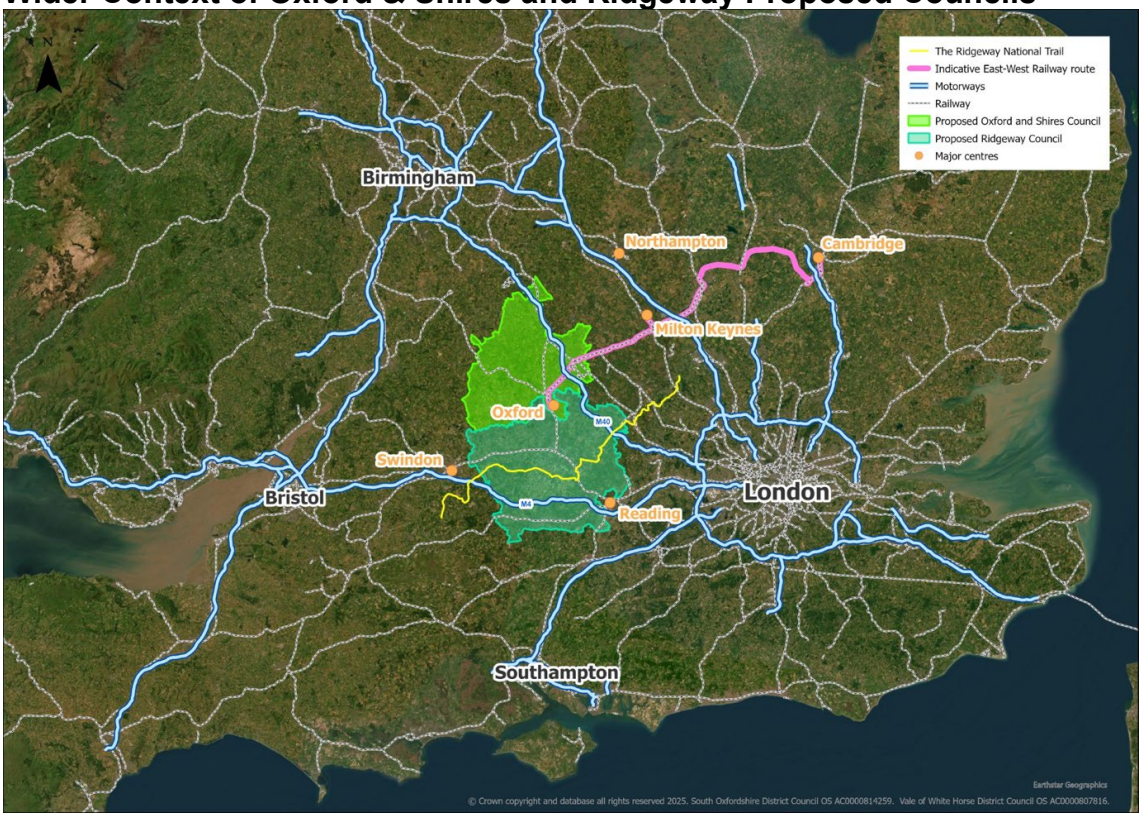
6. Planning for Devolution – Our Growth Offer

6.1 The importance of devolution

Our proposal for two unitary authorities covering Oxfordshire and West Berkshire is a foundational step towards achieving improved growth and devolution across the area.

Formation of a Mayoral Strategic Authority (MSA) for the Thames Valley region, within which Oxford & Shires and Ridgeway sit, affords an opportunity to make growth work for all our communities, create one voice for investment, scale and impact across the Thames Valley and beyond, and deliver on national growth priorities at pace. Oxfordshire and Berkshire's economy is one of significant strength, and devolution is an opportunity to release its potential as a means to drive globally significant economic growth. This strength comes not solely from the cities of Oxford and Reading but from the network of assets that lie in their hinterland across a range of sectors and clusters, and the harnessing of the interrelatedness between the two. These include high-performance engineering at RAF Brize Norton, Banbury, Bicester and the Oxford Technology Park in Kidlington, together with Oxford North and other sites in the city of Oxford, Science Vale at Harwell, Culham, Milton Park and Greenham, nuclear research at Aldermaston and Burghfield, and tourism attractions of Bicester Village and Blenheim Palace. We are seeking to tap into the unfulfilled potential of our assets through devolution to maximise our economic and commercial potential. Oxford & Shires and Ridgeway councils are the right size and with the level of ambition and connection to collaborate with established partners and the MSA to realise the area's potential as a world-class economy.

Wider Context of Oxford & Shires and Ridgeway Proposed Councils



Our ambitious proposition on positive growth and the contribution that Oxford & Shires and Ridgeway councils can make to the government's growth ambition is set out at Appendix D in 'Planning for Devolution – a 'Growth' Offer from the proposed 2 new Unitary Councils' (Authored by spatial and strategic planning specialists Adrian Colwell and Catriona Riddell). This includes an intention to scale up growth delivery by unlocking additional sites.

An MSA will help at a local level by facilitating joined-up strategic planning to tackle regional challenges, including those related to housing and transport, which do not stop at the Oxfordshire-Berkshire borders. This will include the unlocking of stalled sites to increase delivery. Beyond planning, targeted and regionally coordinated support can address shared challenges such as deprivation, poor health outcomes, and skills shortages and mismatches while enabling innovative preventative approaches, such as cohort-based investment. There is a real opportunity for an MSA to provide a dynamic forum where each Unitary Authority, retaining its local leadership and identity, can work in partnership across the region. By engaging effectively with our communities, including businesses, we will be able to build on individual unitary area strengths while amplifying the strengths of partner authorities across the Thames Valley and unlocking more growth than we would be able to on our own. Enterprise Oxfordshire (the former Local Enterprise Partnership) can provide an established, strong voice for the business community for Oxfordshire, from across the private sector and Oxford universities. The Berkshire Shared Prosperity Board offers the same opportunity.

By providing clear strategic leadership for the region and a coordinating role across councils, other public bodies and the private sector, an MSA will counter the current fragmented structures that can slow investment in housing, transport, energy, skills and growth corridors. By unlocking investment at scale, the MSA will help drive greater expansion of key sectors, connect and capitalise on the world-class assets in the region by bridging Oxfordshire's global research base, Berkshire's business ecosystem, and significant human capital to accelerate productivity and growth.

From a national perspective, a Thames Valley MSA offers a credible counterweight to the economic strength of London. It is one of only a few regions that is a net contributor to the UK economy and has the scale and capability to rebalance growth from the capital, even more so when considered in the context of the Oxford to Cambridge Growth Corridor, of which it is an integral part. It is polycentric but interconnected, offering a model of distributed prosperity which can serve as a template for other regions. It is well placed to help solve next-generation national challenges that the country must tackle, particularly in areas around energy, water and housing. The region has a pipeline of projects with partners and plans in place but requires the tools to deliver them at pace and at the scale needed. With an MSA in place, this region can deliver more of what the government wants – building on a strong base in advanced engineering and technology, defence, life sciences, creative industries, digital and NetZero infrastructure, among others. We can work together to accelerate the addressing of national priorities.

How LGR helps with devolution and growth

We recognise that Local Government Reorganisation is an integral step towards delivering the benefits of devolution, in which the relationships between our two proposed unitary authorities with the new Mayor and Combined Authority will be of critical importance.

The government has mandated Spatial Development Strategies in the English Devolution White Paper 2024. These, along with Local Plans, will shape a new era of strategic planning for positive, balanced and sustainable 'Good Growth' where enabling a higher quality of life and wellbeing for residents, reducing health inequality and where the importance of addressing the climate emergency and focusing on nature recovery are recognised as essential outcomes of planning for development and infrastructure.

These planning reforms to both the local and national planning system dovetail with a wider national approach to delivering growth, especially in relation to economic priorities, closing infrastructure gaps (in transport, water, and electricity supply), securing national infrastructure investment, energy supply and environmental recovery. The unitary structure resulting from LGR for Oxfordshire and Berkshire will play a fundamental role in supporting the delivery of devolution ambitions across the region.

6.2 Proposal for devolution for Oxfordshire and West Berkshire within the Thames Valley

Oxfordshire and Berkshire authorities have convened a series of Devolution Summits (November 2024 and January, March and September 2025) to pursue their commitment to a new Thames Valley Mayoral Strategic Authority and an associated devolution deal with government. Swindon Borough Council has also participated in these discussions and has stated its aspiration to be part of an MSA for the Thames Valley region from the outset. Buckinghamshire is open to collaborative working on joint economic growth initiatives, although they have declined an invitation to participate in a Thames Valley MSA.

Two substantive pieces of work have been jointly commissioned to inform the formation of a proposal for a Thames Valley MSA to government, and these have provided clarity on the scale of opportunity for the region and the scope for it to contribute even further to national prosperity priorities.

The first of these commissions by Inner Circle Consulting makes an independent ‘case for change’. Early analysis identifies that the Thames Valley region’s economic success has masked persistent challenges, including a rural-urban divide, housing pressures, fragmented infrastructure and skills mismatches. It noted that a new MSA offers a platform to overcome institutional fragmentation and develop collaborative solutions that deliver real benefits for residents across the region, respecting local identities and uniting communities around shared goals.

As discussions have progressed, a clear commitment to collaborate on vision, purpose and governance of the MSA has been made. A draft vision has been developed for a proposed Thames Valley MSA, which seeks to build on individual area strengths to make a compelling case for the potential collective impact of an MSA with the clear goal of driving economic innovation and inclusive growth through devolution.

A second joint commission by Metro-Dynamics provided a ‘deeper dive’ into the data that sits behind the Inner Circle Consulting ‘case for change’. Titled ‘Thames Valley Devolution: Evidence Base (Sectoral Complexity, Industrial Composition and Economic Geography) it provides insights into important indicators related to sectoral complementarity, industrial make-up and the economic geography across the Thames Valley region (Berkshire, Buckinghamshire, Oxfordshire and Swindon). These are provided to aid in reaching an agreement on a practical geographical area for the MSA and foster early agreement on how devolution might benefit local communities while also driving national growth.

Its analysis found that the Thames Valley ‘does not currently function as an integrated economic area, but its constitutes share many positives including equivalent economic complexity and sectoral composition ... Such complexity reflects not only the diversity of sectors present but also the depth of specialisation and interconnectivity between them’. It suggests that the Thames Valley region is well positioned to absorb economic shocks, pivot towards emerging technologies, and sustain long-term growth.

In summary, a clear steer is provided that deeper economic integration across the Thames Valley is key to sustaining growth and global competitiveness. It cautions that the region’s growth trajectory is uncertain. While the region is home to some of the UK’s most advanced and productive economies and demonstrates high levels of economic complexity, sectoral diversity and export strength, there are nationally significant centres for innovation, resilience and growth, and they are not merely strong local economies, the M4 corridor is showing signs of fatigue. The divergence highlights the need to move beyond fragmented local approaches and towards a more integrated regional strategy.

Qualifying Oxfordshire and Berkshire's position that a Thames Valley MSA provides us a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to unlock the region's full economic potential, the commission offers us a recommendation that the MSA sets a framework for doing so. Through coordinated governance and strategy, the sectoral complementarity can be harnessed to drive resilient and globally competitive growth.

Oxfordshire and Berkshire, within which the proposed Oxford & Shires and Ridgeway councils will sit, is demonstrating collective leadership to deliver a devolution solution which drives local economic development, generates wealth and fosters local prosperity for our communities.

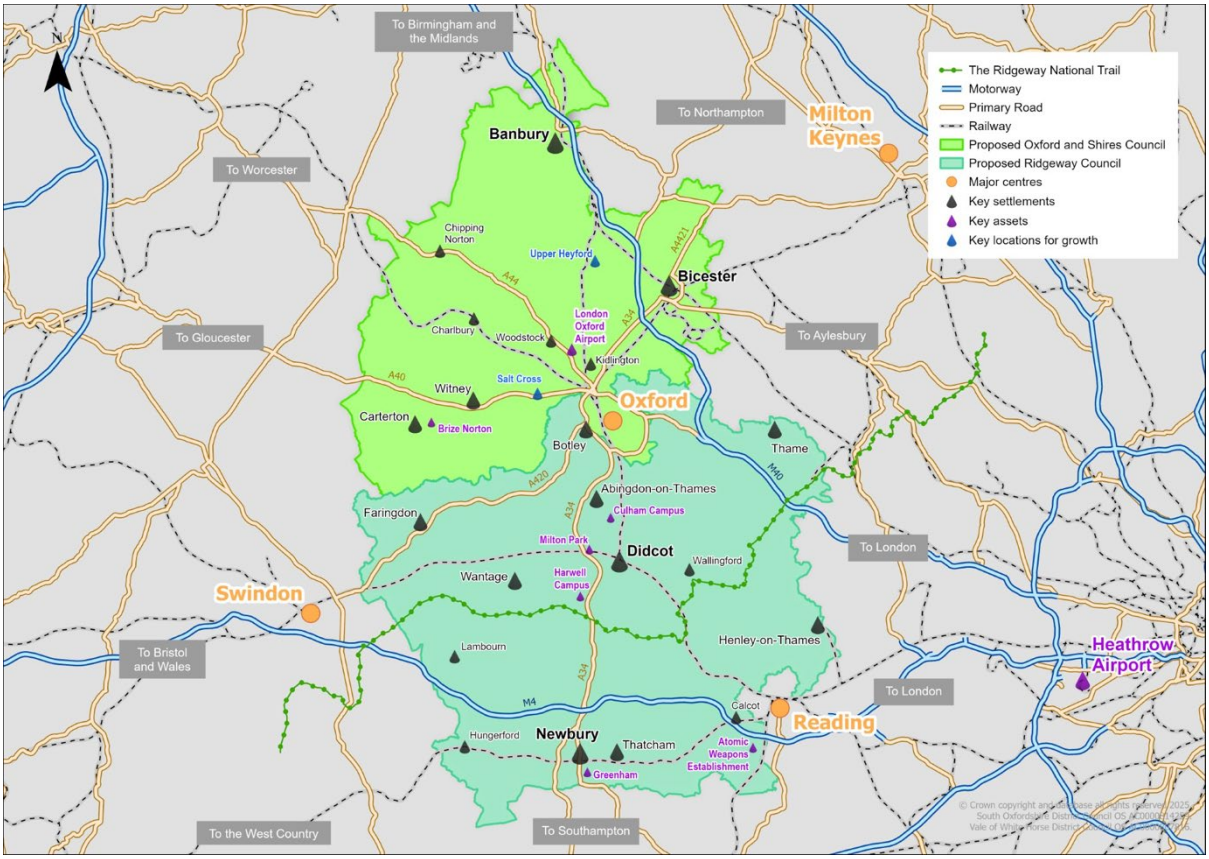
6.3 The benefits to devolution of two unitary councils in Oxfordshire and West Berkshire

In devising the Oxford & Shires and Ridgeway Council proposals, careful consideration has been given to the strategic and geographic context, national growth priorities and local ambitions to ensure that Local Government Reorganisation in Oxfordshire and Berkshire enables the devolution benefits for the area of the two councils, for the region and into the Oxford to Cambridge Growth Corridor and beyond.

Our statement of ambition and intent titled 'Planning for Devolution – A 'Growth' Offer from the 2 new Unitary Councils' (Appendix D authored by spatial and strategic planning specialists Adrian Colwell and Catriona Riddell) is a clear demonstration of our understanding of the opportunity afforded by devolution and our absolute commitment to working with the new mayor to plan for and deliver growth for our local area – harnessing our local knowledge of the opportunities and challenges to deliver good growth and the social, environmental and economic benefits that this will be bring our area and its residents. We want to establish two new councils, which will apply lessons from the past and take new approaches to sustain a dynamic economy in each unitary council, not deliver more of the same on a bigger footprint.

Oxford & Shires and Ridgeway Council geographies are based on a set of corridors (including A34, A44, A40, M40, A420 and M4) which link the current Oxfordshire districts and existing West Berkshire Unitary Council together. All are located in the Oxford to Cambridge Growth Corridor and the proposed Thames Valley MSA region, in which the two proposed unitary councils will sit. The ambitious 'Growth Offer' defines how the new mayor and the two unitary councils could interact and makes proposals for areas of collaboration between the mayor and each unitary council to deliver a significant package of growth at pace.

Spatial development context of Oxford & Shires and Ridgeway Councils – a corridor approach



The proposals recognise the importance of the Oxford City economy, as well as the surrounding economies of the four districts and West Berkshire which, taken together, total twice the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of the City.

According to data published in June 2025, the Gross Value Added (GVA) per hour worked in West Berkshire was estimated at £50.80, compared to the UK average of approximately £38.10. Similarly, West Berkshire continues to demonstrate economic strength, with a GDP per capita of £62,603, representing a figure which is double that of the national average, placing the district among the top-performing local authorities in the UK.

By taking a networked approach, our aim is to strengthen the joint economy of all of Oxfordshire and West Berkshire.

In addition to working with the mayor, the two unitary councils will work together on cross-boundary issues to deliver the best outcomes for the area. Current Oxfordshire and Berkshire structures provide potential platforms for continued joint working with external partners, for example, the former Oxfordshire and Berkshire Local Enterprise Partnership, Enterprise Oxfordshire as a representative body for business, the Universities and skills providers, and Destination Management Organisations in relation to tourism and the Berkshire Shared Prosperity Board. We will advocate a strong ‘place’ voice for our areas on the regional and national stage.

Some of the proposed growth opportunities in our ‘Growth Offer’ are common to both new unitary councils, and we also set out the common features and ambitions for accelerated economic growth and housing delivery, including a focus on affordable housing to generate the social benefits associated with this for communities, alongside securing investment in transport and other infrastructure priorities.

Within the ‘Growth Offer’, each unitary council proposes an offer which reflects the unique strength of the locality and its relationship with and potential contribution to the Oxford-Cambridge Growth Corridor in which each sit.

Both new unitary councils will draw upon the growth record and innovation experience of the current councils. In developing the 'Growth Offer', the councils have considered how to ensure the proposals are sustainable and support 'good growth'; support major sectors and lead to a close engagement with business; take forward housing innovation and responses to climate change; and identify infrastructure priorities critical to enable growth in both unitary areas.

The offer is defined in terms of:

a) Meeting housing need
b) History of the relationship of the composite authorities
c) Our Growth aspirations
d) Maximising our economic and commercial potential
e) Our transport and infrastructure priorities

Ridgeway Council’s geographic and institutional positioning provides a unique strength to this two-unitary proposal for Local Government Reorganisation at the meeting of regional aims for the area. It acts as a bridge between Berkshire and Oxfordshire, anchoring the success of a future Thames Valley MSA and enhancing local productivity across the entire geography. In doing so, it offers a powerful vehicle for realising the transformative potential of devolution in the region.

Our commitment to delivering on devolution

In working with the MSA, our focus on effective placemaking and delivering new communities will include consideration of the environment, health, and stakeholder engagement to ensure that we support an inclusive economy. In so doing, we make the following commitments:

Offer on Economy – build on strengths, key sectors and clusters

- Provide more active support for the skills and training measures essential to economic growth and the individual and social benefits that this will bring.
- Establish a process of engagement with businesses on strategic planning matters and how the local economy is evolving, not just consultation on Local Plan stages.

Offer on Housing – meeting government housing aspirations, especially on affordable housing delivery. Delivering a joined-up approach to economic growth, infrastructure and housing delivery, recognising that quality housing, including affordable housing, is essential to meet the needs of industry and commerce.

- Increase the provision of more affordable housing to support economic growth and generate the social benefits of this for communities.
- Support housing innovation, self-build and climate positive housing.
- Place responding to climate change at the centre of our proposals, applying the lessons from the net-zero approval of the Salt Cross new settlement.

Ask on Infrastructure – transport (road and rail), power and water

- Secure investment in a programme of agreed infrastructure priorities, in transport, expansion of the energy grid and in upgrading essential water and sewerage infrastructure.
- Secure investment into a series of bus and rail transport corridors to create a new generation of transport hubs to enable growth and mixed-use development to reduce the need to travel.
- Delivering transport and digital infrastructure to drive connectivity to maximise economic growth.

Initial priorities of the two councils model include:

- A focus on regeneration and growth of our market towns, using design codes to secure high-quality development.
- Take measures to tackle climate change in our housing, transport and economic development initiatives
- Support the growth of Oxford without the wholesale opening up of the Green Belt by supporting the growth of a new town at the former USAF Airbase Heyford Park, with improved transport links to Oxford. Take measures to speed up the planning process, from consents to proposed development and the making of Local Plans – giving more certainty in the planning process.
- Use Local Development Orders to support economic development at all business parks across the two unitary authorities, based on the effective Milton Park model, with a commitment to a 10 working day planning approval. This new approach to planning will have the effect of 'derisking' planning as a factor in investment decisions and speeding the delivery of economic projects in critical sectors. Greenham in West Berkshire provide a similar example.
- Play a full part in the development of the Oxford – Cambridge Growth Corridor, with support for a programme of measures designed to support its development as a driver for economic growth and prosperity.

Public Service Reform under a Unitary and Mayoral Arrangement

Turning to the delivery of public services under a new regional MSA for the Thames Valley and unitary structure, there is an important opportunity to unify public services, where we currently have a disjointed set of boundaries that do not align with each other, causing confusion for residents and challenges for public sector delivery. The government has specified that in time the Mayor will take responsibility for wider public services in the area, potentially including the Police and Crime Commissioner and Fire and Rescue services. Shared working for efficiencies and a more sensible geography that residents can understand, and that is better aligned to local communities, could be explored.

Under a two-unitary model, we would have unitary councils in place that have both the scale to support our public sector partners, while also retaining a local focus to support partners in delivering local community needs. This would apply to:

- **Police -** we would be better aligned to our communities to aid in crime prevention and improving public safety by using the models set out in this proposal.
- **Fire and Rescue** – we can engage at a local community level to support community and neighbourhood safety and resilience, and emergency planning.
- **Environment Agency** – we can focus on the different and specific areas of the Thames catchment covered by the two unitary council proposals. This would allow strategic and practical intervention on flood prevention, which has been lacking in Oxfordshire under a county-wide model

- **Health** – by having geographies better aligned to communities and of a sensible size, we would be able to focus on prevention work for the social care sector and NHS services. We expect our innovative approach to Adult Social Care and Children's Services will have a positive impact for a range of public sector partners.

There would be opportunities for exciting new approaches to partnership working across the public sector, not just those above, with our approach to creating new, ambitious councils keen to explore the best ways to deliver services. This would build on the existing track records of district councils in Oxfordshire that have formed strong community and public sector partnerships to deliver locally and nationally significant work. An example of this is the Oxfordshire Migration Partnership involving the Thames Valley Police, Fire and Rescue Service, the Health and Voluntary and Community sectors and all local authorities. Ridgeway will provide an anchor for Oxfordshire and Berkshire and will provide an opportunity to develop interventions based on the experience and best practice of both county areas. It will help drive partnership working across the MSA and wider public services.

This proposal supports the current direction of travel for the Oxfordshire Fire and Rescue Service, whereby we are working towards a harmonised approach across the Thames Valley to include systems, equipment and procedures. In Berkshire, arrangements are already in place for the harmonisation of equipment and staff. We believe devolution provides an opportunity for further harmonisation within the proposed MSA to enhance efficiencies and follow a number of areas nationally that have successfully taken this approach. A transitional arrangement would be required, where the Oxford & Shires Council would manage the Oxfordshire Fire and Rescue service on an interim basis on behalf of the county while any restructures take place. The practicalities of this arrangement would be explored in detail during the transitional period leading up to vesting day.

6.4 Making it Happen – Support Required

Delivering the benefits of Local Government Reorganisation for Oxfordshire and West Berkshire and the creation of a Thames Valley MSA go hand in hand. Our ask of government, therefore, is fourfold:

1. There is a synergy between the establishment of a new unitary model for local government in Oxfordshire and Berkshire and that of a Thames Valley MSA. Enabling alignment of the establishment of each structure will help unlock the benefits of each.
2. Request prioritisation of Oxfordshire, Berkshire and the Thames Valley for implementation of devolution – we are a net contributor to the Exchequer and wish to increase this value expediently.
3. We need assistance with developing an effective model to attract and secure inward investment to help realise our collective aim of local 'good' growth, which benefits our communities and the region. This includes contributing to the achievement of the Oxford to Cambridge Growth Corridor ambitions and the national economic benefits that will flow from this.
4. Share the geography that the Spatial Development Strategies will apply to. This will enable us to align Local Plans and transport plans from an early stage and also facilitate further discussions around the geography and governance as part of our Thames Valley MSA proposal to government by the end of 2025.

With this support and certainty from government, we aim to progress a submission to government for a Thames Valley MSA in tandem with this LGR proposal submission for a two-unitary council structure for Oxfordshire and West Berkshire. We are motivated and committed to delivering the mutual benefits of each tier of local government for our area and realising the benefits of these at the most local level.

Chapter 7 Service Delivery and Transformation in a nutshell

Quick Chapter Summary

- **The Oxford & Shires and Ridgeway option is specifically designed to achieve transformational improvements to services as well as ensuring continuity of provision from day one.**
- We will harness the best of current working arrangements and use LGR as a catalyst for significant improvement across all of our service areas.
- Our focus is on the services highlighted in the government criteria, but we have also responded to what our communities have told us are the most important services to them. For each service area we set out our proposed future model and why we believe it is the right approach for Oxfordshire and West Berkshire.

What people told us:

“Schools, training and education, affordable housing, local transport, children services needs investment now to avoid a lost generation.”

“Housing and affordable housing is in such a shortage locally most residents do not realise this. Helping families and individuals effectively and reduce homelessness and a record increase in emergency accommodation is frustrated by a lack of joined up working between housing and adult/children’s services. So much could be achieved if these stressful high-cost services worked together including looking at ways of developing new approaches and strategies.”

“I live in a rural area which is poorly served by the county council due to being on the border of Berkshire and Oxfordshire. I believe the opportunity of creating ‘The Ridgeway Council’ would allow for a better and keener focus on local concerns, which include flooding and the incredibly poor conditions of our roads.”

The two-unitary model will:

1. **Prioritise prevention and focus on locality working:** place-based teams joining up housing, health, care and community support to prevent escalation into high-cost services.
2. **Protect statutory services:** guarantee safe and legal services from vesting day and ensure continuity for children’s and adult social care, homelessness and regulatory functions.
3. **Transform the experience that people have when they interact with their council** including a single digital gateway for residents.

7. Service Delivery and Transformation

7.1 Introduction

A key component of achieving our vision statements and ambitions is the way we will design and deliver local government services by using both our economies of scale and our deep insight into localised demand to find the best ways to meet it. We will design these with authentic collaboration amongst our partners, residents and service users, agreeing on delivery models that bring the best of our collective efforts. Central to our approach to all services is that we will create viable services for our two councils without the need to share services to be financially viable. Where sharing makes sense, we will investigate and develop these opportunities fully but we do not start from a position of being dependent on sharing to be sustainable.

It is paramount that these services are ready to deliver on day one of the new authorities. We have sought expert advice from a range of sources on how best to aggregate and disaggregate existing services, and to re-establish them with our principles at their core. In this section, we consider the transition efforts (during the initial phase of change), our aspirations for key services, and the transformation needed to achieve this (the latter phase).

As per the priority areas outlined within the White Paper, we have focussed our attention on five crucial service areas:

- Adult Services
- Children's Services
- Education and SEND
- Homelessness
- Public Safety and Public Health

We have also considered future transformation opportunities for other services that will be materially impacted by reorganising, such as Planning, Economic Development, Highways and Transport, Waste and Street Scene, Leisure, Parks, and Communities and Culture.

The existing local authorities that make up each of the proposed two unitaries are already well placed to transition and then transform these services. The Ridgeway Council proposal will build on South Oxfordshire's and Vale of White Horse's expertise in delivering community-focussed, district-level services in close partnership, while integrating with West Berkshire's well-established unitary service delivery. It will benefit from increased geographic scale while remaining local enough to relate to local communities and be responsive to communities' needs.

Cherwell, West Oxfordshire and Oxford City share a service delivery ethos, meaning many services are currently provided in-house or through council-owned companies. This commonality offers a coherent base on which to merge existing functions with those currently provided by the County Council as the Oxford & Shires Council.

Through recent public engagement with our key stakeholders, including residents, communities, businesses, and town and parish councils, we have received clear feedback that our communities want to receive better services than they currently do, particularly in areas such as highway maintenance, strategic planning, and adult social care. We will ensure frequent and comprehensive engagement with residents, partners, and stakeholders. This further engagement will help to shape the design of new services before they are finalised and implemented. Our clear and coordinated communication plans will facilitate a full understanding of the LGR process, aiming to maintain and further improve the trust of service users throughout the transition period.

Through this proposal, we highlight opportunities for transformation, improvements and efficiencies across service delivery. In some cases, services could function better at a mayoral strategic authority scale, and we could strengthen locality working to retain close relationships with communities.

Both proposed unitary authorities can deliver significant contractual savings, primarily through consolidation, standardisation, and increased buying power across a wider population and budgetary baseline. Key areas where savings could be realised include:

- Aggregated contracts for goods and services across the current authorities which make up the proposed geography – securing better pricing through bulk purchasing.
- Reduction in duplicate contracts and renegotiation under more favourable terms.

The two-unitary proposal creates the right structural opportunity and with the right commissioning reform, prevention programmes, workforce stabilisation, digital innovation, and careful transition management, the savings and resilience benefits will be maximised.

Local government across Oxfordshire and West Berkshire faces profound demographic, demand and financial challenges over the next two decades. At the same time, residents and communities expect more visible leadership, stronger local accountability, and services designed around their distinct needs. We aim to meet these challenges through modernised, collaborative, impactful local public services.

Transformation Elements required to deliver savings for people services

Commissioning & Market Reform	• Strategic market shaping to stabilise fragile residential/nursing markets • Block contracts, fostering hubs, and IFA conversion to reduce volatility • Outcomes-based commissioning to contain costs and improve sufficiency
Prevention & Reablement	• Home First and reablement-first approaches to reduce long-term admissions • Family hubs and early intervention in children's services to reduce demand escalation
Workforce Transformation	• Joint recruitment pipelines, retention incentives, and standardised practice models • Reduction in reliance on agency staff, with shared training and workforce strategies across both UAs.
Digital & Data-Driven Services	• Digital-first models: resident care accounts, AI-enabled triage, predictive analytics • Improved transparency and quality monitoring (particularly in Ridgeway markets).
Partnership & Integration	• Align with NHS/ICS footprints for joint commissioning in ASC, SEND and public health • Embed stronger VCSE and community partnerships for place-based delivery
Financial Management & Risk Pooling	• Recalibration of unit costs to national benchmarks • Pooling risks across balanced UAs to absorb demand shocks and sustain long-term financial viability

Note: these elements are set out in commissioned research undertaken by PeopleToo - more detail is available in Appendix E.

7.2 Adult Social Care

Our proposed approach

This section covers all social care functions for working age adults and older people, including Information and Advice, Prevention and Early Intervention, individual and carer's needs assessments, safeguarding, direct payments and housing support.

We believe that the two-unitary model provides a better service delivery platform to: [10]

- manage future demand by embedding locally driven preventative approaches across all Adult Social Care services and reducing long-term care costs.
- fully embed place-based and neighbourhood delivery models (working closely with the community and voluntary sector, and the NHS), improving our ability to tailor services to local needs and capacity that delivers a better, more sustainable workforce model.
- further develop and enhance the strategic commissioning model and approach to market management to deliver more efficient and effective local care and support services.

Why we believe this is the right approach

The current geography of Oxfordshire and the way in which Adult Services are organised means that service users in many parts of the county are remote and harder to reach, with the population equally spread throughout the county. The proposed smaller authorities would offer the opportunity to locate teams closer to residents, decrease travel times and increase the time available to provide services. Oxfordshire County Council's 2025 CQC assessment report highlighted inconsistencies in adult social care support provided for carers, especially in rural areas.[11] The report also indicated that people supported by adult social care who live in more rural parts of the county face barriers and inequalities.

The challenges faced by both proposed new unitary areas are stark but differ in nature. The proposed authorities will enable more tailored approaches to address these different challenges. Oxford & Shires will need to focus on managing high-cost, complex needs and reshaping the fragile provider markets.[12] Ridgeway will require a focus on ageing models, rural access and reducing older adult care admissions. Oxfordshire demonstrates a 'low demand, high cost' profile, with fewer service users than comparable areas but significantly higher per-person costs driven by market pressures, workforce shortages, and complex needs.[13] Without reform, demographic growth (24–27% aged 65+ by 2035) will severely compromise the financial sustainability of Adult Social Care.[14]

How we will achieve this

For this, the design and delivery of services must be tailored to the two geographies, but we have a shared vision. This is aligned with the Government's 10-Year Health Plan and CQC's assessment framework for local authority assurance. Our Adult Services principles and the way they translate into transformation opportunities are:

[10] For more information on the service delivery models that we believe will provide better service delivery models, see Appendix E
[11] See Oxfordshire County Council's 2025 CQC Report for further information
[12] For future trend data, refer to Appendix E
[13] For further information, see Appendix E
[14] For future demographic trend data, see Appendix E

Principle	Transformation opportunity
Person-centred – designed around the goals and strengths of individuals, families and carers	Multi-disciplinary triage at the front door will help understand an individual's complete needs and strengths, ensuring people are directed to universal or short-term solutions before long-term care is considered.
Integrated – joined-up across health, housing, welfare, and community support	Aligned to Primary Care Networks/ICS footprints, co-locating social workers, Occupational Therapists, NHS staff, and voluntary sector partners.
Preventative – focused on keeping people well and independent for longer	Strategic commissioning and market management at the unitary scale will adopt outcome-based contracts, micro-care ecosystems, and strong joint commissioning with the NHS/public health.
Community-based – delivered close to where people live, reflecting the diversity of needs across urban and rural areas	Carers at the Heart, adopting structured engagement with unpaid carers and service users, providing expanded access to respite, training, and peer networks.
Digitally enabled – using data, technology, and innovation to improve access, experience, efficiency, and outcomes	Including resident care accounts, online self-assessment, AI-enabled triage, and assistive technologies to support independence.

The proposed geography for both will be large enough to benefit from the efficiencies afforded by integrated commissioning; streamlining contracts, pooling budgets, and prioritising preventative services, yet still small enough to ensure truly personalised and local care.[15]

The Ridgeway unitary will benefit by using West Berkshire's successful quality assurance framework to standardise quality assurance processes, while employing Oxfordshire's robust model for performance monitoring and complaints resolution to ensure accountability. West Berkshire Council Adult Services are currently rated 'Good' by the Care Quality Commission and are characterised as having strong leadership and safeguarding. This will provide a strong platform for building improved Adult Services in the Ridgeway area.

The Oxford & Shires and Ridgeway unitaries will work together closely when redesigning services, applying shared learning and common methodologies where appropriate, while tailoring the design to their respective demographics and geography. There are opportunities to combine West Berkshire's lower cost of care for working age adults with South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse, enabling the ability to manage the market in a different and more localised way.

This will help bolster service resilience and the ability to better withstand financial shocks. The unitary authorities will seek to share staffing resources across localities to reduce pressure, balance caseloads, and improve continuity of care. This will, in turn, bolster workforce resilience and avoid the risks of over-centralisation or fragmentation.

[15] For further reference to the proposed efficiencies see Appendix E

Oxford & Shires will aim to retain a small centralised coordinating function, overseeing discrete locality teams that will build relationships with complementing partner agencies. Both will implement a digital inclusion strategy to address inequality and ensure access to digital care tools and portals. This will reduce some pressure on the workforce caused by increased demand, while also tackling important equity issues.

Both unitary authority models are committed to strengthening partnerships. By working across our combined geography, we will improve coordination with health services, housing, the community and voluntary sector, and carers' organisations to provide holistic, joined-up care for our residents.

Case Study: Strengthening independence through integrated home care
West Berkshire Council has demonstrated strong adult social care practice by greatly reducing delays in hospital discharge through effective workforce development in the home care sector. By supporting recruitment, sponsorship, and training, the council ensures timely access to intermediate care beds and home care services. This proactive approach enables people to return home swiftly, promoting independence and reducing long-term care dependency. Carers report improved access to respite and replacement care, with support tailored to both planned and emergency needs. These efforts reflect West Berkshire's commitment to person-centred care and responsive service delivery.

7.3 Children's Services

Our proposed approach

This section covers all children's social care functions , including referral and triage, early intervention and targeted early help, assessment, multi-agency safeguarding arrangements, Children in Need, Children on Child Protection Plans, and the full range of Corporate Parenting and leaving care services, as well as specialised services including but not exclusively children with disabilities, young carers, youth justice and Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children.

We believe that the two-unitary model provides a more agile and responsive service delivery platform to:[16]

- deliver on the government's Family First reform agenda
- manage future demand by coproducing and delivering locally driven tailored preventative approaches across a place, thereby reducing the need for statutory intervention
- fully embed place-based and local community delivery models (working closely with the community and voluntary sector and statutory partners including the NHS and police), improving our ability to co-design services to address local needs and manage capacity in a way that delivers an agile more sustainable workforce model
- further develop and enhance the strategic commissioning approach to more effectively manage the market delivering more responsive, efficient and effective local care and support services

[16] For information on the proposed model for children's service see Appendix E

Why we believe this is the right approach
The two-unitary proposal represents credible and sustainable reform. It provides a balanced scale to deliver financially resilient, high-quality children's services, aligned with national reforms. By reorganising this way, we have the best opportunity to:

- Respond effectively and efficiently to meet the needs of children and families at the earliest opportunity supporting family networks within local communities
- Tackle Oxfordshire's increasing costs
- Shield West Berkshire from small-scale volatility
- Create a commissioning platform capable of reshaping sufficiency, stabilising markets, and achieving long-term savings

Despite considerable strengths in current practice (both rated 'Good' by Ofsted), Oxfordshire and West Berkshire experience challenges. Similar to adult services, Oxfordshire experiences a 'low demand, high cost' situation- while the number of Looked After Children (CLA) in Oxfordshire is 29% below the England average, weekly outturn costs are significantly higher - £2,500 per week compared to £2,193 (statistical neighbours) and £2,060 (South East average).[17] This is driven by higher complexity and fragile placement markets. Residential costs are lower than peers (7% below England) but rose by 31–42% in one year, showing acute volatility.

In West Berkshire, CLA unit costs are 14% below those of its statistical neighbours; however, as a small authority, it will struggle to absorb demand shocks.[18] Workforce costs are 30% above the national average, and residential costs rose 42% in one year, highlighting market uncertainty.[19] Together, these dynamics create a fragile baseline. West Berkshire do though have relatively high numbers of children placed with West Berkshire Foster carers and are having significant success in line with the Family First reform placing children with kinship carers thereby increasing stability for children and reducing the overall cost of care.

We believe that the two-unitary proposal begins to address these issues, while still requiring national-level system change to ensure long-term service sustainability. The reduced population size gives a more manageable scale than a single county unitary, with the diversified footprint spreading demand, reducing volatility, and increasing resilience to demographic shocks. Our modelling suggests that fostering sufficiency could improve towards 67–70%, reducing reliance on high-cost residential care.[20] Crucially, national benchmarking suggests that current authorities with a population of 350–500k delivering Children's Services achieve the best performance and Ofsted outcomes.

How we will achieve this
To achieve our ambitions, the design and delivery of services must be tailored for the two geographies, with our shared vision. This is based on both a deep understanding of our communities and the policy direction outlined by central government's 'Keeping children safe, helping families thrive'. Our Children's Services principles and examples of the way they translate into transformation opportunities are:

[17] Costings within Oxfordshire can be further seen in Appendix E
[18] Costings within West Berkshire can be further seen in Appendix E
[19] Workforce costings for children's services can be further seen in Appendix E
[20] For information on our modelling, see Appendix E

Principle	Transformation opportunity
Community-centred early help – efforts made to identify solutions before issues require statutory intervention	Embed integrated services like family hubs, peer support, and Family Network Meetings to increase kinship placements, while improving partnership arrangements and consistency with the NHS and voluntary sectors through a more comprehensive place-based working model. Efforts will focus on expanding early intervention networks using West Berkshire's refreshed model.
Tailored – recognising the different requirements in urban/rural geographies	Shaping services based on specific demographic factors (e.g. higher rates of deprivation in Oxford City, sparser populations further afield).
Co-designed – learning from service users and those around them, not assuming we know best	Youth engagement will be strengthened by expanding West Berkshire's successful Children in Care and SEND engagement. Building on coproduction and activity delivered through Public Health and the Building Communities Together model across Ridgeway and reviewing existing practice across Oxfordshire to build on what's already in place.
Outcomes-focused – ensuring all provision delivers for residents, not just reducing short-term costs	Shift to outcomes-based contracts, along with block arrangements and tailored arrangements e.g. sibling discounts that stabilise residential market costs and improve transparency and joint working.
High-functioning workforce – helping our staff do their best work	Implement an integrated workforce strategy, with shared training, strengthened Principal Social Worker oversight, reduced agency reliance, and Social work academy driven workforce pipelines with universities and training providers. Social work practice will be enhanced through the expansion of the social work academy including the development of tailored support including the further development of joint training hubs and practice forums.
Multisectoral – close working with providers, and risk pooling across two balanced authorities to mitigate CLA demand shocks	Strengthen our relationship with private sector providers through the development of Strategic Partnerships to better understand and respond to needs with potential for cost reduction, further enhanced through inter-unitary commissioning and close alliance with the Regional Care Collaborative.

The proposed Oxford & Shires unitary authority should focus on addressing cost volatility, tribunal challenges, and market sufficiency.[21] The Ridgeway unitary authority could consolidate strengths in fostering, parental engagement, and prevention, while tackling workforce cost pressures and improving SEN Support. Together, they can learn from one another.

[21] Children's Service current cost volatility, tribunal challenges and market sufficiency can be seen in Appendix E.

7.4 Education and SEND

Our proposed approach

We have a great opportunity to create a new, smaller, and more agile set of services, better connected to the needs of children and families, the local market and communities, and more focused on complexity drivers of demand in this geography. If implemented in line with our vision, this should result in lower, more consistently and closely managed costs and improved outcomes for all children.[22] We believe the two-unitary proposal is better placed to drive the inclusion agenda across the education sector including for children with SEND and to tackle the growing deficit in the High Needs block of the Dedicated Schools Grant. Ensuring that children and young people are appropriately educated and supported within their communities is central to this inclusive agenda, while building trust between parents, local schools and the council whilst enhancing and strengthening the effectiveness of the mainstream offer.

Why we believe this is the right approach

We believe our two-unitary model provides the balance needed to further strengthen our ability to address local needs with local solutions, manage the provider market, whilst further strengthening the strong bonds with the communities we serve. This forensic understanding of local need and responsive organisational right-sizing will expedite our market shaping and strategic commissioning approaches thereby better managing demand at the right level in the right place leading to reduced costs.[23]

In particular, the two unitary authorities are well placed to drive a 'relationship-reset' with the community of SEND children, their parents and the wider education and care systems, which will pave the way for thoughtfully codesigned local early help provision that addresses need while being cost-effective.[24] The fresh start offered in establishing new unitary authorities will allow us to return to first principles in the way we engage and support.

There are increasing calls nationally for a radical rebalancing of the system towards early intervention and prevention support. The close relationships that the two new unitary authorities will develop with their communities will drive this process locally, targeting community based preventative services, securing and allocating investment aligned to need and listening to communities as to how services should be accessed.

School capital investment, pupil place planning and SEND place planning are best delivered by the new unitary authorities.[25] Their geography allows for local and responsive approaches to meet the inclusion of all children at a local level. The impact on home to school transport is expected to be positive, reducing costs where children are best educated close to home within their own community where appropriate. Solutions to local education for all children will be coproduced across the education and SEND system including all relevant stakeholders.

[22] For further details on the two-unitary modelling for education and SEND, refer to Appendix E
[23] To further understand how the two unitary model will further our market shaping and strategic commissioning approaches to reduce demand and cost refer to Appendix E
[24] For information on the relationship reset refer to Appendix E
[25] Further information on how the new unitary authorities can best delivery school capital investment, pupil place planning and SEND place planning refer to Appendix E

How we will achieve this

This approach will be delivered through principle-led transformation focusing on the 'relationship-reset' with the community of SEND children, their parents and the wider education and care systems, ensuring that the changes in the initial transition period and beyond are grounded in a shared understanding of the goal:

Principle	Transformation opportunity
Inclusive – championing the needs of all, including those traditionally underserved children and young people with Social, Emotional, and Mental Health difficulties, autism and complex needs	Adopting an inclusion agenda that supports families to access peer support and local community support on a universal and targeted supported services level. Supporting the needs of children in mainstream education in line with research and the government's emerging agenda on SEND.
Preventative – giving children and young people the best start in life	Challenge ourselves to protect and increase investment in services that minimise future need, through robust multi-agency support for the very youngest children, supporting the development of and access to intervention that supports school readiness and delivers whole-family assistance.
Proportionate – ensuring good quality universal services, with enhanced tailored support for those who need it most	Reviewing and refining the balance of services available to all including targeted preventative activities, and high-intensity support. Measuring the impact of intervention on all target groups.
Assembling – being proactive in the provider market, improving the public-private partnership	Become more active in convening providers, sharing our strategic direction, testing changes and driving costs down through improved assurance.
Predictive – using data and digital capabilities to support decision making and transparency	Enable the unification of Oxfordshire's strengths in analytics and statutory focus with West Berkshire's contextual insights. This will facilitate the creation of robust, real-time performance dashboards.
Pooling – shifting the local public sector partnership from agreeing joint strategies to committing to action through shared resources	Gathering assets and budgets to improve services like SEND provision, using Delivering Better Value frameworks and integrated funding strategies. Joint commissioning can streamline transitions and reduce waiting times.
Scaling – capturing what works well now, and expanding cover to all parts of the new geography	Broaden the work of West Berkshire's school effectiveness team, children missing education approaches, emotionally based school avoidance approaches along with the targeted early years support and intervention through the Family Hub model.

While the principles are shared, each new authority will need to respond to its distinct strengths and challenges. As examples, Oxfordshire has Education Health and Care Plan (EHCP) growth through higher SEN support, but faces elevated tribunal challenge, while West Berkshire aligns with national EHCP levels but demonstrates strong parental confidence.[26] Our model allows each new authority to tailor responses to these distinct pressures, while sharing best practice across the system to strengthen outcomes and financial sustainability. There is a key opportunity to share what works well across the existing local authorities in the area. We propose combining West Berkshire's engagement-led approach with Oxfordshire's improvement structure to deliver optimal SEND services for families.

A key strength of Oxfordshire County Council's SEND services is its structured SEND Improvement Board, which includes the NHS and parent partnership. West Berkshire's strengths within SEND services include co-production, with the council having co-produced its SEND and Inclusion Strategy 2023-2028. It demonstrates a commitment to service improvement, having participated in the national Delivering Better Value in SEND programme, and boasts a transparent Local Offer which is regularly updated and informed by user feedback.

However, there are pressing issues to address. Oxfordshire County Council has been subject to a statutory improvement notice after an Ofsted and CQC report in 2023, which identified systemic SEND failings.[27] Challenges include an average ASD/ADHD waiting time for EHCPs exceeding 500 days, poor communication with parents, and a lack of transparency in EHCP processes.[28] West Berkshire's financial pressures in SEND school placements persist, as they do across the country, with debt projection in West Berkshire up to £37million and £84 million in Oxfordshire.[29] The foundations of SEND services in West Berkshire are strong, but resourcing constraints are evident.

We need to hold on to what works well in education too, while prioritising the functions that need to change. Oxfordshire's education services benefit from strong data systems, including statutory returns and performance analysis, and effective support for schools through the Performance and Information Team. West Berkshire's Education services comprise active school improvement services, including a focus on governance and continuous professional development.

The area is home to high-performing schools and targeted interventions for vulnerable pupils, and benefits from early years support provided through Family Hubs. Fostering good relationships with non-local authority-maintained schools in both areas remains a priority. However, the performance of disadvantaged Key Stage 2 pupils in West Berkshire is historically low, sitting in the bottom quartile, and there are challenges related to school readiness however recent developments in this area have seen West Berkshire move from 63rd to 16th place in the national league tables.[30] In addition, there is limited use of data dashboards to track and respond to school outcomes, and Home to School Transport costs are high.

[26] To see EHCP growth in Oxfordshire and West Berkshire refer to Appendix E
[27] See 2023 Improvement Notice - Oxfordshire County Council
[28] See 2023 Improvement Notice - Oxfordshire County Council
[29] Debt projection in Education and SEND refer to Appendix E
[30] To see further information on school readiness refer to Appendix E PeopleToo Report

Case study
During a 2025 Ofsted SEND Thematic Review, West Berkshire's multi-agency collaboration was highlighted as a key strength in supporting children with SEND who are not in school. Schools reported strong relationships with the Local Authority SEND team, which was consistently accessible and responsive. Regular joint planning meetings ensured alignment across education, health, and social care professionals, while children on the Dynamic Support Register received well-coordinated support. Health professionals, including diabetic nurses, worked closely with schools and the Medical Tuition Service to maintain attendance and build parental confidence. Social workers and Early Help teams used relationship-based approaches to keep children's needs central. These efforts improved engagement, reduced fragmentation, and led to more timely interventions. Going forward, more strategic information sharing, use of digital solutions, and development of shared protocols could further strengthen data flow and service provision across the Ridgeway geography.

7.5 Homelessness

Our proposed approach
Our two-unitary model offers a significant opportunity to transform the way we tackle homelessness:

- recognising the different challenges for communities across our geography, not focusing solely on the towns and cities where existing provision is concentrated
- managing future demand by better understanding the causes of housing insecurity, and generating a shared mission under one banner
- applying our localities model to homelessness prevention, working in close partnership with the voluntary sector, Police and the NHS to embed place-based and local community delivery models that reduce siloes and place individuals or families at the centre of support
- increasing the delivery of and access to affordable housing, which may be assisted by using the Housing Revenue Account in the Oxford & Shires area

Why we believe this is the right approach
Homelessness is a traumatic and debilitating experience for anyone, affecting their health, financial and social outcomes. It also heaps pressure on local public services, where individuals require more complex and acute support from frontline services.

By reprioritising access to affordable housing as one of the cornerstones of wider social outcomes, we can reduce the burden on other frontline services. The two-unitary model offers appropriate scale, connection to communities and delivery experience to achieve this.

How we will achieve this

By applying the following principles, we have an improved chance to strengthen housing security and mitigate the impact of homelessness:

Principle	Transformation opportunity
Scaling – using our increased resources to improve delivery, grounded in the community insights of what is needed where	Applying the combined purchasing power of the unitary authorities will enable Strategic Housing to acquire property for Temporary Accommodation, improving efficiency savings for the aggregated Homeless Service.
Addressing root causes – increasing focus on the drivers of homelessness, including domestic abuse, end of short hold tenancies, and family evictions	Homelessness is a symptom of wider social complexity, so the solution cannot be solely vested in housing services. Investing in community safety measures, mediation and poverty reduction will have a multiplying effect on the success of housing support services.
Single points of access – simplifying the way housing support is offered, through accessible systems and processes	Having a single gateway, including one registration on a single housing register and a common allocations policy across the new authorities, will assist those in need of housing support through a consistent, simplified approach to accessing housing.
Common cause – generating a shared mission for complementary public sector services	Establishing governance and accountability to prevent homelessness alongside services including Private Sector Housing, Benefits, Planning, Social Care, Public Health and Education.
Enabling – recognising that many people affected by homelessness do not want to engage with statutory agencies	Maximising the role of the Oxfordshire Homeless Alliance to ensure partners are best placed to design, commission and deliver based on their competencies and reputation.
Evidencing – building the business case for holistic preventative interventions	To ensure the longer-term financial sustainability of approaches like Housing First (intensive person-centred support via a tenancy) and assertive outreach, we will adopt a test and learn mindset to the way we design, deliver and collaborate.

Oxfordshire boasts high homelessness prevention rates of around 80% across all districts. However, while the county as a whole has low levels of rough sleeping, general homelessness, and Temporary Accommodation usage compared to the rest of England, these levels are slowly rising.[31]

The Oxfordshire Homeless Alliance brings together Oxfordshire councils, the Integrated Care Board, and local community and voluntary sector partners to commission and provide homelessness and rough sleeping services across the county. While this is generally an efficient delivery mechanism for services, the majority are based in and around Oxford City, as it is the source of most demand. Due to Oxford's housing crisis, many housing issues are shifting further outside Oxford City into surrounding areas and increasing pressure on local services. By refreshing our shared strategy, we will ensure all partners are aware of their obligations and contributions to preventing homelessness. We will work to streamline funding and develop our workforce using the principles outlined above.

[31] For Oxfordshire Homelessness data refer to: JSNA Report on Homelessness

Through capital investment and government funding, West Berkshire Council has supported Temporary Accommodation solutions and delivered successful targeted local interventions such as Housing First. The additional scale also maximises the opportunity to increase existing Housing First models and Temporary Accommodation provision across the whole Ridgeway area.

Housing services are an inherently local service, so the two-unitary proposal would enable residents to benefit from increased efficiency afforded by a larger council without sacrificing the 'local' feel of the service. Through our proposal, we would benefit from being able to share best practice in homelessness prevention and rapid relief from our principal authorities, driving up performance standards in tackling homelessness and rough sleeping.

Case study
West Berkshire Council's Walnut Close project exemplifies how local authorities can repurpose assets to deliver better outcomes, reduce costs, and engage communities. Originally a care home in Thatcham, Walnut Close was repurposed to host court-mandated family contact sessions, which were previously held in unsuitable, costly venues. The new set-up significantly improved the experience for families and staff.
The centre, now known as Walnut Tree House, supports 35 families weekly and fosters a welcoming, personalised environment. Phase 2 converted the remaining space into temporary accommodation for homeless families, addressing rising housing costs and the lack of council-owned stock. With an £80k investment, the Council realised £600k in annual savings and £150k in housing benefit income, while gaining control over local housing supply.

7.6 Public Safety and Public Health

Our proposed approach
There is a broad range of public services that protect the public from harm and promote their wellbeing at both the individual and community levels. Within council services, these include:

Private Sector Housing enforcement
Disabled Facilities Grants administration
Environmental Protection
Food and Workplace Safety
Environmental Crime and Environmental Enforcement
Licensing
Community Safety
Health and Safety
Public Health
Trading Standards
Fire and Rescue
Emergency planning
Safeguarding

Our new unitary authorities will have the opportunity to merge and reconfigure these services to improve effectiveness. Despite varying technical specialisms, statutory obligations and service standards, these functions shared three common aims: promoting life-long wellbeing, protecting the public from harm and taking enforcement action where required. Our approach will reshape these services around the three aims.

Why we believe this is the right approach

The proposal could achieve initial cost savings by enabling the removal of duplicate management posts across the existing organisations' public safety and environmental protection services. There will also be clearer lines of accountability due to the removal of the two-tier system, both for the two proposed new unitary councils and for people accessing services. In addition, there will be an opportunity to build on the strong relationships and partnership working which already exist.

How we will achieve this

Principle	Transformation opportunity
Consistent and fair – all universal services should be provided across the entire geography, not concentrated in areas like the city	Ensuring that universal services are evenly distributed, for example, in working with private sector landlords, administering the Disabled Facilities Grant, and establishing dedicated tasking teams for anti-social behaviour, CCTV, youth diversion, and rural crime.
Cohesive – services provided by different teams and agencies should work in unity, not in competition	Via a single Community Safety Partnership for each unitary, we can replace service fragmentation and standardise interventions across domestic abuse, modern slavery, and safeguarding, informed by Oxfordshire's frameworks and West Berkshire's trauma-informed approach.
Preventative – alongside responsive functions, we need services that identify early risks and mitigate their impact	Oxfordshire is one of 37 'Marmot Places'- adopting the principles of Prof Sir Michael Marmot to address the social determinants of health (housing quality, income, education, etc), not just 'symptoms' like smoking and obesity. By coalescing the strategic leadership of Public Health with technical service delivery via Environmental Health, Trading Standards, Licensing and wider public safety, we will help achieve the 'Marmot Place' aims and improve health protection.
Systemic – recognising the contributions of services at all geographies, in pursuit of common goals	By combining the resources and expertise of multiple councils, public protection partnerships can achieve economies of scale, streamline operations, and deliver services more effectively. This collaboration allows for a more flexible and efficient allocation of resources.
Harmonising – establishing common priorities and working practices	Competing priorities and varied ways of working across local partners make it challenging to prioritise activity. We can establish shared aims and governance, through improved back-office systems, reporting arrangements, data analysis and delivery.
Developmental – ensuring we attract and retain the best staff	Proactively attract qualified staff to fill vacant posts in specialist functions through appropriate remuneration and continuous personal development. Operating as a unitary authority will increase the availability of training and resources for the development of staff, like Environmental Health and Licensing professionals, allowing improved career progression and workforce resilience.

Clearly, it is vital that these services work in close partnership to maximise the impact of their efforts. Existing examples of effective collaboration include:

- The Oxfordshire districts' Private Sector Housing teams work closely to share expertise, best practice and intelligence. This is particularly helpful where landlords operate across multiple districts, as it contributes to a more consistent approach to private sector housing across Oxfordshire.
- Oxfordshire County Council's Public Health team and the community and voluntary sector via initiatives like the countywide 'Better Housing Better Health' fuel poverty advice service.
- Food and workplace safety (through the Thames Valley Food Group) and health and safety (through the Thames Valley Health and Safety Group).
- Licensing functions in Oxfordshire, using a Joint Operating Framework amongst councils and Thames Valley Police to ensure harmonisation of standards and information sharing to protect residents. In addition, Oxfordshire councils carry out joint enforcement work, including with authorities outside of Oxfordshire.
- West Berkshire's Building Communities Together Partnership delivers a strong public-health-informed approach to serious violence and successful youth and anti-social behaviour interventions in its key towns. Through the use of restorative approaches, 'Safe Places', and home security, there is a commitment to supporting vulnerable residents to feel safe. In addition, strong partnership working with Thames Valley Violence Prevention Partnership and engagement with the health sector help to secure positive outcomes for residents.
- The West Berkshire Council hosted Public Protection Partnership is a shared service which delivers a wide range of public safety and regulatory services across West Berkshire, Reading, and Wokingham. This improves efficiency and value for money across environmental health, trading standards, licensing, food safety, and consumer protection services. The model, which combines the capabilities and expertise of three local authorities, enables the pooling of resources, increases service coverage, and delivers a consistent experience for service users.

Fire and Rescue Services provide a range of public safety services, including fire prevention, protection and emergency response services. Locally, these are delivered by the Royal Berkshire and Oxfordshire Fire and Rescue Services. As mentioned in Chapter 3, the government has specified that in time the regional Mayor will take responsibility for wider public services in the area, potentially including the Police and Crime Commissioner and Fire and Rescue services.

We will continue working towards a harmonised approach across the Thames Valley, including systems, equipment and procedures. In Berkshire, arrangements are already in place for the harmonisation of equipment and staff. Transitional arrangements covering both new unitary authorities will be required to maintain current service standards and further embed Fire and Rescue in local public sector partnerships.

7.7 Other service areas

A range of other service areas will be materially impacted by reorganising. The transition to two unitary councils presents an opportunity to harness the benefits of a new footprint through transformation, thereby enhancing service delivery.

Planning and Development

The Planning and Infrastructure Bill will create statutory strategic planning powers that will apply to the proposed Oxford & Shires and Ridgeway authorities. Unitaries will be responsible for providing universal coverage of up-to-date Local Plans for the geography that, along with the new Spatial Development Strategy (SDS), will form a new statutory development plan for each area. In aligning with the SDS, we will look to share specialist skills/resources with emerging strategic planning teams.

Through the transition of placemaking functions to the new unitaries (such as minerals and waste planning and the Lead Flood Risk Authority function), there is an opportunity to reshape the approach to be more responsive to the smaller geography of Oxford & Shires and Ridgeway allowing integration to align development and infrastructure delivery to enable growth. Spatial planning, transport, regeneration and housing delivery will see increased collaboration with partners to influence their direction. Central to this will be working with the MSA to secure investment and joined-up approaches to cross-boundary issues.

There will be opportunities to establish new working relationships with stakeholders (especially infrastructure providers) and communities that can be used to inform unitary service planning and shape strategic policies managed through the MSA.
Appendix D ‘Planning for Devolution – A ‘Growth’ Offer from the two new unitary councils advises how the new Planning and Development service may function and interact with key stakeholders to deliver growth for Oxford & Shires and Ridgeway. Suggestions include:

- Collaboration of the planning and development functions of the two unitaries through a new forum linking into Berks and wider TV area.
- Area Delivery Boards established within each unitary for joint working with partners in shaping identified localities, the market towns and areas of Oxford City to consider delivery coordination, infrastructure and cumulative impacts of development. Note that these are distinct from Local Neighbourhood Areas, which collectively cover the whole unitary area and cover matters beyond planning and development, but they would work closely with them.
- Establishment of Area Panels to address the lack of consistency in engagement with the development sector.
- A concerted focus on service design to speed up planning decision-making, including the use of Local Development Orders to expedite planning approvals of business parks.
- The approach to meeting the growth needs of Oxford and the economic and infrastructure challenges associated with this will be shaped by the findings of the Oxford Growth Commission.

Housing Delivery

Moving to a two-unitary model is a fresh opportunity to prioritise the acceleration of housing delivery, particularly affordable housing, of the right mix and tenure to meet locally identified need. This is crucial to addressing the homelessness challenge and wider economic barriers arising from a lack of housing supply.

Current arrangements unique to Oxford City Council will accelerate housing delivery for Oxford & Shires. Oxford City's Housing Revenue Account (HRA) will enable Oxford & Shires to efficiently grow the collective stock of properties, making more suitable properties available, enabling wider management moves and assisting in reducing housing waiting lists. In addition to this, the Ox-Place delivery mechanism (owned by Council-owned Oxford City Housing Limited) could open up further opportunities to acquire housing stock, develop collective land assets, manage property and contribute to the stock of the HRA.

A number of transformation opportunities apply to both Oxford & Shires and Ridgeway to achieve accelerated housing delivery with the required infrastructure through the two-unitary model across the whole of Oxfordshire and West Berkshire:

- The aggregation of land assets presents opportunities to bring forward development in key locations across the Unitary Authority.
- A larger authority will have greater influence with Homes England as funder and facilitate more productive relations with delivery partners, Registered Housing Providers, and housebuilders.
- The potential for land assembly will be improved as assets can be reviewed as a unified single tier rather than the existing two-tier system.
- Increased opportunities for wider regeneration through maximising initiatives such as the 'One Public Estate' (OPE) programme.
- Increased competitiveness when bidding for Brownfield Land Release Funds (BLRF), thus supporting regeneration aims and placemaking objectives.
- Greater efficiency and effectiveness in how we approach Town centre regeneration projects from a housing delivery perspective across both public and private sectors.
- Access to wider housing markets across the Unitary Authority presents opportunities to diversify housing products and display innovation. This offers greater scope to take a strategic view of cross-subsidy and increase affordability options for residents in need of social rented accommodation.
- Amalgamated delivery of social rented homes from a unitary authority will include more move-on accommodation and permanent settled accommodation across the area, thus reducing housing demand.
- A unitary structure can benefit the delivery of specialised and extra care needs through close links between commissioning teams and delivery teams. Strategic Housing can offer better enablement of commissioning requirements by negotiating for Adult Care services from the outset of the proposed development.
- Spatial planning can be improved through strategic analysis of collective housing need and market areas. Planning decisions can be made with improved, collective intelligence of the wider spatial picture.
- Policy requirements can be well coordinated to deliver a coherent and consistent stance on key strategic housing matters (such as tenure requirements across the unitary).

Economic Development

Bringing together the strengths of strategic economic development functions that currently sit with Oxfordshire County Council and West Berkshire Council with the more localised, interventionist economic development approach of District Councils through the establishment of Oxford & Shires and Ridgeway Councils presents an opportunity to accelerate inclusive economic growth across the whole geography in a more joined up collaborative way, with the scope for economies of scale and impact that come with this.

Through the creation of the two-unitary model working in conjunction with the Mayoral Strategic Authority, we will achieve a holistic approach to economic development in conjunction with infrastructure, housing, social and leisure facilities and enviro quality. Each council will ensure that both areas:

- Continue to pursue inward investment, enabled through high-calibre and globally significant sectors, including those affiliated with the global brand of Oxford, and business clusters linked through strong transport corridors to regionally and nationally significant logistics and transport hubs.
- Continue to invest in their mature and well-functioning economic partnerships, facilitating the active involvement of regional partners.
- Structure teams to operate on key strategic economic priorities: business engagement, regeneration, infrastructure and strategic planning, including accelerated employment site delivery, digital infrastructure, tourism and the rural economy.
- Focus on skills development to support the growth of existing businesses and attract new.
- Have greater accountability for economic development with clear streamlined governance, thus expediting economic growth initiatives and improved cohesion between different economic development disciplines and other council functions, which are core to their delivery (for example, Planning Policy). This rationalisation will bring cost savings, enabling the targeting of resources to initiatives with the greatest impact.

In following the principles above to inform the structure and resourcing of two new economic development functions for Oxford & Shires and Ridgeway councils, the total area will benefit by bringing together the high-performing economies of Oxfordshire and West Berkshire closer together, further forging regional links, and bringing more economic growth than they would be able to do on their own.

Unique to Oxford & Shires is the opportunity for Oxford as a globally significant destination with 32 million annual visitors. A dedicated tourism team will address the challenges presented by this overheated market by facilitating greater linkages to the wider visitor economy within Oxford & Shires and adjacent areas, including Ridgeway and further afield.

Transport, Highways and Public Rights of Way

Highway services are outsourced across Oxfordshire and West Berkshire, with the exception of Public Rights of Way. Oxfordshire maintains a Highways Strategy and implements this through an asset management approach guided by condition surveys to target services. This has reduced reactive maintenance repairs and maintenance of the substantial rural highway network has been deprioritised. West Berkshire employs a lifecycle-based asset strategy and condition surveys to deliver service, along with innovative use of low-carbon surfacing technologies. A performance-based approach to contract delivery is also central to their approach.

In preparing for the transition to Oxford & Shires and Ridgeway Highways services, it is essential to scope current contractual arrangements, key milestones, and succession arrangements, as well as how they will apply to the new geography, as they do not currently align.

Current contract arrangements

Authority	Contractor	Contract expiry
Oxfordshire	Milestone Infrastructure	2033 with a possible extension of up to 14 years
West Berkshire	VolkerHighways	Currently preparing for the procurement of a 10-year maintenance contract expected to start in 2027. Engaging the market to shape, scope and deliver the model with a focus on innovation, net-zero and local supply chains

The establishment of highway services in both Oxford & Shires and Ridgeway provides an opportunity to develop an effective Highway model which incorporates elements of Oxfordshire's strategic highways asset model with West Berkshire's innovative, responsive, and effective operations. By uniting these approaches, Oxford & Shires and Ridgway will benefit from a best-in-class Highways service with improved equity, sustainability, and resilience for residents in both rural and urban areas.

In establishing the function, we will look at other authority models for the direct delivery of integrated public transport solutions as a means of expanding solutions that improve accessibility and respond to NetZero ambitions.

The Public Rights of Way statutory duty under the Highways Act 1980 centres on ensuring that the substantial network of Public Rights of Way across Oxfordshire and West Berkshire is not obstructed, routes are maintained and kept in reasonable condition. Both Upper Tier authorities meet this statutory duty in-house and with the support of volunteers – Parish Path Wardens in Oxfordshire and, less formally, the Ramblers Network Party and Local Access Forum in West Berkshire.

An updated Rights of Way Improvement Plan for West Berkshire will run from 2025-2035. The Oxfordshire Plan ran from 2014 to 2024, and a successor Plan is under development. There is scope to reshape the geography to which the forming Oxfordshire Plan will apply, reflecting the Oxford & Shires geography and transition arrangements for Ridgeway as its Public Rights of Way function moves from an Oxfordshire to delivery under a West Berkshire Rights of Way Improvement Plan.

Waste and Environmental Services

The current authorities that form Oxford & Shires are already collaborating to deliver waste and environmental services for the area. West Oxfordshire and Cherwell District Councils have been working with Oxford City Council and Oxfordshire County Council to develop a new operating model for Waste Collection, Disposal and Environmental Services (including Street Scene). This model would be implemented for Oxford & Shires post 2028.

A detailed business case has been produced that identifies significant opportunities to transform waste and environmental services for Oxford & Shires, including:

- The creation of a shared company model to provide an agile approach to the transformation and delivery of the Government's waste and climate targets
- Delivery of significant financial efficiencies
- Investment in 'end of life' infrastructure

A Waste and Environmental Services Transformation Programme has been established, and the authorities are completing a shared companies option appraisal to determine the future delivery model.

South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse are following their own procurement pathway with a retendering of their current joint Waste Management contract for waste collection (and street cleansing) with Biffa due to end in June 2026. Oxfordshire County Council currently provides the disposal function. Under a two-unitary model, the disposal function for Ridgeway would shift from Oxfordshire to West Berkshire. A 25-year waste management contract (including street cleansing) with Veolia for West Berkshire runs until 2032. Under the Ridgeway model, alignment and strengthening performance across the area through a shared waste collection and disposal contract would eliminate duplication and enable a standardised cost-effective service model, driving a higher standard of environmentally responsible waste management delivering waste reduction and improving recycling.

Parks and Grounds Maintenance

Oxford & Shires: Cherwell maintains parks, play areas and open spaces through an in-house team of landscape officers, with some capacity outsourced to contractor Krinkel UK. Ubico Ltd provide this function in West Oxfordshire, as a Council owned company jointly owned with Gloucestershire authorities. Similarly, Oxford City wholly owns Oxford Direct Services (ODS), which delivers a range of facilities management capacity, including grounds maintenance, for its geography.

A single model of direct delivery for parks and grounds maintenance will be established to cover Oxford & Shires. A strength of ODS as an option is its strong track record in these spaces in Oxford, which can be rolled out to adjoining West Oxfordshire and Cherwell, offering a ready-established model that is Council-owned and benefits from direct control, performance management, and the efficiencies that come with that.

Oxfordshire County Council and West Berkshire both have an in-house countryside service which, along with Public Rights of Way and countryside access (see above), provides capacity on nature recovery and land management. A future model should identify how both Oxford & Shires and Ridgeway will support the delivery of their respective Local Nature Recovery Strategies covering their respective geography and ensure active membership of the Oxfordshire and Berkshire Local Nature Partnerships.

Ridgeway: Currently, in-house teams oversee parks and grounds maintenance with some outsourced capacity through grounds maintenance contracts. In West Berkshire, this sits within the Countryside Service. In South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse, a dedicated Parks Team is responsible for managing a range of parks, open spaces, and play areas, as well as riverside moorings and wildflower meadows. A new service delivery model under a Ridgeway footprint would consider how to further reinforce the strengths, knowledge and skills of in-house teams, as well as any further outsourcing of grounds maintenance capacity through a single, streamlined, cost-efficient contract.

Leisure

Oxford & Shires: Oxford City embarked on a new 10-year Leisure Services contract in 2024 with Serco and More Leisure Community Trust as an operating partner. The contract includes a number of planned improvements, with a focus on inclusive access, youth engagement, and carbon reduction. Cherwell leisure provision is partly contracted to Parkwood Project Management and Cherwell Leisure, with some functions being brought back in-house to achieve contract savings. West Oxfordshire has a contract with not-for-profit charitable enterprise Greenwich Leisure Limited, which is due to expire in April 2027. In establishing a new footprint for leisure services, aligning with a new single model offering a greater range of services across a wider geography, with a focus on improved accessibility, carbon reduction, and greater investment, will see an improved leisure offer for residents of Oxford & Shires.

Ridgeway: South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse hold a joint leisure services contract with Greenwich Leisure Limited (ending August 2026 and a three-year extension to this is underway), while in West Berkshire, leisure services operate under a 10-year outsourced management contract with Everyone Active (to July 2033 with scope for a 5-year extension). There is some commonality in scope across the contracts, including: community outreach, social value and inclusion, helping people stay active and healthy, increasing participation in sports and leisure activities, decarbonisation and capital investment. In establishing a new footprint for leisure services across the area, aligning with a single model that addresses this scope will result in a more diverse leisure offer for the residents of Ridgeway.

Cultural, Arts and Communities

Oxfordshire and West Berkshire provide a strong cultural and arts offer to communities, whether through Upper Tier authorities such as libraries and culture and heritage services, or through localised community teams working at a District level who have a solid understanding of their residents and the local Voluntary and Community Sector. The richness of this offer can be carried through to the Oxford & Shires and Ridgeway Councils through the integration of both levels of service to provide a more comprehensive service that benefits rural and urban communities alike.

Working with partners, including the Voluntary and Community Sector in particular, both areas will sustain and further develop a network of cultural facilities, museums, libraries and heritage assets. The quality of these services will be supported by a combination of investment, community participation, and efforts to integrate cultural provision with broader priorities, such as education, tackling isolation and health. The sustainability of these services will be of paramount importance, and structures that are cognisant of financial viability through demonstrating adaptability, high standards of delivery and innovation will ensure that this offer to communities continues under a two-unitary model.

Transformation opportunities for a Cultural, Arts and Communities Service include:

- Development of combined locality teams in urban and rural areas utilising council assets to meet communities where they are
- Enhanced career progression, retention and development opportunities for staff
- Supercharging of local delivery with the use of currently underutilised buildings for community benefit
- Streamlining of processes to distribute resources for community and cultural enhancement through Section 106 and Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL)
- Ease of access for residents to key services and opportunity to consider cultural hubs to maximise use of built assets

Chapter 8 How the new councils will work in a nutshell

Chapter Summary

- The Oxford & Shires and Ridgeway councils will be designed as brand new councils from the outset. We will fully grasp the chance to rethink ways of working through this process.
- Our councils will share many common principles but will be fully independent, sustainable modern councils focused on the distinct needs of their different geographies.
- We will adopt an approach to locality working and community empowerment that will mean we can manage the risk that larger councils face of being too remote from their communities.
- We will build on existing strengths and collaborative working with town and parish councils, public and voluntary sector partners and the business community.
- Two councils will have fewer councillors than the current arrangements but our approach ensures strong local accountability and democratic representation.

What people told us

“Local councillors must be active in promoting local improvements in all the areas that effect local people, local services, local amenities, all of the community features that provide improvements to the modern features that benefit our life and enjoyment within our own home and community.”

The two-unitary model will:

- **Provide clear accountability:** simplifies governance, making councils easier to navigate.
- **Increase capacity and resilience:** each council large enough to sustain specialist statutory teams.
- **Preserve and enhance localism:** locality teams and parish links not only maintain but enhance grassroots accountability – formalising it for the first time on this scale.
- **Deliver efficient corporate services:** shared platforms and consolidated teams reduce duplication.
- **Secure credible partnerships:** two balanced councils provide strong footprints for collaboration with health, police, transport and regional bodies.

8. How the New Councils will Work

8.1 Introduction

Introduction

LGR provides a 'once in a generation' opportunity to redesign the way that local government will work across Oxfordshire and West Berkshire. The vision, ambition, and service outcomes outlined in the previous sections can only be achieved through a significant reimagination of how local government will operate to deliver them successfully.

This section sets out the proposed target operating model (TOM), a desired way of working, for the two new councils. A TOM helps us highlight the things that the councils will need to do, such as community engagement or customer service, and the enablers that will need to be in place to support these capabilities, like assets, technology, skills or culture.

At this stage, this is a combined model that describes the direction of travel, providing a strong sense of how it will feel to engage with or work in the new councils. More detailed design and implementation decisions will be the preserve of the shadow authorities for each council. We will continue to consider the way the proposed councils work, beyond the submission of this proposal and will begin to design specific features, as required, to meet the different needs of the two distinct areas.
Throughout the development of this proposal, significant stakeholder and public engagement was undertaken, and a number of workshops and strategy sessions involving officers and members who have worked jointly on this proposal were held. These have informed the following principles, which will underpin how we work as local authorities, regardless of our operating model. These principles reflect the needs of those we serve, the views of local people, and the practical considerations of operating as a unitary authority.

8.2 Target Operating Model

Underlying design principles

The design principles for the Oxford & Shires and Ridgeway councils are intended to guide a forward-thinking and future-proofed approach to shaping the way the new councils will work in practice. The principles have informed the high-level design undertaken so far and will inform more detailed design in due course. These principles are organised into seven categories.

Our **customer** core principles are that we will:

- Collaborate on solutions with our individuals, communities and local partners to enable them to help themselves wherever possible – focusing on prevention rather than intervention
- Design services to achieve the best outcomes, focusing on the needs and experience of service users and always striving to be proactive and get things right the first time
- Strive for easy-to-access, easy-to-understand, self-service, digital interactions for our internal and external customers as a default, while providing non-digital channels where necessary

Our **delivery model** core principles are that we will:

- Maintain a long-term plan of future delivery decisions with appropriate lead-in times, to enable options to be fully appraised
- Always look at who is best placed to provide our services, acknowledging that it might not always be ourselves but we will always strive for delivery options that produce the best outcomes for our customers
- Consider carbon impact, climate change and adaptation

Our **finance** core principles are that we will:

- Continually monitor and benchmark the true cost of our statutory and discretionary services and adopt a more commercial mindset to identify areas of efficiency
- Embed effective financial management practices, driving budget-based decision making and cost/benefit assessments
- Pool budgets, assets and resources across the local public and voluntary sector, wherever this makes sense, to maximise outcomes and benefits for our communities

Our **people** core principles are that we will:

- Match our workforce numbers and skills to our service priorities
- Empower our staff to own their service delivery and outcomes, and to get things right for our communities
- Support our workforce to evolve with us, providing upskilling opportunities and succession planning, with a strong focus on employee wellbeing

Our **ways of working** core principles are that we will:

- Embed a high-performance working culture framed by clear and appropriate parameters with effective escalations
- Acknowledge and manage risk to maximise positive service delivery outcomes and opportunities to improve
- Use a test-and-learn approach to support the continuous development and innovation of our services

Our **supplier and partner** core principles are that we will:

- Maximise both value for money and the social value that we achieve from our contracted services
- Manage our suppliers effectively and proportionately, to achieve the standards of delivery for our customers that we expect
- Maintain productive and mutually beneficial partnerships that contribute to our strategic objectives

Our **process, data and technology** core principles are that we will:

- Simplify, standardise and share our ways of working, with a focus on good customer outcomes and continuous improvement
- Drive a culture of evidence-based decision-making across all of our work, with the right data being available, at the right time, to drive improved performance
- Invest in our use of modern technology, using common platforms and off-the-shelf products wherever possible and ensuring we exploit all available functionality and process automation when implementing new systems

Key Council-Wide Transformation Opportunities

Through LGR transition and further transformation, there are some significant council-wide opportunities to make material improvements to the way the two councils work by adopting these principles. These go beyond the service-specific improvements that have already been outlined and include:

- Fundamentally redesigning services from an 'outside-in' perspective (resident centred design), starting by collaboration on solutions with individuals, communities and partners, including access and delivery approaches, where appropriate
- Significant rationalisation and improvement of the technology used to underpin council operations
- Investment in richer data collation and analysis capabilities to create more valuable insights to drive decision-making
- Systematic simplification, standardisation, automation and sharing of processes across the new councils
- Consolidating and reviewing contracts and their management to better achieve council objectives
- Focusing on employees and encouraging high levels of empowerment, performance, development and recognition

Example of how these principles could inform key capabilities for a Target Operating Model

To be most effective, the two councils will need to apply these principles by designing and implementing consistent capabilities across all service areas. The key capabilities that will be required are set out below. This approach offers a way to directly address feedback from residents who expressed a desire to reduce local government bureaucracy and multiple access points across Oxfordshire and West Berkshire.



Prevention, Community Empowerment, Place Making and Locality Working

- Investing in dedicated capabilities that will undertake thorough engagement and will actively and consistently encourage, equip and empower people and communities to create their own solutions without the need for council intervention. They will also undertake place-making activities, forging partnerships with key stakeholders such as town and parish councils, the private sector, and third-sector organisations to solve problems collaboratively and significantly enhance local outcomes.

Communication and Engagement

- Building enhanced proactive communication capabilities which can tailor targeted engagement to reinforce prevention and locality working supported by the skills and tools to enable richer data analysis, predictive analytics, and appropriate use of AI. This will assist in the early identification of situations where people will need more intensive or specialist support.

Self Service, Information Provision and Customer Management

- Investing in the right technology, skills and service design to provide genuinely effective, self-service and integrated customer management for all council services and other agencies where appropriate. Dedicated provision will continue to be made for specific services that deal with issues that are sensitive or time-critical, such as safeguarding or emergency response.

Complex Assessment and Case Management

- Building simplified, standardised and automated systems and processes to support effective complex assessments and case management to improve user experience, reduce bureaucracy and avoiding double handling. Vulnerable residents should not be expected to share their stories more than once, and service users can expect proactive updates on progress to help in managing their expectations.

Service Delivery

- As the new councils deliver services we will maximise time spent in communities where it is most impactful. Services will be designed and prioritised to reflect need, and will always be based on a deep understanding of customer insights and locality context

Enabling and Support

- Building enhanced data management, big data, AI and analytics capabilities to underpin better decision-making, supporting improved service design, performance management, financial oversight, and strategic prioritisation. There will be a strong focus on promoting customer-focused internal services that recognise the end goal of supporting effective external service delivery.

Commercial Focus

- Fostering a strengthened commercial approach will enable the council to be highly effective at managing costs, deriving maximum value from market shaping and engagement, improving contract management, and carefully balancing revenue generation against potential hidden costs and service failure.

High-Performance Culture

- Cultivating a culture of high performance across the new councils will promote ownership and accountability across all levels of the organisations. Clearly articulated strategic goals and empowered leadership will facilitate decisive and timely action, supported by rigorous performance management systems.

8.3 Democratic arrangements and governance

Democracy and governance

The approach to governance for Oxford & Shires and Ridgeway councils ensures that the move to a unitary authority maintains existing structures wherever possible, with some flexibility for the new authority to adapt and evolve from these structures once established.

The political leadership structure will be a Leader and Cabinet model as prescribed by Government. Local democracy for Oxford & Shires and Ridgeway councils will be strengthened by executive governance arrangements, providing strong political and strategic leadership in each of the two unitary councils.

Under unitary councils, communities will be clear who the elected representatives are. Councillors will be supported to champion their local area.

Current Councillor Numbers	Ridgeway UA Population[32]: 472,000	Oxford & Shires UA Population: 464,000
County Councillors	25	40
Unitary / District Councillors	117	145
Totals	**142**	**185**

Proposed councillor numbers and boundary issues

We propose to generally reflect the existing County Council electoral divisions in the new unitary arrangements for the administrative areas covered by the 5 current district councils, and with the existing wards for the West Berkshire Administrative area.

To ensure we can progress LGR at pace, the proposed Ridgeway authority will not involve any changes that require any boundary reviews. The proposed Oxford & Shires authority, however, recognises the need to balance the overall reduction in Councillor numbers as per Government ambitions set out in the English Devolution White Paper with the need to provide residents with the right level of access to political representation over a largely rural area.

We have modelled councillor numbers for the shadow authority elections and will seek a view from the Local Government Boundary Commission for England (LGBCE) on the right level of democratic representation in the new unitary authorities in due course. Our modelling is based on LGBCE guidance that the number of councillors should be below 99 per authority as a starting point.

This level of representation has been informed by due consideration of future strategic leadership, accountability and community leadership for the proposed new councils. The councillor-electorate ratio for both authorities is in line with research into other LGR areas with a geographically large and similar rural-urban mix, such as Cornwall, North Yorkshire and Buckinghamshire. Our

[32] ONS 2025 projected population figures

proposal also maintains effective representation for each division within the new councils. Councillors will have the right powers to focus on delivering for residents.

We propose a model of whole council elections every four years to ensure effective scrutiny and facilitate more stable and strategic leadership. This will create clearer accountability for residents, lowering costs by reducing the frequency of elections and reducing voter fatigue, with the aim of seeing increased voter participation at each election.

This is a shift from the current approach of some districts and boroughs within Oxfordshire, where elections are held in thirds or halves.

Ridgeway

- **Totalling 96 Councillors** within the area currently administered by South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse District Councils and West Berkshire Council

Oxford & Shires

- **Up to a maximum of 92 Councillors** within the area currently administered by Oxford City, Cherwell and West Oxfordshire District Councils

The formation of committee structures will be an important priority for the shadow authority in due course, reflecting the need for effective scrutiny and the separation of executive and council functions. Based on the experience of previous of LGR we would anticipate a boundary review within two years of the new authorities being created.

Civic and Ceremonial Tradition

We are committed to protecting historic assets and civic traditions across Oxfordshire and West Berkshire, as it is integral to local identity and democratic heritage.

This proposal is therefore seeking to continue with the existing Lord Lieutenancy arrangements in place across Oxfordshire and Berkshire, and recognises the crucial role that the Lieutenancy plays in our communities.

The particular importance of the heritage and ceremonial traditions to the city of Oxford, along with the significance of its City Charter and Lord Mayoralty, is recognised, and the future model will seek to protect these as a priority. Government also recognises that civic identity and service distinctiveness can and should be protected within wider governance structures. We therefore propose a structure that allows the two unitaries to deliver the efficiency and capacity that the government requires, while ensuring Oxford, as part of the Oxford & Shires council retains the appropriate powers, identity, and accountability befitting a city of its scale, pan-regional economic influence and global profile.

The model we propose builds on these elements, and existing arrangements in Oxfordshire and West Berkshire, ensuring communities retain the traditions that connect them to place, history and public life.

8.4 Future Engagement Model

Key principles of engagement

The two new unitary councils will develop their own consultation and engagement strategies, but the universal principles of strong consultation and community engagement will always be applied, meaning that all activities will be:

- **Timely** – give respondents sufficient time to absorb the information and provide a considered response, and before decisions are set in stone
- **Fully informed** – ensure respondents have the full details in an easy-to-understand way so they can give an informed opinion
- **Meaningful** - ensure communities have a genuine opportunity to influence decisions
- **Accessible and inclusive** – strive to reach all members of our communities and ensure the engagement is provided in a way they can access and understand it
- **Fed back** – communicate openly with communities on how their feedback has influenced decisions and services

Community Engagement Activities

The two new councils will be structured from the outset to enable all our diverse communities to take an active role in influencing services, strengthening local accountability and participation. Examples of community activities could include:

- **Engagement impact monitoring –** during our extensive LGR public engagement activities, most of the respondents told us they thought their views had little or no impact on how councils do things, and so restoring and maintaining trust at a larger, single-tier council is vital to ensuring local accountability.
- **Town and parish engagement –** during our LGR engagement, towns and parishes councils were clear that better clarity over who and how to get in touch with questions and requests for support would significantly support their productivity and enable them to provide greater input.
- **Community engagement forums and focus groups –** forums by which all our diverse communities could engage in a meaningful way supporting locality working.
- **Data driven approach –** targeted engagement using data sets to focus our activities based on local need.
- **Partnership working –** meaningful engagement with all partners to ensure the best use of our collective resources to support the communities we serve.

8.5 Localities working and community empowerment

Locality working

Our proposed approach to ‘locality working’ could lead to a significant shift from traditional, top-down service delivery to a more preventative, localised, and collaborative approach. It aims to improve public services by delivering them closer to and in more integrated ways with and for the communities they serve.

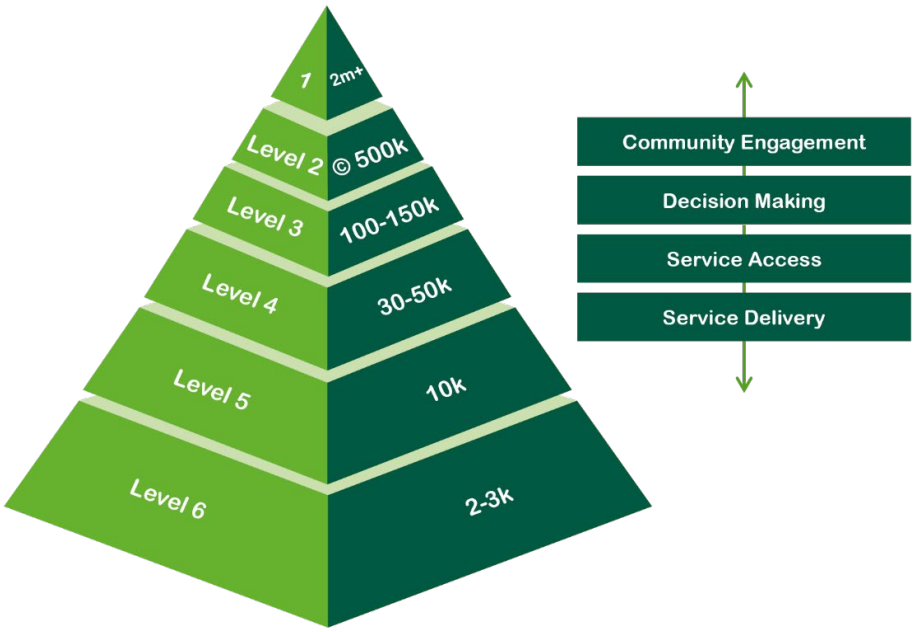
Our key principles and features of how a new locality model would work include:

- **Place-based, not service-based:** Instead of services being simply organised by a specific function (e.g. social care or housing), they are increasingly structured around a particular geographical area or ‘locality’. This allows for a deeper understanding of the characteristics of different localities and a much more holistic and tailored approach to meeting the needs of that specific community
- **Joined up and integrated services:** breaking down the silos between different public sector organisations such as local authorities, the NHS, the police, and the voluntary and community sectors. Seeking to create more multi-agency functions that work together to address the root causes of issues for individuals and families, rather than just treating the symptoms
- **Early intervention and prevention:** A core aim is to intervene more consistently, ‘upstream’ to prevent problems from escalating. By working more closely with communities and partners, services can identify and address issues at an earlier stage, which is more impactful and less costly than dealing with them in high-intensity, high-cost care services later
- **Shared resources and assets:** promoting the joint use of resources, including staff, data, and physical assets like buildings, across different partner organisations where this adds most value. This can lead to more effective use of public funds and better accessibility to services
- **Improved democratic accountability:** The model will help to strengthen the role of local councillors, who, working more closely with frontline officers and community groups, can better represent their constituents and address local priorities

Locality working is a cultural and operational transformation designed to make public services more responsive, efficient, and effective by decentralising decision-making and fostering a collaborative, community-focused approach.

The role of Locality Working in Local Government and wider Public Services

Public services, including local government services, are designed and delivered at various geographic levels that serve different-sized population groups. These geographies are complex and overlapping, but many of them follow a pattern of being at a series of levels that are characterised in the “place pyramid’ below.



Different public services are currently organised at different geographic levels across Oxfordshire and West Berkshire. The White Paper sets out to make significant changes to the scale at which different aspects of local public services are organised. Oxfordshire and West Berkshires examples include:

	Current	Likely future changes
Level 1	The Buckinghamshire, Oxfordshire and Berkshire Integrated Care Board (BOB ICB) serves a population of over 2 million people. Thames Valley Police are of a similar scale	A new Mayoral Strategic Authority A new Thames Valley Fire and Rescue Service
Level 2	Oxfordshire County Council currently provides services for c. 750,000 people Separate Fire and Rescue Services for Oxfordshire and Berkshire	New Oxford & Shires and Ridgeway Unitary councils providing services to c. 470,000 population Removal of county councils and existing FRS
Level 3	The other five principal local authorities across Oxfordshire and West Berkshire unitary authority all serve populations c. 150,000	Removal of district, city and smaller unitary councils

Level 4	Primary Care Networks are specifically designed with the NHS to help organise services for populations of between 30,000 and 50,000, and the BOB ICB oversees over 50 Primary Care Networks across the area	Local Neighbourhood Areas covering 30,000 to 50,000 people
Level 5	GP surgeries typically provide services for around 10,000 people	
Level 6	The majority of Town and Parish Councils serve populations of between 2,000 and 3,000 people, but some serve significantly larger numbers	

More effective alignment within and between these different geographic levels is crucial to improving public services in any given place. Critically, Devolution and LGR are going to fundamentally change the way local government operates alongside other public services in Oxfordshire and West Berkshire.

In establishing unitary government in Oxfordshire and West Berkshire, it will be imperative to recognise and retain the unique identity and function of key significant communities, such as the City of Oxford, alongside smaller and rural communities. Government has recognised this risk and has placed a requirement on the new authorities to put in place effective arrangements for neighbourhood governance, proposing Area Committees as an example of such arrangements.

Local Neighbourhood Areas will therefore be an important consideration for both proposed authorities to channel engagement and deliver accountability. As part of the overall governance arrangements, Local Neighbourhood Areas provide the potential to establish a dedicated link between the new authorities and residents and businesses in their localities, as well as enabling strengthened relationships with other public service providers, such as town and parish councils and existing partner groups.

The new authorities will have the opportunity to be bolder in their new form by reimagining how local authorities can collaborate and coordinate the services they provide to meet the needs of local people. Reshaping the influence of neighbourhood working and linking this to local communities will be essential for both new unitary areas. Building on work already underway in the BOB ICB, a new model of locality working can be developed with communities to work alongside and listen to their aspirations; working with them to achieve better resident outcomes and offer value for money.

Financial

The financial benefits of locality working primarily come from prevention and efficiency. By addressing issues early and in a coordinated manner, public services can avoid the high costs associated with crisis intervention.

- **Reduced Demand on High-Cost Services**: Evidence shows that early, proactive intervention can lead to a significant decrease in the use of expensive statutory services. In 2024, a group of leading organisations across social care found that earlier action and support interventions save approximately £3.17 for every £1 spent[33]
- **Operational Savings**: Locality working promotes the more efficient use of resources, through reduced bureaucracy, pooled budgets, better asset management through co-location; connecting communities to the right service locally helps build cohesion and resilience
- **Economic Empowerment**: focusing on place helps to direct public procurement spending to local suppliers, supporting community enterprises and providing skills training that leads to local jobs. This approach keeps money circulating within the community and increases business rates

Non-financial

Neighbourhood belonging, social connectedness, and community control all contribute to supporting the wellbeing of families and individuals. These benefits are harder to quantify, but arguably just as important as the financial efficiencies.

- **Better Outcomes for Citizens**: instead of treating a single problem, integrated teams can address the root causes of issues, such as poverty, social isolation, and poor health, leading to lasting change
- **Strengthened Community Cohesion and Resilience**: involving communities in decision-making and service design leads to a greater sense of community ownership, purpose, and identity. It also builds social capital, fostering stronger relationships and networks between neighbours, which makes communities more resilient and better able to support themselves
- **More Responsive and Empowered Workforce**: For public sector staff, locality working means breaking down departmental silos. This fosters a more collaborative and innovative culture, allowing frontline workers to be more responsive to local needs and exercise greater professional judgment. This can lead to increased job satisfaction and a more effective workforce

Building on our strong local context

Drawing on a rich landscape of good practice, existing authorities can promote their innovation and partnership working to bring about change for residents. Working closely with communities in different localities led to Cherwell District Council identifying specific needs for improve activity levels. This led to a pilot of Families Active Sporting Together (FAST) with funding from Sport England. This programme proved so successful in improving the health outcomes of low-income families by increasing their physical activity levels that it was adopted by the ICB and the Public Health team and funded for roll-out across the whole county area as You Move.

[33] https://www.local.gov.uk/publications/earlier-action-and-support-case-prevention-adult-social-care-and-beyond

A new locality model for unitary government in Oxfordshire and West Berkshire will align well with the ICB neighbourhood health strategy and draw on the expertise within our communicates and with the voluntary sector, ranging from larger umbrella organisations to smaller, place-based or issue-driven groups. It also builds on the Asset Based Community Development (ABCD) approach that Oxfordshire's district local councils already work to. This is a community-led approach that focuses on building from a community's strengths and existing assets, rather than addressing problems and deficits.

The pandemic revealed the real strength and depth that communities possess. Groups established at that time have continued to grow and thrive. Constituent district authorities have a solid track record of engagement and support with their residents, community and voluntary organisations, and the communities they serve. The two-unitary proposal offers the best opportunity to build engagement into empowerment and devolve activity to a level where communities decide outcomes for themselves.

The exact nature of how our two new councils will adopt our principles of locality working and community empowerment will be shaped by:

- Local engagement and consultation with communities and a range of local partners across Oxfordshire and West Berkshire
- Further research into the most successful examples of this approach locally and across the country
- Further government guidance on the nature of effective neighbourhood governance it expects to see; and
- Detailed design work informed by the above

Local Neighbourhood Areas will give us the opportunity to reimagine the relationship between local government and the communities and localities it serves. We have set out in our proposal our strong ambition and firm commitment to achieve this in accordance with the framework that government has committed to provide. We will collaborate with individuals, our communities and local partners to develop a locality working model for that works for everyone across Oxfordshire and West Berkshire.

An example of what this might mean in practice for Oxford & Shires

We have set out an example of how this could look in the Oxford & Shires area below. Our approach is specifically designed for the Oxford & Shires context and the fact that the city of Oxford is largely unparished in contrast to the rest of the area.

We are proposing the establishment of a series of Local Neighbourhood Areas across the Oxford & Shires area. These Local Neighbourhood Areas will provide a critical building block for the new council to establish effective locality working across the area. The nature and proposed boundaries of the new Local Neighbourhood Areas will be subject to engagement and consultation in due course. We anticipate that each Local Neighbourhood Area would serve a population of between 30,000 and 50,000 people.

The exception to this typical size, may be the city of Oxford, where a larger Local Neighbourhood Area, perhaps encompassing the entire city, may be optimal for providing effective neighbourhood governance. It is also recognised that, given the limited number of parish and/or town councils currently in the city of Oxford area, there may be a fuller future role for one or more directly elected bodies, at the local council level (e.g. town or parish councils). Further careful consideration will be required but the Local Neighbourhood Area approach has some clear benefits including:

- Embedding Oxford's economic and international role within the unitary framework, it does not absorb Oxford but provides a platform for recognising and building on its unique strengths;
- Creating clear subsidiarity, with powers devolved to the most effective level, including local councils (parish, town or city) where appropriate; and
- Establishing Local Neighbourhood Areas, ensuring every community – city or Shires – has a meaningful voice.

Each Local Neighbourhood Area would provide a forum for local elected members to work closely with the local community, local town and/or parish councillors, the voluntary sector, representatives of key public services such as health and police with responsibility for each area, local unitary council service teams and dedicated neighbourhood support teams. This approach has been successfully adopted in areas such as Cornwall, Somerset, Durham and others. Local Neighbourhood Area would be expected to have a purpose across four key aspects of the new unitary authority:

Key purpose	Key considerations
Community Engagement and Development	Each Local Neighbourhood Area will be responsible for encouraging deeper community engagement. They will use their convening expertise and local insight to develop a deeper understanding of the hopes and concerns of residents, businesses, and visitors and then advocate for change. Taking a strengths-based approach to this is crucial, ensuring that a community's assets are fully understood when considering solutions to local issues. Highly effective Local Neighbourhood Areas would be able to support community development, growing community capacity over time.
Specific Localised Decision Making	Each Local Neighbourhood Area would have a committee, including local elected members, at its core. Where appropriate, this would provide the opportunity to devolve some decision-making to a more local level for certain issues. For some services, direction may be provided at the unitary authority level, but some decisions could be taken at the Local Neighbourhood Area level about how best to enact this. For others, there will be services where a uniform approach across the whole of the unitary authority will achieve more consistent quality and lower delivery costs.
Local Service Access	By developing a deep understanding of their local areas in terms of both needs and available capabilities, Local Neighbourhood Areas can help in informing the most effective ways for people to access services. Strong local networks can provide more integrated support for individuals and customers, ensuring they receive the right help without being passed around between services or signposted to help elsewhere. Developing single points of access in communities would further enhance this, using existing trusted spaces such as libraries and VCS organisations.

Footprints for Service Delivery alignment	Local Neighbourhood Areas will also offer a geographical footprint for different services to help organise their delivery teams in a more aligned way in different localities. There is real benefit where service teams from the different parts of the new unitary council and a range of partner organisations can collaborate in a common geography. This can foster better, more trusted relationships and enable more integrated multi-agency practice to thrive. This approach would allow services that already tailor their services to the specific needs of a particular neighbourhood (for example areas with higher homelessness rates) to be even more effective by aligning with others working in the same locality.

In designing these Local Neighbourhood Areas, work will be guided by the following principles:

- We will design services and engagement mechanisms according to a locality's specific geography and demographics - what's right for Oxford as a city may not be for the countryside or a market town
- We will build on current strengths in each area, for example in terms of town and parish councils and also support the development of new strengths in areas where this would make the most difference
- We will collaborate, co-design, and co-deliver services wherever it makes sense, and we will seek to make more decisions closer to where the responsibility for outcomes sits and near where actions are taken.
- We will recognise that different services need different approaches and will embrace what works for each service, commissioning and delivering these at appropriate scale and geographies to harness economies of scale, embracing digital solutions where possible

Local Neighbourhood Areas will give us the opportunity to reimagine the relationship between local government and the communities and localities it serves.

An example of what this might mean in practice for Ridgeway

The entire proposed Ridgeway geography is already comprehensively served by town and parish councils, which provide well-established and locally accountable governance structures.

Town and parish councils across Ridgeway play a central role in representing local communities, influencing service delivery, and supporting civic engagement. These councils are embedded into the governance of rural and urban areas and are often the first point of contact for residents on hyper local matters. Their presence ensures that all communities, regardless of their size or location, have access to democratic representation and a mechanism for shaping local priorities.

Several rural unitary and district councils across England have adopted forms of neighbourhood governance that rely on and build upon their existing network of parish and town councils. Examples of this include:

Herefordshire Council, which works closely with its extensive network of parish councils to deliver local services and engage communities.

North Yorkshire Council, which, despite its large geographic footprint, has not adopted local area committees, instead leveraging its strong parish council infrastructure. In this example, however, there are committees at Parliamentary constituency level which feed into the work of the Mayoral Strategic Authority. This could be considered as an additional community governance option once the MSA is established.

Shropshire Council, which supports community governance through its town and parish councils and area-based partnerships.

These councils demonstrate that in areas with comprehensive town and parish coverage, such as the proposed Ridgeway area, this provides a strong basis for community enablement. Town and Parish engagement forums already operate successfully across Ridgeway and provide a structured platform for dialogue between the Council and local town and parish councils. These forums could be refined and scaled up to further strengthen and enhance community governance across sectors and interested partners.

The consultation and engagement work regarding these proposals highlighted that Parishes were ‘cautiously’ optimistic and eager to play an enhanced role supporting their communities. It is clear that to be effective, town and parish councils will need to be engaged from an early part of the design process to help shape the future of what good and effective neighbourhood governance would look like to ensure sufficient capacity and capability in neighbourhood areas. This will help to maximise the benefit of those arrangements for those living, working and learning in Ridgeway.

Ridgeway Council would work closely with Towns and Parishes to ensure that the needs of communities are understood, so that relevant services are delivered to our communities in the most effective manner. Working collaboratively with the existing network of Town and Parish Councils will ensure that those councils in collaboration with Ridgeway Council, will continue to play a vital role in supporting their communities.

In summary

The proposed neighbourhood governance arrangements for the Oxford & Shires and Ridgeway council areas reflect their distinct local contexts, while offering complementary solutions to ensure strong community representation across both geographies. The ability to create governance structures that better reflect the communities they serve is an important benefit of the two unitary proposal for the whole of the Oxfordshire and West Berkshire area.

Together, these tailored approaches demonstrate a commitment to place-based governance, ensuring that each council area is equipped with the right tools to meet the needs of its communities, whether through new structures or by enhancing existing ones. Most importantly, these proposals align with the objectives of the Devolution White Paper, which emphasises the importance of bringing decision-making closer to communities, even within larger local authority areas.

Our roadmap for implementing the new arrangements may include:

November 2025 - Summer 2026	Summer 2026 – May 2027	May 2027 – May 2028	May 2028 – onward
Submission to Decision Point	Decision Point to Establishment of Shadow Authority	Shadow Authority to Vesting Day	Vesting Day – Transformation
Further research into optimal neighbourhood approaches including learning from other LGR proposals			
Discussions with Central and Local Government colleagues over optimal models plus potential Independent Expert Review			
	Deep engagement with communities and local partners		
		Design firm proposals for agreement with Shadow Authority	
			Begin Implementation of new arrangements

We have set out in our proposal our strong ambition to achieve this. We will collaborate with individuals, our communities and local partners to develop a locality working model that works for everyone across Oxfordshire and West Berkshire.

Chapter 9 The Financial Case in a Nutshell

Quick Chapter Summary

The Oxford & Shires and Ridgeway proposal provides the strongest case for making savings and significantly improving financial resilience

- **Option 1:** £27.3m recurring savings from LGR transition only; payback ~3.1 years; leaves West Berkshire financially exposed. With transformation, total recurring savings could reach £58.4m
- **Option 2:** £21.9m recurring savings from LGR transition only; payback ~4.2 years; secures West Berkshire's future. With transformation, total recurring savings could reach £59.8m
- **Option 3:** £9.5m recurring savings from LGR transition only; payback ~8.7 years; weakest case, highest risks. With transformation, total recurring savings could reach £47.7m

Option 2 can potentially deliver the highest recurring annual benefits from LGR transition and transformation across its geography and is the only deliverable model that secures sustainable finances across Oxfordshire and West Berkshire.

What people told us

"Local council funds should be spent on local benefits. Councils should facilitate the creation of jobs by creating an environment (planning, transport, rates) that encourages inward investment. Councils creating jobs removes money from the local economy as they do not, for the most part, create value."

"Value for money does not equal lowest cost to make do and mend... it means best value in terms of quality, sustainability, longevity, pride, contribution to reduced operating costs or increased revenues and general positive impact to people in terms of cost of living and wellbeing."

The two-unitary model will:

- **Deliver sustainable savings:** £21.9m recurring annually from LGR transition which could rise to £59.8m with associated transformation, reinvested into frontline and prevention.
- **Be fair and balanced:** both councils start life relatively financially stable, avoiding a two-speed system.
- **Fix current challenges:** helps to resolve West Berkshire's deficit and reliance on government support.
- **Support credible delivery:** manageable one-off costs and a payback of 4.2 years for LGR transition alone.
- **Support transformation:** savings create headroom for digital, prevention and locality services.
- **Improve outcomes for residents:** savings reinvested into care, housing and prevention.
- **Enhance service delivery efficiency:** streamlined corporate services and stronger commissioning.
- **Support strong local leadership:** stable finances allow focus on community priorities.
- **Resilience and deliverability:** clear payback, credible costs, and phased implementation.

9. The Financial Case

9.1 Introduction

This section details the financial case for two unitary authorities across Oxfordshire and West Berkshire. The financial case is compelling for the following key reasons:

- The two proposed unitary councils provide a solid basis for future financial sustainability, which is far more robust than the current scenario, helping to manage the impact of cost pressures and changes to funding.
- The proposal also provides a route map to resolving significant financial challenges across the geography in line with the government criteria.
- The analysis shows that neither of the two proposed councils can be deemed to be materially advantaged or disadvantaged from a financial perspective when the balance of demand, income, assets, liabilities, debts, workforce and other associated factors are considered.
- As with all LGR, this proposal requires an upfront investment of £30.4m, but it is anticipated that it will create significant transition benefits of £21.9m per annum and potential transformation benefits of up to £37.9 million. How this compares to the other options is shown in the table below[34].

Option	Level of change	Recurring net financial benefits (£m)	One-off costs (£m)	Payback period (years)
Option 1 Oxfordshire Unitary council and no change to West Berkshire Unitary council	Transition	27.3	23.8	3.1
	Basic Transformation (Base)	20.9	14.6	1.7
	Transition plus Basic Transformation	**48.2**	**38.4**	**2.8**
	Ambitious Transformation (Stretch)	31.1	21.7	1.7
	Transition plus Ambitious Transformation	**58.4**	**45.5**	**2.7**
Option 2 Oxford & Shires and Ridgeway councils	Transition	21.9	30.4	4.2
	Basic Transformation (Base)	25.6	17.9	1.7
	Transition plus Basic Transformation	**47.5**	**48.3**	**3.4**
	Ambitious Transformation (Stretch)	37.9	26.5	1.7
	Transition plus Ambitious Transformation	**59.8**	**56.9**	**3.2**
Option 3 Greater Oxford, Northern and Southern councils	Transition	9.5	32.5	8.7
	Basic Transformation (Base)	25.8	18.1	1.7
	Transition plus Basic Transformation	**35.3**	**50.6**	**4.7**
	Ambitious Transformation (Stretch)	38.2	26.7	1.7
	Transition plus Ambitious Transformation	**47.7**	**59.2**	**4.2**

[34] The detailed analysis underpinning this table is provided in Appendix B

- Based on the options appraisal, the proposed two-unitary model would payback the upfront investment in 4.2 years and create a potential ongoing benefit position of £59.8m p.a. from Year 5 onwards.
- This cost-benefit compares favourably to the proposal to create a large unitary council for the whole of Oxfordshire and to leave West Berkshire Council in a position of being deemed too small in relation to government guidance to achieve economies of scale.
- This cost-benefit also compares very strongly in relation to the proposal to create three unitary councils for the whole of Oxfordshire and West Berkshire.
- The two-unitary model proposal therefore presents the best Value for Money option in terms of providing better local representation at a similar cost-benefit level.
- It is important to note that the benefits of LGR will be essential in helping to bridge forecast funding gaps and for better meeting increasing demand in terms of Adult Social Care and Children's Services.

All the Oxfordshire councils, together with West Berkshire Council, are predicting increasing budget challenges over the coming years, with significant demand pressures expected in areas such as adult and children's services and homelessness. Government funding has not kept pace with increasing costs and service pressures, and council tax referendum limits restrict the income that councils can collect locally to support services.

Inflationary pressures in recent years have led to an increase in the cost of services councils receive from third parties. Additionally, councils that have borrowed externally have experienced an increase in borrowing costs due to rising interest rates. Councils without significant borrowing have seen an increase in income from their investments in recent years, but this will reduce as interest rates are expected to fall in future years.

These pressures manifest in the councils' Medium-Term Financial Plans (MTFPs)[35], which show an increasing pressure on future budgets that is either met through the use of reserves or savings targets. There is also considerable uncertainty over the level of future government funding and retention of business rate income.

As a two-tier area, the unitarisation of the existing Oxfordshire councils is expected to generate savings against current expenditure, though the timing and quantum of such savings depend on the proposal going forward. West Berkshire Council is currently in receipt of Exceptional Financial Support (EFS), having received its first allocation relating to financial year 2024/25. West Berkshire's population is currently under the threshold limit for a unitary authority deemed as financially sustainable by central government. The two-unitary proposal and the proposal for a single Oxfordshire authority are very similar in terms of the overall cost-benefit analysis. However, the two-unitary proposal has the potential to make the largest savings *and* the opportunity to create two financially stable unitary councils within the guidelines set out by central government, taking into consideration the current financial constraints faced by West Berkshire.

[35] Known in some organisations as Medium Term Financial Strategies (MTFSs)

9.2 Baseline, Approach and Assumptions

Baseline costs used for cost-benefit analysis

The estimated total net current expenditure of the proposed two new unitary authorities has been sourced from the MTFPs published in February 2025, or, where applicable, publicly available revisions. These projected the estimated budgets for the pre-existing authorities for 2027/28, and have been used to determine the core baseline for expenditure of the future unitary authorities on vesting day.

The February 2025 MTFP estimates of total government grant funding, council tax, and retained business rates income for each existing organisation have also provided the core baseline for the income of the future unitary authorities. The resulting transfers to or from reserves to balance the budgets on vesting day are also shown, as reflected in the February 2025 MTFPs.

Income and Expenditure			
	2 UA (£m)		
Category	Oxford and Shires	Ridgeway	Notes
Income*			
Council Tax	377.4	431.5	Currently 27/28 view. Includes Council Tax Surpluses.
Grants (inc. non-AEF)	45.8	63.0	Currently 27/28 view
Business Rates	114.4	55.0	Currently 27/28 view
Total Income	537.6	549.5	
Expenditure**			
All Staff	171.8	164.5	Does not include any staffing consolidation impact. Proportion based on FY25/26 establishment data shared.
All Non Staff	384.1	396.7	Expenditure excluding staff
Total Expenditure	555.9	561.2	Total Expenditure for all authorities in Oxfordshire and West Berkshire. FY27/28
Net Position	-18.3	-11.7	
Total Reserve Draws	13.4	6.8	Draws from reserves for FY27/28 to cover budget deficit
Final Position	-4.9	-4.9	

(Source – Oxford & Shires | Ridgeway Detailed Financial Case October 2025 – Appendix C)

*Income Sources: Draft statement of accounts (24/25), MTFS and MTFPs, Pixel Outputs
**Expenditure Sources: Statement of Accounts 24/25, Net Operating Expenditure (25/26 onwards), Newton Analysis, Establishment data (provided by LAs).

Approach to financial model, including estimating costs and benefits

To project forward the financial position of the two proposed unitary councils on vesting day, the first task is to allocate out the existing councils' budgets. This task is made easier in this proposal by the inclusion of two existing upper-tier authorities. As the costs of the districts and West Berkshire Council can be allocated in full to the two proposed unitaries, since there are no proposed boundary changes, the main focus in this area of work has been on allocating Oxfordshire County Council costs, income, assets and liabilities across the two proposed councils.

To support this work, and the work of estimating costs and benefits across transition and transformation, PwC and the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy (CIPFA) have been engaged as consultants. The work of PwC and CIFPA has built on the already constructive working relationships between the chief finance officers of the councils supporting these proposals, as well as the long-standing work of the Oxfordshire Treasurers' Association.

PwC has prepared two documents in support of this proposal; an options appraisal looking at all three of the unitary options under consideration, and a detailed financial case looking at the two-unitary authority proposal. These are shown in appendices B and C respectively. The documents draw on the experience of the consultants in working on current and previous LGR proposals elsewhere and in previous Oxfordshire LGR reviews. They are based on published data and using assumptions that have been agreed across the relevant S151 officers.

The options appraisal (appendix B) offers an objective view of the costs and benefits of different reorganisation options. It looks to illustrate the high-level financial implications of implementing and operating a single unitary authority, two unitary authorities or three unitary authorities across the geography. The appraisal has been undertaken on a like-for-like basis across the three options to allow for direct and fair comparison.

The detailed financial case (Appendix C) sets out the implications of the proposed two unitary option. It helps to model what future budgets will look like, provides a more detailed view on the starting financial position, and draws out the financial implications of local government reorganisation and wider transformation benefits. It provides a more detailed review of costs/benefits of the two-unitary proposal and begins to break down that analysis between the proposed Oxford & Shires and Ridgeway councils. It is important to note that the deeper analysis included in the detailed financial case produces differences in numbers to those included in the options appraisal.

Assumptions applied

As noted earlier, a key focus of work in estimating the budgets of the two unitaries on vesting day has been in allocating the costs, income, assets and liabilities of Oxfordshire County Council to the new councils. The assumptions used to allocate these costs are as follows:

Net revenue expenditure

Oxfordshire County Council's revenue costs have been primarily allocated between the two councils based on population, as per ONS population projections for 2025. The exception to this is Adult and Children's services, which have been allocated using modelling of demand on day one carried out by Newton Associates on behalf of the County Councils' Network.

Income from government grants, council tax and business rates

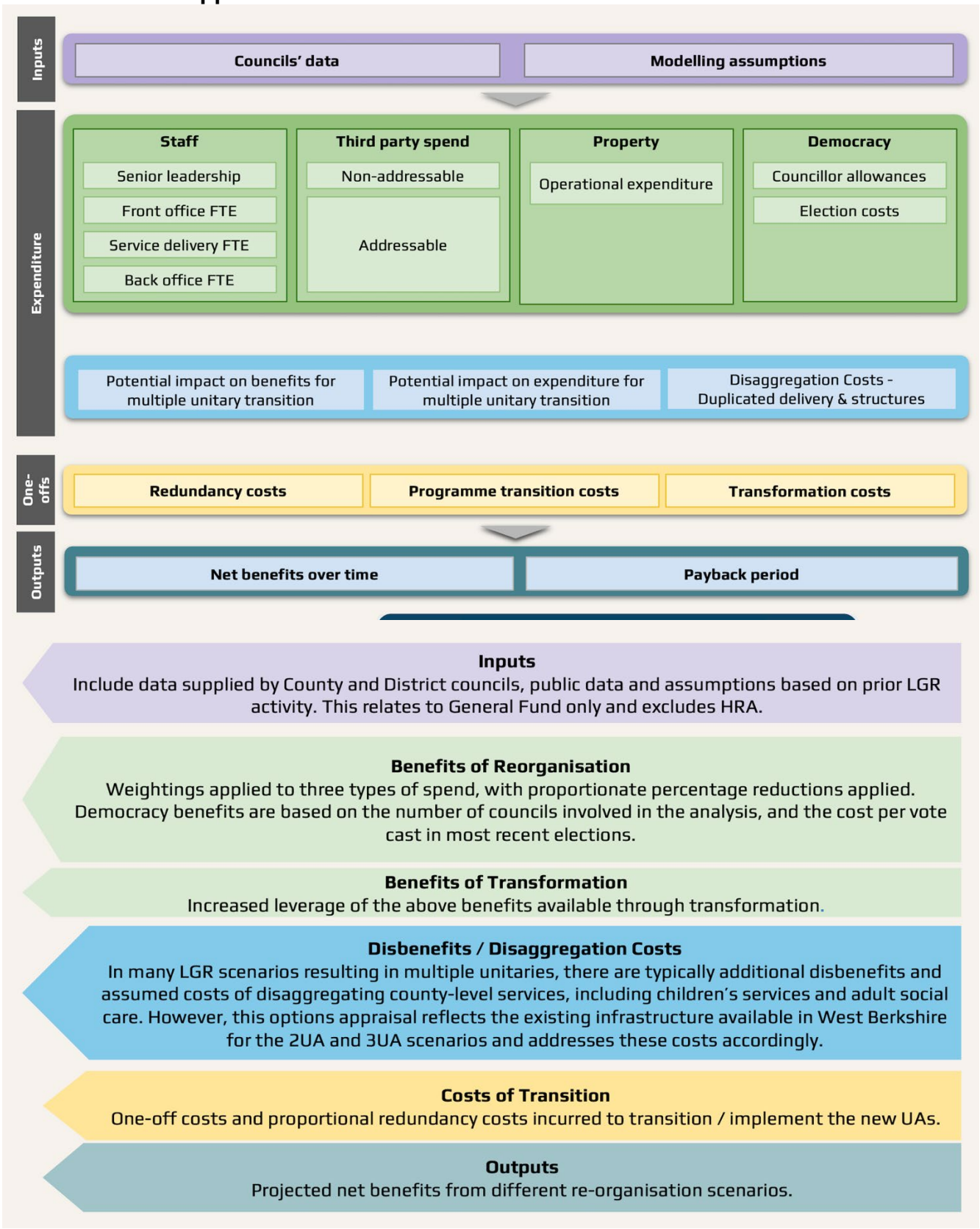
Income from government grants, council tax and business rates for the two unitaries has been projected using estimates included in the councils' MTFPs. Oxfordshire County Council's income has been allocated between the two unitaries based on modelling undertaken by Pixel. The projections do not include any estimates of the impact of the government's fair funding review, other than those made by the councils in preparing their MTFPs in February 2025 (and some revised positions in September).

In estimating future council tax levels, the weighted average council tax method has been used. This was modelled on 2028/29 Band D Council tax levels by applying tax base growth and expected precepts included in the councils' MTFPs, then harmonised to that rate on day one.

Transition and transformation costs and benefits
To determine the costs and benefits of transitioning to the new unitary councils and the transformation opportunities once in place, the councils have worked with their consultants to determine areas of opportunity and the likely costs to be incurred in delivering them.

SEND Deficits
For the purposes of this financial modelling it has been assumed that central government will assist local government in resolving the issue of SEND deficits.

Financial model approach



9.3 Cost-Benefit Analysis - Transition

Transition benefits
Under this proposal, the transition from seven councils to two presents significant opportunities for immediate and ongoing savings benefits estimated at £21.9 million per annum. These are detailed below. Savings and associated costs are taken from the options appraisal to enable comparison with the alternative proposals.

Salary savings
The existence of the two-tier system in Oxfordshire means there is significant duplication of senior management roles, which will be rationalised under the two-unitary proposal. The inclusion of West Berkshire Council in the proposal, however, means that many of the ongoing disaggregation costs that would be incurred if this were a two-unitary proposal wholly within Oxfordshire would be avoided, given the existence of two upper-tier management structures.

Analysis by PwC identifies ongoing annual savings, before additional on-going costs, of £17.2 million from year 5 onwards, resulting from the creation of the two unitaries. There are additional ongoing annual equalisation costs of £3.1 million for the proposed Ridgeway council, reflecting upper-tier services currently offered in Oxfordshire but not currently available in West Berkshire. It will be for the future Ridgeway council to determine whether these additional services are available in the future. These estimates exclude the impact of pay harmonisation.

Democratic savings
The transition to two unitaries will see a reduction in the number of elected councillors and a saving in the costs of running elections.

In terms of elected members, there are currently 331 district, county and unitary councillors across the seven existing councils, at a cost of £4.4 million per annum. Under the two-unitary proposal, this would reduce to between 160 and 200 councillors.

In terms of elections, the Oxfordshire district councils have a range of election cycles ranging from halves, thirds and all-out elections every four years. Oxfordshire County Council and West Berkshire Council both have all-out elections every four years. Transitioning to two unitaries and assuming that a four-year cycle is adopted will, together with the reduction in councillor numbers, lead to an annualised saving of £2.5 million per annum.

Savings from property
The existing councils all have extensive property assets, valued at over £3.6 billion, not all of which will be needed by the new unitary councils. Following discussions, PwC's analysis suggests that just under £10 million in one-off capital receipts and income could be delivered through property rationalisation as part of local government reorganisation, producing revenue savings of just over £2.2 million.

Third party spend
All seven existing councils procure a wide range of services, often individually, which means that there is significant scope for economies of scale in future procurements. PwC estimates the savings opportunity here to be of the order of £3.0 m per annum, based on applying a modest efficiency assumption in line with reductions found in other local authorities to have undergone LGR.

Transition Costs

The move from seven councils to two comes at a cost.

Having considered experiences elsewhere, PwC estimates that the transition costs of moving to a two-unitary model are likely to be around £30.4 million as set out in the table below:

One off transition / implementation costs	Total (£M)	Note
New unitarities setup & closedown costs • External Comms, Rebranding & implementation: • Internal Programme Management: • Creating the new council • Organisation closedown • Public Consultation • Shadow Chief Exec Costs	***7.5***	Programme management, administrative and legal activities linked to new council creation and closedown, public consultation, rebranding and communications ahead of vesting day, and shadow member and executive costs. Based on other actuals from other previous LGR experience.
IT & Systems Costs	***6.9***	Costs of data migration, systems migration, setting up new systems, hardware costs, integrating business systems etc. Based on other actuals from other previous LGR experience.
External transition, design and implementation support costs	***7.7***	Based on other actuals from other previous LGR experience.
Redundancy costs	***5.1***	Redundancy cost as a proportion of salary (current assumption) x total FTE saving
Contingency	***3.2***	Estimated 40% of total one off transition / implementation cost (excl. ICT)
TOTAL	***30.4***	

PwC's analysis of these costs compared to the two other proposals estimates the one-off transition costs of the one unitary council to be lower at £23.8 million, while those for the three unitary proposal are higher at £32.5 million. The one unitary proposal does not include West Berkshire, so it is not directly comparable.

Cost-Benefit Analysis and Profiling
The table below shows total forecasted benefits and costs of the reorganisation. The equivalent tables for the two other options can be found in appendix B.

BENEFITS OF AGGREGATION								
Category	Staffing Front Office	Staffing Service Delivery	Staffing Back Office	Staffing Management	Third Party Spend	Property	Democracy	Total aggregation benefits (annual)
Saving (£)	4,993,230	1,924,474	2,808,692	7,508,699	3,028,930	2,214,130	2,463,724	**24,941,879**

TRANSITION COSTS			
Category	Programme transition costs	Redundancy costs	Total transition costs (one-off)
Cost (£)	25,297,020	5,135,299	**30,432,319**

DISAGGREGATION COSTS				
Category	Additional senior leadership costs	Additional service delivery costs	Additional democratic costs	Total disaggregation costs (annual)
Cost (£)	0	3,058,000	0	**3,058,000**

NET BENEFITS		
Total net benefit after one year	Total net benefit after five years	Payback period
-24,909,667	16,632,379	4.2 years

Note: these only refer to transition benefits, not wider transformation benefits

Based on experience elsewhere, a conservative approach has been adopted to realising savings. Despite that, transitioning to two unitary councils is expected to payback within 4.2 years. This is compared to 3.1 years for the one unitary proposal, which focuses solely on Oxfordshire and does not consider the financial position of West Berkshire Council. The three unitary option has a payback period of 8.7 years.

9.4 Cost-Benefit Analysis - Transformation

Transformation benefits represent additional efficiency savings and income growth that the new authorities could achieve post-vesting day through localised service delivery agreements and transformation. These are over and above transition benefits. For the options appraisal PwC focussed on three key areas:

- Full Time Equivalent (FTE) staffing
- Addressable third party spend
- Income generation.

PwC's analysis shows likely benefits and costs of transformation against two scenarios, "base" – relatively conservative programme of change and "stretch" – a more ambitious programme of change (see table in section 9.1). PwC identified the two-unitary authority option as having the potential to deliver the highest level of savings through transition and transformation, noting that this is over the whole geography including West Berkshire. Examples of the type of transformation that underpins these figures are given in Chapters 7 and 8.

9.5 Detailed financial case

Building on the options appraisal, the second PwC document, the detailed financial case (appendix C) offers further details on the benefits and associated costs of the two-unitary authority proposal. This analysis has followed in-depth discussions between chief financial officers and their staff with PwC colleagues to produce a more refined view of the impact of transition and transformation, and to start to build a picture of the likely finances of the two councils.

Detailed financial case – transition

The transition benefits outlined earlier in section 9.3 have been refined. and the table below shows how the refined benefits are shared across Oxford & Shires and Ridgeway, as well as how they compare to the figures in the options appraisal.

	Option appraisal vs Detailed financial case				
	Option appraisal	Detailed financial case			
		Oxon & Shires	Ridgeway	Total	Variance to opt app
	£m	£m	£m	£m	£m
1) Benefits of aggregation					
Staffing					
Front office	5.0	2.4	2.3	**4.7**	(0.3)
Service delivery	1.9	0.9	0.9	**1.8**	(0.1)
Back office	2.8	1.4	1.3	**2.7**	(0.1)
Management	7.5	5.6	1.9	**7.5**	(0.0)
Total staffing	**17.2**	**10.3**	**6.4**	**16.7**	**(0.5)**
Third party spend	3.0	1.0	0.9	**1.9**	(1.1)
Property	2.2	1.4	1.4	**2.8**	0.6
Democracy	2.5	0.8	0.9	**1.7**	(0.8)
Total benefits	**24.9**	**13.5**	**9.6**	**23.1**	**(1.8)**
Additional service costs	(3.1)	0.0	(3.1)	**(3.1)**	(0.0)
Net benefits	**21.9**	**13.5**	**6.5**	**20.0**	(1.9)

As can be seen there is a modest reduction in the transition benefits as compared to the options appraisal, which used assumptions to enable comparability across the options.

Transition costs

Transition costs are as estimated in the options appraisal, and a detailed breakdown of that estimate is shown in the table below.

Category	Transition Costs	Oxfordshire 2UA Cost (£'000)
Programme transition costs	**External Comms, Rebranding & implementation** *Examples include: Staff Advertising, Venue/Room Hire, Subscriptions*	659
	External transition, design and implementation support costs *Examples include: Other Hired & Contracted Services & Consultants Fees*	7,686
	Internal programme management *Examples include: Staff Admin Recharge*	3,426
	Creating the new council: *Examples include: Training, Vehicle Parts/Maintenance and Contents Insurance*	1,464
	Contingency *Examples include: Other Expenses General & Miscellaneous Small Projects*	3,228
	Organisation closedown *Costs involved with legally and financially closing down councils and create sound budgetary control systems*	732
	Public consultation *Examples include: Survey Professional and Other Fees, General Materials, Entertainment and Refreshments*	494
	ICT costs *Examples include: IT Hardware, IT Repair Installation Maintenance and Training, IT Software & IT Licences*	6,862
	Shadow Chief Exec / member costs *Examples include: Electing the shadow cabinet, training costs*	747
Total Programme Transition Costs		25,297
Redundancy Cost - *Examples include: Redundancy payments (does not fully factor in pension strain)*		5,135
Total One-off transition costs		30,432

Transformation opportunities

The detailed financial case offers further insight into the transformation possibilities available to the new authorities. The table below is a high-level summary of what additional avenues can be explored, allocated against:

- Assets
- FTE
- Third party Spend (TPS).

Service Area	General Projections*	High-level Opportunities for Oxfordshire
Adult's	1-5%	• **Assets:** Examine opportunities to repurpose existing assets to support the provision of community-based services. • **FTE:** Organisational redesign to support effective service delivery model using latest technology to enhance impact and efficiency. Cross-cutting opportunities related to customer and contact management, as well as cultural and behavioural change. • **TPS:** Improved strategic commissioning across housing, mental health, and care homes to reduce duplication and improve' provider rate.
Childrens	1-5%	• **Assets:** Potential reduction in administrative buildings and integration of co-located services (e.g. care with housing, co-locating Family centres). • **FTE:** Rationalisation of commissioning teams and support staff across 2UA option. Cross-cutting opportunities related to customer and contact management, as well as cultural and behavioural change. Review use of data to support with enhance demand management, prediction and holistic care. • **TPS:** Review the care cycle, enhance preventative approach to care provisions and aim to reduce the rate of escalation for high-cost placements.
Place	6-10%	• **Assets:** Develop an asset strategy, identifying additional opportunities for income generation and cost recovery (eg. disposal of surplus assets post-reorganisation and review cost-recovery in comparison to similar Councils). • **FTE:** Review the service delivery model, to identify current service levels and standards, use of digital, efficiencies in existing operating model. Cross-cutting opportunities related to customer and contact management, as well as cultural and behavioural change. • **TPS:** Improved long-term contract management, commissioning and procurement capabilities to support greater grip over long-term management.
Corporate Services	6-15%	• **FTE:** Organisational redesign to remove duplicative activity and shadow spend within services, leveraging automation and emerging technology to streamline processes (eg. recruitment, P2P) and improve self-serve capacity. Cross-cutting opportunities related to customer and contact management, as well as cultural and behavioural change. • **TPS:** Review current use of agency spend as part of organisational redesign and assess opportunities to reduce reliance on external agency spend, particularly relating to specialist services (eg. Legal), and use of data to drive performance management.

**Transformation portfolios developed from working with Councils elsewhere, may vary depending on previous savings delivered, existing transformation in place, resource capacity. Savings projections draw on demand management, FTE release and reduced third party spend.*

Shown below is an assessment of additional transformation opportunities that may be explored following reorganisation, taking into account planned savings and existing transformation programmes, and drawing on conversations with officers.

Category	Reasoning
Front office FTE	Two Customer Experience Programmes are set to be delivered ahead of vesting day, which may give the incoming authorities with more digitised, capability-driven Front Office operations. However, given that this is only being explicitly delivered in two organisation, the overall size of opportunity is likely smaller than Back Office redesign.
Service delivery FTE	Benefits here would be focused on realising the benefits of more effective and efficient service delivery models, including implementing fundamental changes to service provision to reduce demand. Anticipated savings are lower than in the Front and Back Office, as service delivery activity is less impacted by digitisation but would still benefit from process optimisation.
Back office FTE	There are some planned transformation for back office and service delivery as part of OCC's organisational redesign, but there has overall been a greater focus on transforming the front office. Back office services are also more influenced by digitisation, improvements to ways of working and reduction of shadow or duplicative activity via the centralisation of operations.
TPS	There are opportunities to strengthen the grip over the future authorities' commissioning cycle, building on the initiatives underway in Oxfordshire County Council and enhancing the future organisation's overall commissioning, procurement and contract management capabilities.
Income	Some gains from income generation through review of sales. fees and charges for District charging of key services (eg. green waste, planning) and harmonising to new standards. Based on 23/24 RSX data, Oxfordshire has similar fees and charges rates with its comparator group (eg. Gloucestershire, Surrey, Buckinghamshire).
Assets	Review of current use of assets to assess cost recovery and usages of typically income generating assets (eg. car parks) and to align the strategic use of assets with service delivery models (eg. better co-location of services, repurposing certain buildings to enhance place-based service provision).

Potential savings from transformation firstly at Oxford & Shires, followed by Ridgeway, are shown in the tables below:

Category	Baseline (£'000)	Base %	Base (£'000)	Stretch %	Stretch (£'000)
Front office FTE spend	56,213	3%	1,686	5%	2,811
Service delivery FTE spend	59,279	1%	593	3%	1,778
Back office FTE spend	42,599	5%	2,130	7%	2,982
TPS	382,662	2%	7,636	5%	19,089
Income	73,496	0.5%	367	1%	735
Assets (Operational Spend)	11,225	0%	0	0.5%	49
Total			12,412		27,444

Category	Baseline (£'000)	Base %	Base (£'000)	Stretch %	Stretch (£'000)
Front office FTE spend	57,429	1%	574	5%	1,723
Service delivery FTE spend	60,561	1%	606	3%	1,817
Back office FTE spend	43,520	3%	1,306	5%	2,176
TPS	367,094	1.5%	5,506	3%	11,013
Income (Sales, Fees and Charges)	126,284	0.5%	631	1%	3,671
Assets (Operational Spend)	11,117	0.5%	49	1.5%	146
Total			8,672		20,546

In comparison to the options appraisal, the combined total of potential annual base transformation savings is £21.1 m compared to £25.6m the options appraisal, but the potential stretch saving is £47.9m compared to £37.9m in the options appraisal.

Council tax income

Within the detailed financial case are assumptions around what the Band D council tax could be for the proposed new authorities in 2028/29. This takes assumed Band D council tax, and estimated tax base growth, from the existing councils' MTFPs and uses a weighted average to harmonise these into a single rate for the new councils from day one.

Under this method, which has been favoured by most councils in recent rounds of LGR, there is no material change to aggregate council tax income. The decision on the level of Band D council tax for the new councils will be a matter for those councils, and they could choose not to use this method to harmonise, but whatever method is chosen will need to align with the government's referendum limits in place for the new councils. Based on the current referendum limits, the weighted average council tax levels calculated in this proposal are with those limits.

The 2028/29 weighted average Band D council tax for the proposed Oxford & Shires council would be £2,441.60. How this compares to the existing council's council tax is shown in the table below.

District	Tax base	County Precept (£'000)	County Band D (£)	District Precept (£'000)	District Band D (£)	Total Council Tax (£'000)	Total Band D charge (£)	Harmonised Band D (£)	Change on Band D (£)	Change %
Cherwell	62,034	137,223	2,212.1	10,765	173.5	147,989	2,385.6	2,441.6	56.0	2.35%
Oxford City	48,730	107,793	2,212.1	18,989	389.7	126,782	2,601.7	2,441.6	-160.2	-6.16%
West Oxfordshire	50,868	112,523	2,212.1	7,344	144.4	119,868	2,356.4	2,441.6	85.1	3.61%
Totals	161,632	357,540		37,099		394,639				

As shown in the table below, the equivalent 2028/29 weighted average Band D council tax for the proposed Ridgeway Council would be £2,325.80.

District	Tax base	County Precept (£'000)	County Band D (£)	District Precept (£'000)	District Band D (£)	Total Council Tax (£'000)	Total Band D charge (£)	Harmonised Band D (£)	Change on Band D (£)	Change %
South Oxfordshire	66,547	147,205	2,212.1	11,063	166.2	158,268	2,378.3	2,325.80	-52.5	-2.21%
Vale of White Horse	62,404	138,040	2,212.1	11,034	176.8	149,074	2,388.9	2,325.80	-63.1	-2.64%
West Berkshire	72,705	£0	£0	161,669	2,223.6	161,669	2,223.6	2,325.80	102.2	4.59%
Totals	201,655	285,245		183,766		469,011				

9.6 Investment

Approach to be taken to funding transition

As identified earlier, transition costs are estimated at £30.4 million for this proposal. There are currently sufficient reserves, including the ability to utilise the flexible use of capital receipts, across the seven existing councils involved in this proposal to meet these transition costs. Whilst no external funding is therefore required to support this transition, should government funding be available for transition costs we would expect all proposals for LGR to be treated equitably in terms of financial support. Further, we anticipate government funding for at least some of the transition costs will enable the councils to begin with a firmer financial footing, thus aiding long-term sustainability.

Approach to be taken to funding transformation

As it is transformation activity that will help support long-term financial sustainability and deliver better outcomes for residents, we would look to government to match fund our investment in these services to accelerate delivery.

9.7 Funding and Financial Sustainability

Key Assumptions around funding, including national policy developments

The timing of submission of LGR proposals coincides with the fair funding review, resulting in a lack of clarity over future levels of government funding for all councils.

In preparing the 2025/26 budgets, all seven councils prepared MTFPs covering the period to vesting day. All councils will have made their best estimates of funding levels for future years, based on the funding received for 2025/26 and on the direction of travel indicated in the initial Fair Funding Review 2.0 consultation.

Although there has been a further round of consultation on Fair Funding Review 2.0, uncertainty remains regarding future funding levels. As such, the key assumptions around future funding remain those reflected in the councils' latest published MTFSs.

Summary of financial sustainability of the two new councils

The two-unitary authority proposal for LGR offers the best solution for the future viability of local government in Oxfordshire and West Berkshire. It provides a unique opportunity to simultaneously address West Berkshire's exceptional financial support position, while creating two similarly sized, relatively low risk councils, that will be best placed to deliver the transition savings and transformation benefits outlined earlier.

The proposal enables these benefits by allowing existing unitary experience and infrastructure to be utilised in the creation and running of the two new unitary councils. The opportunity to utilise existing infrastructure allows for transformational efficiencies and limited disaggregation costs compared to the three-unitary proposal, which require an additional upper tier management structure to be created and produces smaller unitaries that may prove less financially resilient. The single-unitary proposal does not address the financial pressures experienced by existing unitary councils (social care commissioning budgets), which have created significant financial pressures in both Oxfordshire County Council and West Berkshire Council, the latter now being in receipt of exceptional financial support.

The analysis in this section demonstrates that the councils created under the two-unitary authority proposal will realise significant savings from transition and will have the potential to realise further savings from transformation. This will leave the new councils well placed to face future financial challenges.

Chapter 10 Implementation Plan and Approach in a Nutshell

Quick Chapter Summary

Creating two new councils is a complex task that must safeguard services, reassure staff and maintain public confidence. Without a clear plan, the risks of disruption, cost overrun and loss of focus on statutory responsibilities would be high.

The implementation plan addresses these risks through the following:

- **Objective:** Deliver two new councils smoothly and safely by vesting day, protecting statutory services, staff and residents.
- **Approach:** Phased, risk-managed implementation led by shadow authorities, overseen by an Implementation Board, and independently assured.
- **Continuity first:** Statutory services (children's, adults, housing, public protection) prioritised for safe transition.
- **Transformation next:** Early consolidation of corporate services (finance, HR, IT, procurement), followed by locality-led transformation.

Delivery will be sequenced and governed: shadow authorities and an Implementation Board will oversee the transition, supported by Senior Responsible Officers for each workstream, independent assurance and transparent reporting. Phased milestones, contingency reserves and

What people told us

"For the new council to secure trust from the residents, this will have to be set up from the beginning so that the new unitary council is seen as better than the previous councils."

The two-unitary model will:

- **Assure continuity:** clear leadership and accountability within each footprint.
- **Increase transformation capacity:** scale sufficient to modernise systems and roll out locality models.
- **Be future-proofed:** builds councils that are stable from vesting day and positioned for devolution.
- **Improve outcomes for residents:** continuity first with safe and legal services, then modernisation and prevention.
- **Enhance financial sustainability:** early corporate consolidation generates savings to protect services.
- **Improve service delivery efficiency:** streamlined contracts, shared systems and locality models reduce duplication.
- **Strong local leadership:** shadow authorities and early appointments ensure visible leadership during transition.
- **Resilience and deliverability:** phased milestones, independent assurance and risk mitigation provide confidence.

10. Implementation Plan and Approach

10.1 Introduction

This implementation plan has been prepared to guide the transition process towards the creation of two new unitary authorities for Oxfordshire and West Berkshire, ready for an assumed Vesting Day of 1 April 2028.

In developing the plan, we have had regard to the timetable issued by MHCLG and looked to local authorities that have already been through similar processes so that we can learn from their experiences and build on their successes.

Our approach will be guided by the principles of openness, transparency and collaboration. We will seek to involve local communities, stakeholders, and delivery partners in designing local government arrangements that respond to local needs and ambitions. We will build opportunities for co-production and ensure robust formal scrutiny mechanisms are in place throughout the process.

Our ambition is to create new unitary authorities that will operate safely and legally from day one, while providing a seamless transition for customers, staff, elected members, delivery partners, and other stakeholders.

The transition of services currently delivered by Oxfordshire County Council, including key services such as Social Care and SEND, will require detailed planning and an orderly implementation programme to minimise disruption and ensure outcomes for residents are unaffected across both proposed unitary authorities. This proposal has the benefit of having two councils which already provide upper tier services, with West Berkshire Council already operating as a unitary council and therefore providing good mitigation against the risks of disaggregation.

Services will be designed by those with the expertise and experience to do so and engagement with all stakeholders will be effective and timely. Robust governance will support the process and transition governance boards will oversee delivery and scrutinise progress, drawing on additional technical, legal, and financial expertise where needed to support sound decision-making. Elected members will play a vital role in this, providing democratic accountability and critical friend oversight to progress.

Recognising the different starting points for the two unitary authorities (Oxford & Shires merging services from three districts and a county council, Ridgeway combining two districts, a county council and an existing unitary authority), their approaches to ensuring a safe and legal transition will differ. There are learnings to share as well, as services across Oxfordshire and West Berkshire already have experience in aggregating and disaggregating, through previous initiatives like shared service delivery.

This will be a complex process, with many unknowns and hundreds of different strands that need to be brought together. There are also many risks associated with the transition that must be carefully managed. This will require an agile approach, and it is envisaged that the implementation plan will continue to evolve as the business case emerges and even after its rollout commences.

Vesting Day will be a key milestone. We are confident that the new arrangements will provide a sound platform for future transformation, to realise operational efficiencies and financial savings, while delivering improved outcomes for residents and service users.

Figure 1 sets out a high-level timeline with key phases and milestones, covering preparation, transition, implementation, and post-implementation transformation. Further detail on each of these phases is provided below.

10.2 Our phased approach

Phase 1 - Preparation and Mobilisation (December 2025 – Summer 2026)

During this phase:

- The proposals and supporting business cases will be submitted to government by the deadline of 28 November 2025.
- Government will review all the competing proposals for the area before deciding how to proceed.
- Government will then carry out a statutory consultation with affected local authorities, and other parties - it is anticipated that this will commence in early 2026.
- Once the consultation has concluded, Ministers will decide, subject to Parliamentary approval, which, if any, proposal is to be implemented, with or without modification. It is anticipated that an announcement will be made in the summer of 2026.
- Programme management arrangements will be put in place for each of the two new unitary authorities in advance of the government announcement to allow for rapid mobilisation in line with the government's ambitious timetable.
- The LGR process will be overseen by an LGR Board, which will include senior management representation from the constituent authorities. A series of thematic officer boards will be set up to progress particular workstreams. It is currently proposed to have seven boards, but the number and focus of the boards will be reviewed periodically to ensure they remain fit for purpose and reflect the priorities at the time. The programme board and project boards will be supported by a dedicated programme management office. The proposed programme management arrangements are shown in Figure 2 below.
- Communications with residents and stakeholders will continue throughout this and future phases to keep all parties informed of planned changes and developments, and to highlight opportunities for those living, working and learning in our communities to engage fully with this process whenever it is appropriate.
- A range of activities will be undertaken during this period to prepare for design in Phase 2. This will include working across all of the principal councils on preparation work that will be valuable irrespective of the option chosen by the minister. A degree of option specific work will also be undertaken to ensure that Phase 2 is best placed to proceed at the necessary pace.

Phase 2 – Design (Summer 2026 – April 2027)

Design and detailed planning work will begin once the government has confirmed the proposal it wishes to see progressed for LGR in Oxfordshire.

Once a decision is taken on which proposal to implement, the MHCLG will prepare the necessary legislation (Structural Change Order (SCO)) for Parliamentary approval.

New governance arrangements will be required during the transition period until the existing local authorities are abolished, and the new unitary authorities go live. Arrangements will be set out in the SCO; however, it is anticipated that a Joint Executive Committee will be established for each of the new authorities, with membership drawn from the constituent authorities' cabinets/executives. A Joint Scrutiny Committee will also be set up for each of the two new authorities to provide oversight and critical challenge of the transition process. Membership will be determined with regard to political proportionality. Member Task and Finish Groups may also be required to progress particular pieces of work.

Other activities that will take place during this phase will include:

- Confirming 'day one' requirements for all essential services so the new unitary authorities are safe and legal.
- Scoping of future requirements for all services.
- Reviewing existing contracts, including break clauses and expiry dates.
- Reviewing the property portfolio of each local authority, including any commercial investments.
- Developing service transition plans, including planning for the disaggregation and transfer of Oxfordshire County Council services and assets, and the aggregation of services across the constituent authorities of the new unitary authorities.
- Developing and agreeing HR plans for the transition of staff.
- Developing and implementing ongoing staff and trade union communications and engagement plans.
- Reviewing baseline ICT architecture and planning transition ready for day one (e.g. email addresses, building passes, Wi-Fi, printing, and systems access).
- Developing and agreeing on a budget for the transition year.
- Formulating governance proposals for adoption by the Shadow Authority, including:
- A new executive and committee structure
- A member code of conduct
- Member allowances
- Constitution
- Reviewing any ward boundary changes and making arrangements for the election of the shadow authority.
- The governance arrangements during the transition period will be determined by the SCO, but it is anticipated that this will involve the creation of a shadow authority for each of the new unitary authorities.
- Agreeing an external communications strategy and undertaking key stakeholder engagement to support transition.

Phase 3 – Implementation (May 2027 – April 2028)

The joint committees and joint scrutiny committees set up to oversee the transition will be stood down following the first annual meeting of the shadow authorities in April or May 2027.

Shadow authorities consist of elected members and appointed officers. Once created, the shadow authorities for Oxford & Shires and Ridgeway Councils will oversee key activities such as:

- Shadow authorities will be set up to support the smooth transition to the new local authority structure by Vesting Day on 1 April 2028. It is expected these authorities will be in place one year prior to Vesting Day, with the election of the shadow councils before 1 April 2027.
- Detailed integration planning and preparations for the transition of services to the new unitary authorities, including preparation of fully costed service plans based on previously developed blueprints.
- Development of the Council Strategy, and ensuring that all necessary services, policies and plans are in place for a safe and legal day one operation.
- Refining organisational structures set out in the design stage.
- Appointing the interim and permanent Head of Paid Service, other statutory officers and senior leadership roles.
- Budget setting for the new authorities, including consolidation of funding arrangements, such as council tax harmonisation, business rates collection, etc.
- Managing the transition of ICT systems.
- Overseeing the transfer of staff to the new authorities, with a focus on retaining a skilled workforce.
- Establishing payroll and pension arrangements.
- Ongoing staff and trade union negotiations.
- Ongoing stakeholder engagement, including reinforcing current partnerships and forming new partnerships, where appropriate.

Phase 4 - Post-transition (April 2028 onwards)

Once the new authorities formally come into existence on Vesting Day on 1 April 2028, the focus will move towards developing strategies for the medium- and long-term, which may include the following:

- Establishing a transformation programme.
- Implementing new enterprise resource planning/customer relationship management systems.
- Detailed review of existing contracts and third party spend, consolidating and rationalising spend, while seeking to take advantage of economies of scale.
- Harmonisation of fees and charges.
- Alignment of employee pay and terms and conditions.

Following Vesting Day, the focus will rightly be on delivering improved services for all those living, working and learning in the new council areas, but there will also be considerable work to close down the accounts of the former councils.

10.3 Key risks

We will adopt and apply the principles of effective risk management to support the transition to the new unitary authorities. This approach will follow an agreed-upon risk management framework, approved by the constituent authorities, and in due course, the shadow authorities, which will involve reviewing risks at the corporate, directorate, and service levels, while also ensuring that cross-cutting risks are captured to ensure appropriate identification, analysis, assessment, mitigation, reporting and review. There will also be appropriate levels of formal scrutiny throughout the process. Key risks and corresponding mitigations are set out in the table below.

Table 1: Key Risks and Mitigations

Risk	Mitigation
1. **Scale, complexity and pace of change**	
The LGR proposal involves a significant amount of change in a relatively short period, across multiple organisations, with the disaggregation and integration of assets, budgets, and services, while still delivering business-as-usual activity.	Our proposal lays the foundations for an efficient and seamless transition. Our proposed approach to programme management will ensure that the right skills, capabilities and governance are in place to deliver complex changes involving multiple workstreams. The constituent authorities have a successful track record on previous transformation and service improvement programmes that have delivered significant efficiency savings. Also, West Berkshire Council has the added benefit of being an existing unitary authority. Established in 1998, it has over 25 years of experience in delivering the full range of local government services, including services rated as good by Ofsted across Children's and Adults Services.
2. **Stakeholder support**	
The proposal involves multiple stakeholders who may have differing goals and priorities. This may result in disagreements in approach and preferred solutions. It may also result in a lack of alignment across other public services (e.g. police, health, etc).	We will work closely with stakeholders, both internally and externally, to build consensus and trust, identifying where there are different targets and agreeing on approaches to resolve issues as they arise. Decisions will be taken in an open and transparent manner, with reasons given for the decision made. A communications strategy will be developed to further support clear and consistent messaging throughout the transition process and beyond.
3. **Decision making and governance**	
There needs to be clarity on who is responsible for making decisions, when those decisions need to be taken, and that they are taken with the appropriate authority and consideration. Without this, there may be delays in implementing LGR, and the process may be open to legal challenge.	A framework will be established setting out the governance for the transition process, including roles and responsibilities (terms of reference for Boards, Committees, etc.). A clear timeline will be developed to show when each decision needs to be made. We will seek to learn from other authorities that have undergone this process, and we will consult regularly with colleagues in MHCLG to ensure that we have a safe and legally compliant setup from day one.

4. **Staffing**	
LGR will result in considerable changes for staff employed by the affected councils, including the transfer of staff to new employers, and changes to existing roles and responsibilities. The process will also place additional demands on staff, who will be required to support the transition while continuing to deliver business-as-usual activity. This could potentially result in additional stress, low morale, increased levels of staff sickness, and higher rates of staff turnover.	All staff across the affected councils will need to be involved in planning for the new unitary authorities. The HR process will be designed to support managers and staff, with comprehensive and timely communications throughout the process. Targeted support will be provided to specific individuals who have particular concerns or worries. Retention activity will be increased in areas where high turnover is anticipated, and prompt recruitment will be undertaken to fill any gaps created as a result of increased turnover. This will use secondments and agency staff if appropriate where shortfalls are forecast to be temporary.
5. **Finance**	
Budgets will be set to cover the costs of implementing the LGR process. However, there is a risk that these may be insufficient to cover the associated costs, especially if unforeseen activities are required. Also, there are uncertainties about the treatment of SEND High Needs Block deficits, which are currently off the balance sheet, but this arrangement is due to end in April 2028.	There will be close monitoring of costs throughout the LGR implementation process. This will ensure that any potential shortfalls or funding gaps are identified promptly as they arise.

Figure 1 - Implementation Timeline and Phasing

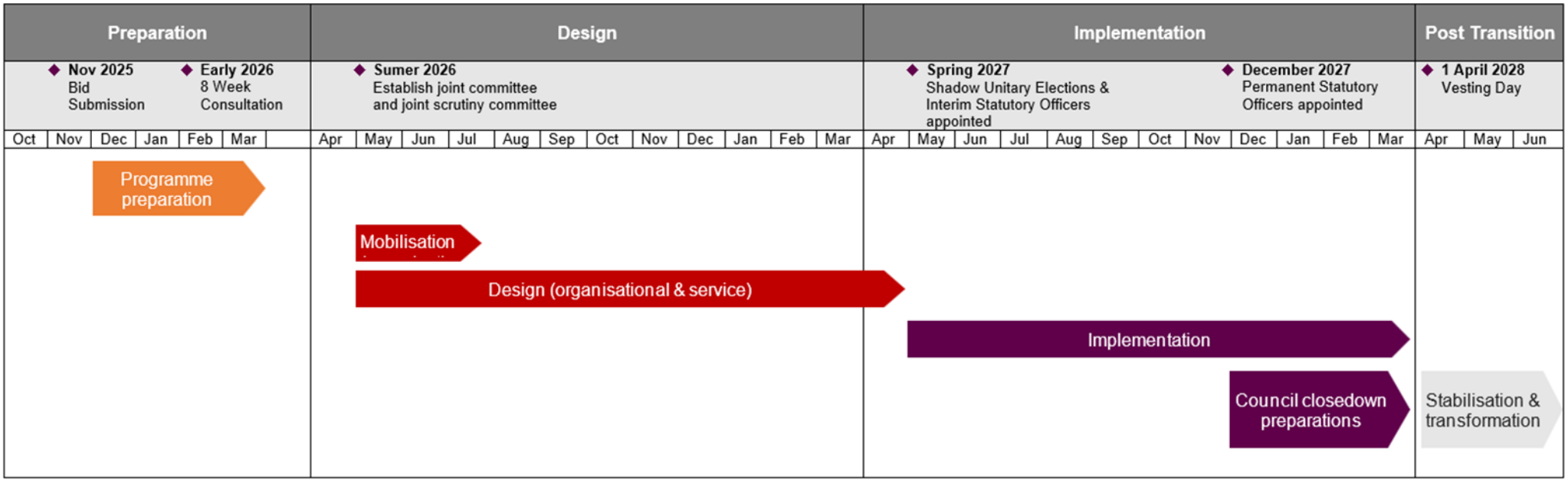


Figure 2: Programme Management Structure

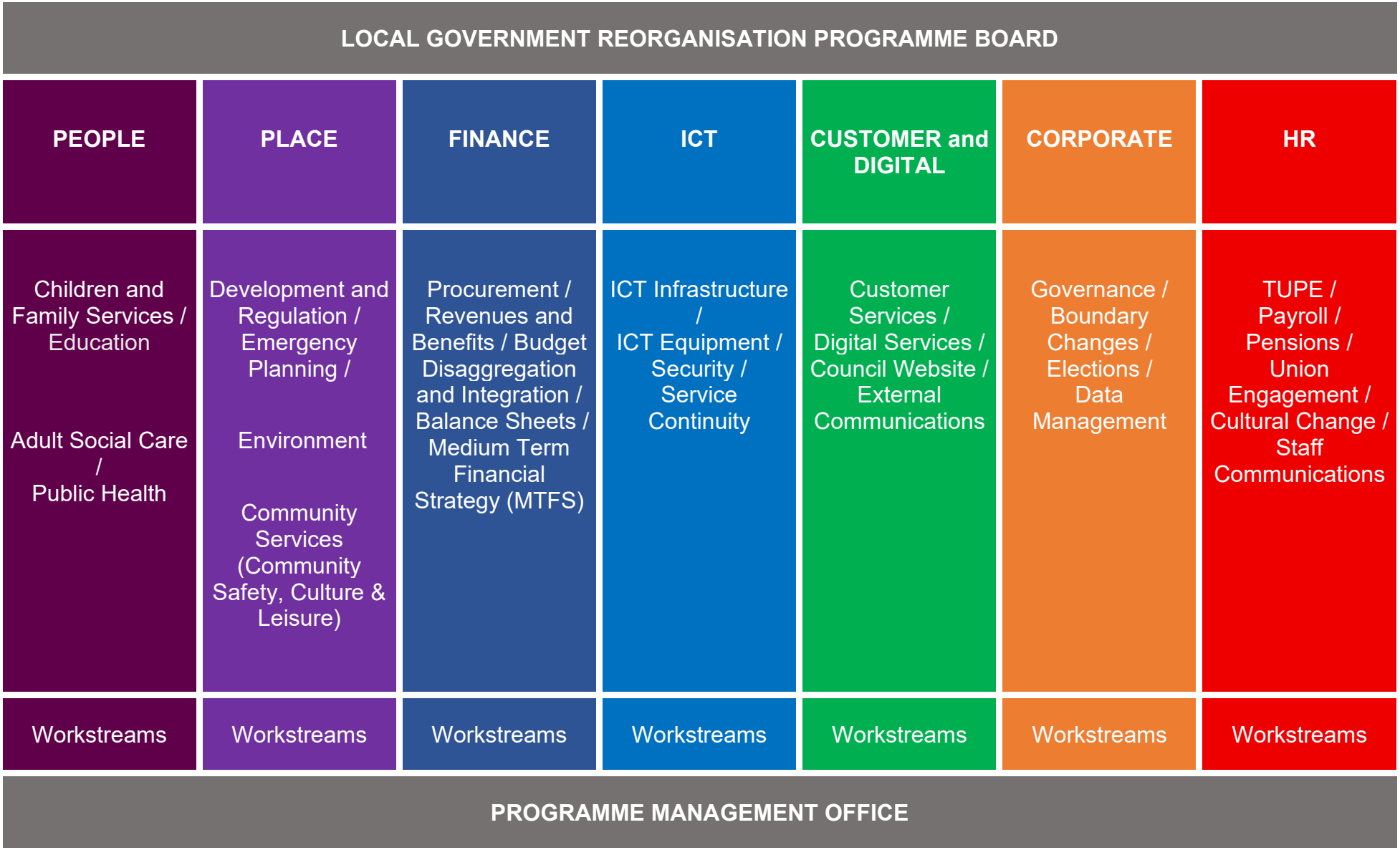


Figure 3 – High Level Timeline for Design Phase

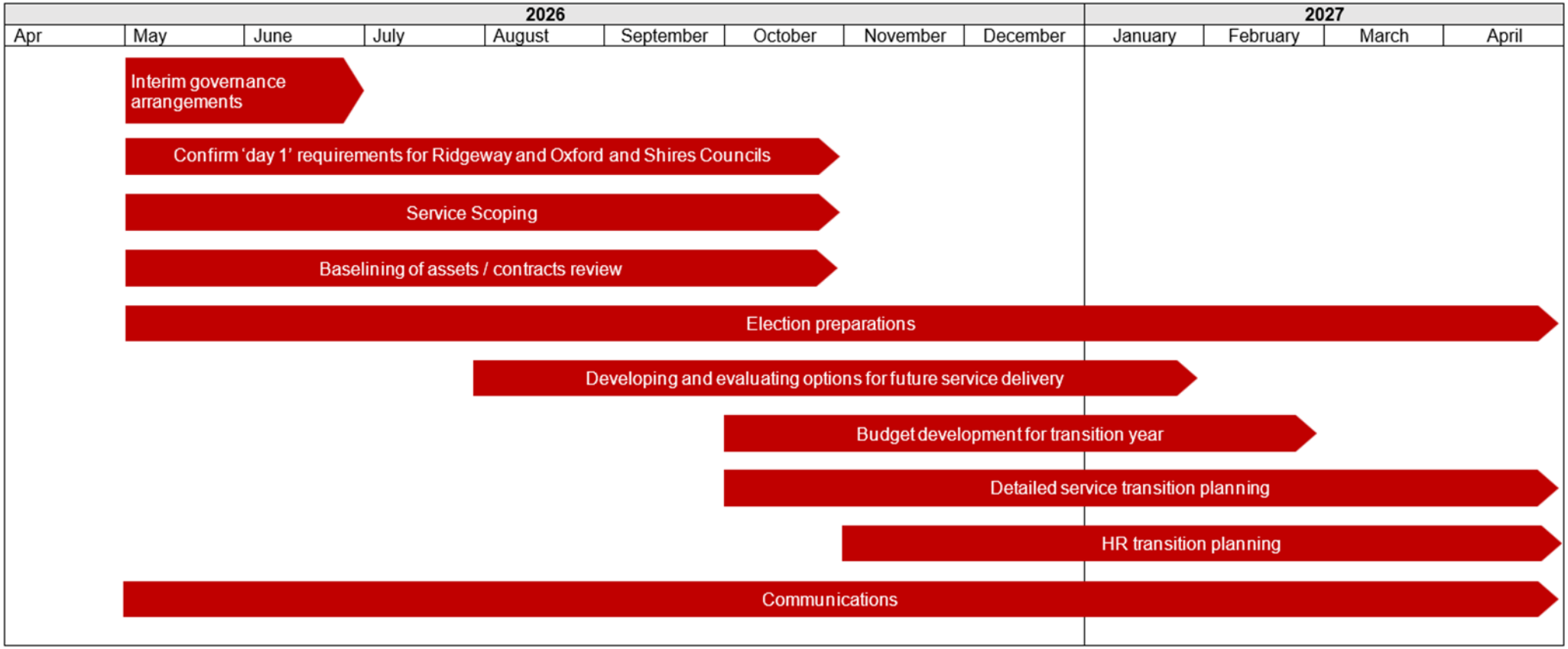
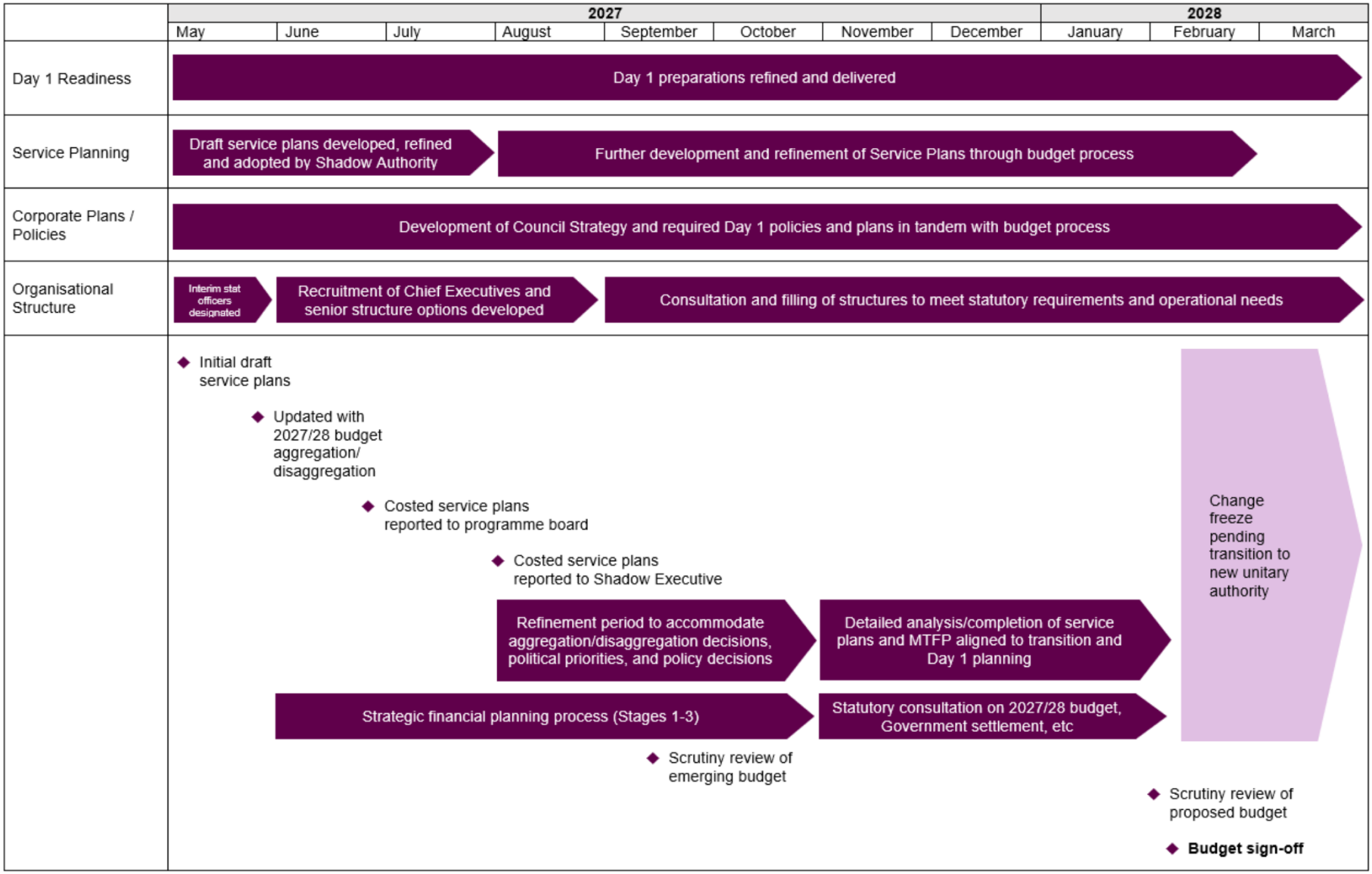


Figure 4 – High Level Timeline for Implementation Phase



Chapter 11 Engagement Summary in a Nutshell

Quick Chapter Summary

- **Our key engagement objective:** Reorganisation designed *with*, not *to*, communities — ensuring trust, legitimacy and local ownership.
- **This involved an unprecedented approach:**
  - Widespread and extensive engagement with residents, staff, parish councils, businesses, communities, public bodies, local partners and much more.
  - Engagement online, through surveys, face-to-face, in exhibitions in village and town halls, social venues like cafes, bars and pubs.
  - Many thousands of comments in response.
  - The most-extensive public engagement we've ever done, possibly the biggest ever carried out by councils in our area.

What people told us

"It is important that people feel they have a voice that will be listened to."

The two unitary option will:

- **Address the key findings of our engagement including:**
  - People want improvement.
  - They don't just want more of the same.
  - They want councils that are locally focused and responsive.
  - They want local accountability, identity and voice.
  - They want value for money, efficiency, better services, and protection of their communities.
  - They recognise the need for housing growth but are clear it needs to be managed strategically and carefully.

- **Outcome:** The engagement we carried out and the feedback we received has had a demonstrable and meaningful impact on our proposal.

11. Engagement summary

11.1 Introduction and response themes

From the outset of our proposal development, we knew that genuine, wide-reaching engagement would be critical to getting this right. We were clear that our engagement must be meaningful so that the proposal is based on a robust foundation of local views.

Local government reorganisation is clearly a big deal — it can fundamentally change how people access services that are vital to their lives and livelihoods, it affects how communities are represented, how future decisions are made, and it can have a generational impact on how people view their local identity. We wanted our communities to input into the design of new councils so that the proposal tackles the issues raised by our residents and creates a better future for the areas in scope.
And so, we ran a thorough and inclusive engagement process that informed people about what was happening but crucially also gave them a meaningful say in shaping the two-unitary proposal. The process was built around the simple principles of being open, local and collaborative. This chapter sets out how we did that, what we heard, and how it shaped the Oxford & Shires and Ridgeway proposals.

Top 3 most important council services
    - Education and schools
    - Roads and transport
    - Adult social care
- Top services that need improving
    - Roads and transport
    - Planning and development
    - Adult social care
    - Education and schools
- Most important economic priorities
    - Improving transport links
    - Revitalising high streets
    - supporting local business
    - Providing affordable housing
- Should decisions be made locally to help support economic growth and encourage new investment? - Yes 85%
- It is important that the council represents my local community's needs – Yes 75%
- It is important for the council to be based around an area that has a shared history and culture – Agree and strongly agree 75%
- It is important my council provides good quality services and value for money – strongly agree 83%

11.2 Our key takeaways from the engagement work

Summary breakdown of what we heard and what we learned

The following table breaks down the key points raised by different stakeholder groups

Stakeholder group	Key points raised
Residents	• Most important services are education/schools, roads and transport and adult social care. • A lot of services need improvement, mainly roads and transport, planning and development, adult social care and education. • Councils should do more to communicate, listen to residents and demonstrate that resident feedback is influencing decision-making. There is considerable concern about this currently, especially for county-wide services. • Economy is a big priority, especially improving transport, revitalising high streets, supporting local business and providing affordable homes. • Councils need to represent local needs. • Councils need to provide good quality services and value for money. • Concerns around a loss of their area's rural identity – this was common across the rural areas, but most acute in the areas immediately surrounding Oxford and to the east of West Berkshire near Reading. Conversely, those in Oxford itself were concerned that the city might lose its sense of identity. • Many people at our engagement events and in our survey expressed concern about the current performance of council services and want to see improvement. These were mainly county-wide services such as highways, transport and SEND.

Town and parish councils	• Real concerns and cautious optimism about what's to come, whichever proposal goes forward - but they need support to play their role. • Strong concern that the larger the unitary, the more parish and town councils will lose influence, feel ignored, or be marginalised. They pointed to the current lack of engagement or response from the county council on a range of issues and lamented the potential loss of district level. • Significant anxiety over the prospect of increased responsibilities for towns and parishes without the funding or staff to deliver them. Funding is the main barrier to taking on more. • Fears that power will concentrate in urban centres at the expense of rural and small communities. This was heightened in relation to the single county unitary and the Greater Oxford models. • Similar views were also expressed by residents living in the eastern part of West Berkshire, many of whom expressed a desire to remain part of a predominantly rural council rather than look to become part of any 'Greater Reading' urban settlement. • Town and parish councils want to be true stakeholders, involved in shaping their areas, but only with the support, respect and resources to do so.
Businesses	SME feedback: Strategic growth and business development: • They would value better collaboration and partnership programmes with the public sector. • Accessing support across all levels and departments of local government is a challenge, and a single point of contact would be beneficial. • They would value local government providing them with a doorway to networking opportunities and idea creation. • They wanted clearer pathways to selling their services to local and national government. • Business rate support, particularly in town centres where bricks and mortar businesses rely on each other for footfall. On a day-to-day business operation basis: • Better direct communication to businesses on service delivery updates and disruptions.

Community and voluntary sector	• Overwhelming support for locality-based working. • Questions raised about the continuity of care and maintaining safeguarding links. • Need mechanisms in place to ensure genuine local voice and accountability. • Concerns raised about potential overlap, competition, and closures due to boundary changes. • There is a strong call for scenario planning and transitional support to help community and voluntary sector organisations to adapt. • Protections need to remain in place for vulnerable individuals, especially those supported by non-commissioned services such as some domestic violence charities.
Developers	• Developers welcomed the opportunity to hear more, and the overriding concern was that they're keen for the transition process to be managed as smoothly as possible. In particular, they would like to see the Strategic Authority come forward as soon as practicable to enable regional spatial planning to support their growth plans.
Schools	• At the Head Teachers Forum, attendees were interested to learn about local government reorganisation and the positive opportunities that would arise from the proposals being presented for West Berkshire • Secondary school pupils told us they see South and Vale as being like West Berkshire. In West Berkshire they said they did not want to be aligned more closely to Reading as they do not see the geographical similarities between the two, and that it felt like a distinct place.

We have not included feedback from stakeholders where they may be identified, as we do not wish to put them in a difficult position or misrepresent their views in a published document. However, they have provided valuable input that has helped to shape the proposal. These stakeholders include:

- Local MPs
- Public sector partners such as police, health, local hospitals and fire service
- Oxfordshire County Council
- Oxford City Council
- Cotswold National Landscape
- Employers like Berkshire Youth, Greenham Trust and Newbury Racecourse
- Sports organisations like the Oxfordshire Football Association
- Oxford Civic Society
- Thames Valley Berkshire Local Enterprise Partnership
- Newbury Business Improvement District (Newbury BID)
- Oxfordshire Local Enterprise Partnership (Enterprise Oxfordshire)
- Housing associations
- Oxfordshire Association of Local Councils.

The feedback

Throughout our engagement work, we consistently identified several key themes. These themes have helped shape the design of this proposal, ensuring that we address the concerns raised and strive for the ambitions of our communities. The key themes are:

Our communities want change; they want improvement
Our survey responses were clear that people see a number of services currently performing poorly, such as highway maintenance, strategic planning and adult social care. Carrying on as we are should not be an option, and our communities want to see local government deliver better services than those they currently receive. This was reinforced in conversations with parish councils and other stakeholders, who felt that a change in the way services are delivered, and the geography in which they are delivered, is needed.

Our communities want councils that are locally focused and responsive
A concern raised again and again was that any new council should not be so big that it would lose touch with its residents. Communities already felt that they had experienced a loss of contact with services currently delivered on an Oxfordshire-wide scale. They also wanted to see councils based on an area relevant to their communities.

Our communities have ambition around our local economy
Responses to our survey and conversations with businesses and stakeholders highlighted that we should be ambitious about economic growth, both in our big towns and in the city, as well as in our rural communities. People want to see better strategic transport planning to link the areas, more jobs created and a coherent strategy for business growth.

New councils should provide value for money
The cost of council tax and the need for councils to be efficient were other repeated themes. Not only should we look to improve services, but we should also explore how we deliver them differently to achieve savings and minimise future council tax rises.

The expansion of housing needs to be managed strategically and carefully
There is a recognition that we need more homes, but the delivery of those homes must be managed effectively, protecting the environment, creating suitable infrastructure and improving affordability. While it wasn't part of our proposal, there was a lot of concern about the growth of Oxford encroaching on the green belt.

Our conclusions
These themes all point to creating new councils that effectively balance the need for efficiency with the need to maintain local representation and responsiveness. It suggests that we should look to deliver services differently and improve what we do as councils, rather than continuing with our current approach, which people don't think is working. The main discussion that seemed to enthuse people was that of a fresh start and a positive outlook for change.

The geography is crucial to unlocking housing and economic growth in a way that benefits communities across the area, ensuring we have the right transport in place, the right community facilities and the right jobs.

These themes, along with the more detailed feedback outlined below, have all fed into the proposal. We have highlighted throughout the proposal some of the places where stakeholder comments have shaped our thinking.

There is also more specific detail on some of the feedback we received – and what we've done with it – in the "How your feedback has influenced our proposal" section below.

11.3 Our approach to engagement

Who we engaged with

In summary, we spoke with:

- **Residents**, through more than 20 community events across the entire geography, and an extensive public survey.
- **Town and parish councils**, via a wide variety of online and in-person briefings and meetings, mailings and direct conversations. This included events we arranged, and ones we were invited to, including the Oxfordshire Association of Local Councils' Talking Tables event, and a number of parish council meetings.
- **Businesses, other public services and community representatives**, through targeted webinars, written updates, briefings, meetings and letters.
- **Council staff**, both directly and through internal communication channels.
- **Other key partners**, including voluntary groups, faith groups, MPs and neighbouring authorities.

This wasn't just about meeting a requirement — it was about designing something better for our communities, and doing that with them, not to them. We made every effort to engage as far as possible to gather a wide range of views and perspectives.

What we did

Working together as five councils, we developed and delivered a coordinated programme of engagement to provide stakeholders with clear information about the proposed changes and to gather input on key topics that would shape the proposal.

Our activities included:

- A public survey, open for six weeks to ensure residents had enough time to provide a carefully considered and informed view. Over **2,100** people and organisations responded to this survey. It focused on geography, identity, service delivery and local representation—core elements of the government criteria for the LGR proposals.
- Over **20 drop-in events** across Oxfordshire and West Berkshire attended by over 300 people. These were held in libraries, markets, community centres, cafes and other everyday venues. They allowed residents to speak directly with councillors and senior officers, ask questions, and share their views.
- Dedicated websites (twocouncils.org, ridgewaycouncil.org, and oxfordandshires.org) to provide clear and accessible information, FAQs and ways to take part.
- A tailored stakeholder programme, including letters, calls, meetings and online sessions for parish councils, MPs, businesses, public sector partners and other organisations.
- Consistent communications, with branded materials, digital media and social content, posters, newsletters, press releases, media interviews, and more to raise awareness and encourage participation.

Throughout, we worked collaboratively to avoid duplication, reduce costs, and maintain consistent messaging while tailoring delivery to local contexts.

What we didn't do

This wasn't an exercise in comparing the three proposals being developed in the Oxfordshire and West Berkshire area. We were clear and upfront that three proposals were being developed and directed stakeholders to the publicly available details of the other two, but we did not invite comments on them.

The best time for stakeholders to perform their own side-by-side comparison of the different options is once the proposals are fully developed, and during the government's statutory consultation phase.

11.4 Summary of how feedback has influenced our proposal

From the outset, we were determined that our public and stakeholder engagement would not be just a box-ticking exercise; instead, it would be the activity that kicked off, inspired, and thoroughly influenced our proposal.

We circulated a detailed summary report of the early engagement findings to the numerous officers who contributed to the development and authoring of this proposal, along with our detailed public survey report – accompanied by a guide to ensure colleagues used the feedback appropriately and correctly.

In the interest of transparency – and to practice what we preach in the Future Engagement Model section of the proposal – we have outlined below some of the most significant areas where community and stakeholder feedback have influenced our proposal.

The feedback we received is reflected throughout this proposal; therefore, the table below is by no means the full picture, but it gives a flavour of the extent to which our communities have been involved in the development of this proposal.

Shaped by engagement: **seven** important ways our communities have fundamentally influenced our proposal

You told us	What we've done	Where you can find this in the proposal
1. LOCALISM Councils should be locally focused, responsive and based on areas relevant to their communities. Some 75% of respondents to our public survey said that councils should represent the local community's needs. Residents were concerned that rural areas would be left behind, with power being centralised. The community and voluntary sector called out for mechanisms to ensure a genuine local voice and accountability	Chapter 8 of our proposal sets out a new approach to locality working. The concept of locality working and community empowerment runs throughout the proposal.	Throughout, including: **Chapter 8.4** Localities working and community empowerment.

2. QUALITY 83% of public survey respondents agreed that new councils should prioritise good services and provide value for money. You told us that service delivery in roads and transport, planning and development, and adult social care needs significant improvement. Economic growth is important, but it must go hand-in-hand with strong services and support for communities.	Our proposal (Chapter 7: Service Delivery and Transformation) takes a detailed look at service delivery and transformation. In part, this focuses on aggregating and re-establishing existing services along new boundaries, but also looks at some of the areas identified during public engagement as those requiring the most improvement.	**Chapter 7** Service Delivery and Transformation **Chapter 7.7** Other services
3. TRUST 80% of respondents to our public survey felt like their input wouldn't have much – or any – impact on how councils do things. This perception turned them off from participating in local democracy.	We're building the new councils from the ground up to ensure community feedback is hardwired into the decision-making process, and that there is a robust mechanism to ensure people see how their feedback has influenced things – restoring trust and increasing participation in local democracy – this ensures robust	**Chapter 8 Future Engagement Model**
4. VOICE Town and parish councils need a more coherent and formalised way to interact with all levels of the primary authorities to have a voice.	In Chapter 8 (How the new councils will work), we set out our Future Engagement Model, which identifies a Town and Parish Liaison function that will facilitate day-to-day engagement and support for parishes. It also provides an in-depth look forward to how community and stakeholder engagement becomes hard-baked into the democratic processes of the new councils.	**Chapter 8.4** Localities working **Chapter 8 Future Engagement Model**

5. IDENTITY You want to protect rural communities and the countryside. You want a strong voice for the city of Oxford and to ensure its sense of identity and history is preserved.	Chapter 5 sets out our vision and ambition for the two new unitary authorities, and in part, this identifies where the unique characteristics of different parts of our area will be supported.	**Chapter 5.2** How we will help secure better outcomes. **Chapter 8.3** Democratic arrangements and governance
6. EMPOWERMENT Businesses want better collaboration and partnerships with the public sector, as well as a single point of contact. The voluntary and community sector demonstrated overwhelming support for locality-based working.	Our localities model sets out processes to empower all parts of our communities to contribute meaningfully to the decisions made by the future councils. The local business sector will both help to co-design aspects of this process and, once the new councils are up and running, will become active participants.	**Chapter 8.4** Localities working and community empowerment.
7. SUPPORT There was a strong desire from Town and Parish Councils and the Voluntary and Community sector to ensure that the most vulnerable members of our communities, as well as our partner organisations, retain the support they get through the transition and adapt to what follows.	A carefully phased approach to preparation, mobilisation, and implementation will ensure the new councils are safe and legal from day one. The implementation plan sets out clear steps to ensure that no one is left behind.	**Chapter 10** – Implementation Plan and Approach

You can read the full report on our public survey at twocouncils.org/get-involved

12. Conclusion

12.1 Our case for change

This proposal sets out our vision for **two unitary councils for the area that offers the best balance of scale, efficiency and local empowerment and accountability.** The two new councils would be large enough to be resilient, withstand financial shocks and deliver services efficiently, but small enough to stay close to local communities.

At the very first step in this process, the government invited Oxfordshire councils to think innovatively before submitting a proposal. We looked at the make-up of local authorities in our area with the government's criteria, objectives and ambitions in mind. It became very clear to us that by considering **Oxfordshire and West Berkshire together** we could embrace the opportunity to create something new and better for all of our residents and communities. We have all worked enthusiastically to identify the best way to achieve these joint goals.

It speaks to our rational and pragmatic approach to identifying the best option that the financial analysis has shown that this model is the one that provides the **best potential annual financial benefits** when you take transformation into account. By developing existing upper-tier authority services across more sustainable footprints, we can protect those who need it most while securing the long-term viability of local services.

This model **builds on the strong track record of community involvement** already seen across Oxfordshire and West Berkshire and writes it into the DNA of how the new councils work, while allowing each council to focus on its own distinct but complementary identities.

The new council geographies represent a bit of a departure from what local people have known for the past 50 years or so but solving difficult problems has never been possible without new ideas. We know that our new unitary councils will be **the right building blocks for the government's ambitions for devolution** – and by getting the balance right, we can provide a firm base for the Mayoral Strategic Authority, and a genuinely local link to the communities it will serve. Doing so will support the government's aim to ensure devolved powers are truly in the hands of local people.

Five out of the seven councils across Oxfordshire and West Berkshire support this proposal, and we're excited about the opportunities solving those challenges will provide, and we're excited that we can do all of this with a strong foundation in historical ties and community identity.

This proposal embraces the once in a generation opportunity to create two new councils for one better future.

13. Appendices

Current appendices:

A. **PwC Comparative Data**
B. **PwC Financial Options Appraisal**
C. **PwC Detailed Financial Case**
D. **Planning for Devolution – A 'Growth' offer from the proposed 2 new Unitary councils**
E. **PeopleToo technical social care and SEND analysis**
F. **Glossary of terms**
G. **Government criteria checklist**

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Oxford and Shires | Ridgeway

LGR Comparative Demographic, Economic, Social and Environmental Analysis

Executive Summary | Headline Demographic, Economic, Social and Environmental indicators (1/2)

The table below shows the indicators in tabular format including how these compare to the South East and England data for each area (where appropriate and available). Within a two unitary scenario, the majority of indicators describe a more challenging scenario for Oxford & Shires authority than for Ridgeway. The three unitary proposal is not included here, due to the boundary changes required that do not allow accurate analytical comparison.

Statistics (input source)

Option	Area	Children in Low-Income Families	GCSE Attainment vs National Average	Overall Health Index	Household Benefit Claim Rate	Adults with No Qualifications	Developed Land Use
1UA		9,643	0.11	112.8	11.75%	13061	7.9%
West Berkshire UA		9,257	2.3	114.20	13.87%	13,957	7.2%
2UA	**Oxford & Shires**	10,836	-0.51	109.1	11.91%	13738	8.6%
	Ridgeway	8,372	1.74	116.9	11.60%	12704	7.2%
England		**18,981**	**-**	**100.80**	**21.33 %**	**17682**	**8.7%**
South East		**12,355**	**1.2**	**106.1**	**11.10%**	**15054**	**9.9%**
Units and Period:		Per 100k, 2023/2024	% Point Difference, 2023/2024	2021	%, 2023/2024	Per 100k, 2022/2023	%, 2022/2023
Sources		Stat-Xplore (requires log in)	Parliamentary constituency of school location data, GOV.UK	Health Index scores, England, ONS	DWP benefits, GOV.UK (requires log in)	Highest level of qualification, ONS	Land use in England, GOV.UK

Executive Summary | Headline Demographic, Economic, Social and Environmental indicators (2/2)

The table below shows the indicators in tabular format including how these compare to the South East and England data for each area (where appropriate and available).

Statistics (input source)

Option	Area	Business Growth	Gross Value Added	Obesity Prevalence in Adults	Adult Social Care spend per resident	Job Density	Deprivation
1UA		0.14%	£41.30	20.86%	£347	0.94	11.58
West Berkshire UA		-0.80%	£54.10	21.99%	N.A	1.17	9.89
2UA	Oxford & Shires	0.43%	£39.0	20.45%	£340	1.01	13.78
	Ridgeway	-0.46%	£49.30	21.29%	£364	1.00	8.92
England		0.24%	£42.40	26.5%		0.87	21.67
South East		0.14%	£36.90	24.6%		0.86	15.48
Units and Period:		% change, 2023/2024	£ per hour worked, 2023	%, 2023/2024	£ per resident, 2025	Ratio, 2023/2024	IMD, 2019/2020
Sources		Business Demography, ONS	Gross Value Added (GVA) per hour, ONS	Public Health Profiles, NHS	Newton	Job Density, Nomis	English indices of deprivation, MHCLG

Supporting Appendix

Appendix

Financial Factors | Financial Health

- GDHI per head at current prices - ONS
- Core Spending Power per individual - MHCLG
- Net Assets per individual - District Councils
- Total debt per head - GOVUK
- Total operating expenditure per capita - MHCLG
- Current DSG deficit - GCC SoA
- Projected DSG deficit - GCC SoA

Local Economic Factors | Economic Output and Growth

- GVA per hour worked - ONS
- Business Growth - ONS
- Developed Land Use - GOVUK

Local Economic Factors | Employment & Access to Work

- Employment - ONS
- Adults with No Qualifications - ONS/CENSUS
- Travel to work patterns - ONS
- Job Density - ONS

Local Economic Factors | Digital Economy and Infrastructure

- Digital propensity - ONS
- Digital Connectivity - OFCOM
- Housing land supply - District Councils

Service Delivery Factors

- No. of residents supported ASC / CSC - Newton
- % of total population supported by People Services - Newton
- Total cost of service 2025 - Newton
- ASC / CSC spend per resident 2025 - Newton
- Benefit Claim Rates - GOVUK
- Homelessness - ONS
- Schools rated 'good' & 'outstanding' - OFSTED
- Rate of pupils receiving SEN support - HoC
- Rate of pupils with an EHCP - HoC
- Educational Attainment - GOVUK
- Children in Low Income Families - GOVUK
- Overall Health Index - ONS
- Obesity Prevalence in Adults - NHS
- Deprivation - MHCLG
- Life Satisfaction - ONS
- High Anxiety - NHS
- Low Happiness - NHS
- Common Mental Health Disorders - NHS
- Children looked after - GOVUK

1. Population & Taxbase

Population Projections

Overall, Oxfordshire's over-65 population is projected to grow between 2026-2030, and more in Ridgeway compared to Oxford & Shires, however, the difference is marginal each year.

- Not accounting for population size, broad age group population growth is highest in the over-65 population.
- The 0–19 population declines in both LGR scenarios, with a greater decrease in growth in Oxford & Shires.
- Ridgeway will outpace Oxford & Shires in overall population growth each year.

LGR Implications

The number of older people in Oxfordshire is rising, which could increase future demand for adult social care; noting that the 65+ population in the Ridgeway has reduced demand for social care relative to Oxford & Shires. At the same time, the 20–64 growth is steady but doesn't peak beyond 0.6%, which limits how much council tax and business rate income can grow to fund these services. Local government reform offers a chance to share resources more fairly and manage this ageing demand better, if it strikes the right balance between financial stability and delivering services.

Cumulative population change projection (% change)

		2026	2027	2028	2029	2030
Single UA	Total	0.7%	0.7%	0.8%	0.8%	0.8%
	0 - 19	-0.2%	-0.3%	-0.5%	-0.2%	-0.3%
	20 - 64	0.5%	0.5%	0.6%	0.6%	0.6%
	65+	2.5%	2.7%	2.7%	2.6%	2.6%
Oxford & Shires UA	Oxford & Shires	0.4%	0.5%	0.6%	0.7%	0.7%
	0 - 19	-0.6%	-0.5%	-0.7%	-0.4%	-0.4%
	20 - 64	0.2%	0.2%	0.4%	0.4%	0.5%
	65+	2.5%	2.8%	2.8%	2.8%	2.6%
Ridgeway UA	Ridgeway	0.8%	0.7%	0.7%	0.7%	0.7%
	0 - 19	-0.2%	-0.4%	-0.6%	-0.4%	-0.6%
	20 - 64	0.6%	0.5%	0.5%	0.6%	0.5%
	65+	2.4%	2.4%	2.5%	2.3%	2.4%

Population Figures

	2024	2025	2026	2027	2028	2029	2030	2031	2032
Oxfordshire CC	**766,129**	**773,131**	**778,869**	**784,525**	**790,608**	**797,209**	**803,838**	**810,363**	**816,697**
West Berkshire	163,540	163,712	163,754	163,725	163,811	163,953	164,123	164,303	164,507
South Oxfordshire	156,126	157,893	159,508	160,995	162,478	163,954	165,404	166,825	168,232
Vale of White Horse	148246	150,552	152,620	154,532	156,414	158,299	160,110	161,864	163,566
Ridgeway	**467,912**	**472,157**	**475,882**	**479,252**	**482,703**	**486,206**	**489,637**	**492,992**	**496,305**
Cherwell	170,119	172,283	174,214	176,065	177,917	179,804	181,661	183,507	185,337
Oxford City	171,899	171,498	170,562	169,946	169,797	170,096	170,562	171,052	171,425
West Oxfordshire	119,739	120,905	121,965	122,987	124,002	125,056	126,101	127,115	128,137
Oxford and Shires	**461,757**	**464,686**	**466,741**	**468,998**	**471,716**	**474,956**	**478,324**	**481,674**	**484,899**

Taxbase

	2025/2026	2026/2027	2027/2028	2028/2029	2029/30	2030/31	2031/32	2032/33	2033/34	2034/35
Oxfordshire CC	**279,025**	**282,904**	**286,742**	**290,583**	**294,454**	**298,458**	**302,519**	**306,639**	**310,818**	**315,057**
West Berkshire	68,511	69,882	71,279	72,705	74,159	75,642	77,155	78,698	80,272	81,877
South Oxfordshire	63,640	64,595	65,563	66,547	67,545	68,558	69,586	70,630	71,689	72,765
Vale of White Horse	59,152	60,216	61,300	62,404	63,527	64,670	65,834	67,019	68,226	69,454
Ridgeway	**191,303**	**194,692**	**198,143**	**201,655**	**205,231**	**208,871**	**212,576**	**216,347**	**220,187**	**224,096**
Cherwell	59,854	60,572	61,299	62,034	62,779	63,532	64,294	65,066	65,847	66,637
Oxford City	47,638	47,999	48,363	48,730	49,099	49,472	49,847	50,225	50,606	50,990
West Oxfordshire	48,742	49,522	50,216	50,868	51,504	52,225	52,957	53,698	54,450	55,212
Oxford and Shires	**156,234**	**158,093**	**159,878**	**161,633**	**163,383**	**165,229**	**167,098**	**168,989**	**170,902**	**172,839**

2. Financial Factors

Financial Factors | Summary

Why have we selected these measures?

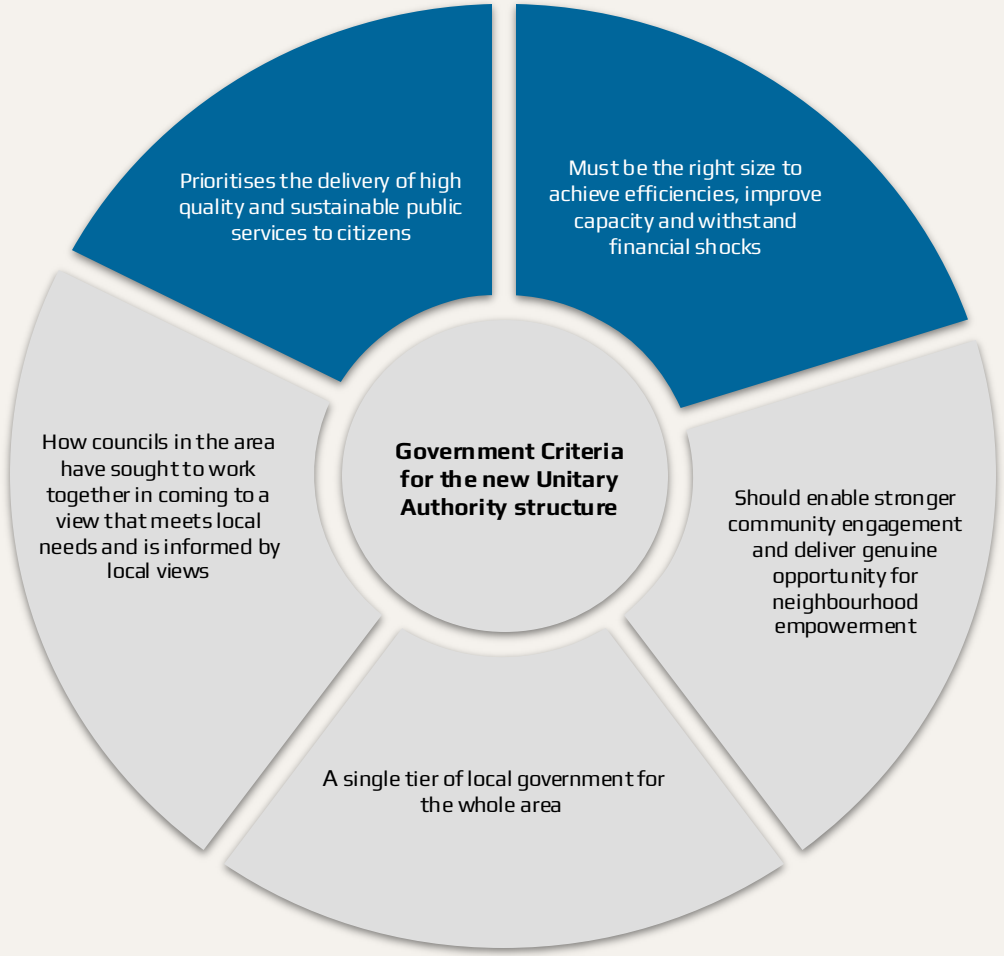
These measures show how financially strong each council in Oxfordshire is. They give a snapshot of things like debt, assets, spending, and key pressures such as DSG deficits.

They help us judge whether future council structures, either one or two unitary authorities would be financially sustainable. They also show how well each area could cope with financial shocks, manage past deficits, and continue running services. These indicators are a key part of the government's financial tests when deciding if a unitary model is viable.

What do these measures tell us?

These figures give an overview of each area's financial health. Local Authority Debt, borrowing compared to reserves, and assets per person show how resilient and stable each area is. Council tax, business rates, and household income (GDHI) reflect the strength of the local economy and funding base.

Operating expenditure per capita and core spending power show how much it costs to run services in each area. DSG deficits highlight pressures from high-needs education.



Financial Health

Description of Indicator

Financial health indicators provide a snapshot of a local authority's fiscal resilience and ability to handle future pressures. Measures such as debt per individual, council tax, and business rates income reflect the authority's funding base and how much it relies on borrowing. Gross Disposable Household Income (GDHI) per capita shows how much money residents have, which can affect both local revenue and demand for services. Operating expenditure per capita, net assets per individual, and core spending power per individual help us understand how much is spent and how financially strong the authority is overall. The current and projected DSG deficits highlight risks linked to funding for high-needs education.

LGR Implications

Ridgeway has lower Local Authority (LA) debt per capita (£527 compared to £961), and higher GDHI per capita (£28,272 compared to £24,736). It also collects more through council tax. Ridgeway also has a higher operating expenditure per capita (£262 compared to £231) and lower reserves per capita (£4433 compared to £2,392). Ridgeway shows a higher level of Core Spending Power, Dedicated Schools Grants (DSG) deficits in 2023 to 2024 and will have higher projected DSG deficits in 2026. This is supported by the Newton analysis which also indicates a higher demand for Children's services within Ridgeway.

Statistics (input source)

The table overleaf presents the headline statistics, with units and sources, for the following data categories:

LA Debt	Total Council Tax Receipts	GDHI per capita	Operating Expenditure	Total Reserves	Core Spending Power	Dedicated Schools Grant Deficit	Projected Dedicated Schools Grant Deficit

Financial Health

	LA Debt	Total Council Tax Receipts	GDHI per capita	Operating Expenditure	Total Reserves	Core Spending Power	Dedicated Schools Grant Deficit	Projected Dedicated Schools Grant Deficit
Oxfordshire CC	£1,234	595,909	£25,406	£251	£1620.6	£1,941	£92.5m	£137.0m
West Berkshire	£1,493	137,752	£28,055	£459	£1714.8	£2,122	£16.3m	£37.0m
South Oxfordshire	£309	137,267	£29,938	£192	£1372.2	£217	-	-
Vale of White Horse	£702	126,752	£24,995	£104	£879.2	£252	-	-
Ridgeway	**£2,054**	**401,711**	**£27,709**	**£420**	**£2392.5**	**£2,130**	**£57.0m**	**£97.3m**
Cherwell	£1,460	128,933	£23,757	£141	£345.2	£256	-	-
Oxford City	£2,330	101,235	£21,662	£369	£6400.8	£384	-	-
West Oxfordshire	£206	101,722	£27,658	£136	£1237.8	£211	-	-
Oxford and Shires	**£2,689**	**331,890**	**£23,999**	**£474**	**£4432.9**	**£2,255**	**£51.8m**	**£72.7m**
England	**£2,054**	37,176,692	**£23,104**	**£715**	-	**£2,371**	-	-
South East	**£1,347**	**7,261,811**	**£25,796**	**£307**	-	**£850**	-	-
Units and Period	£ per capita, 2024/2025	£ '000s, 2023/2024	£, 2022/2023	£ per capita, 2023/2024	£ per individual, 2023/2024	£ per dwelling, 2023/2024	£m, 2024/5	£m, 2025/6
Source	Statement of accounts data	Receipts of Council Taxes, MHCLG	Regional gross disposable household income, Nomis	Revenue Outturn, MHCLG	District / Unitary Councils	Core Spending Power, MHCLG	District Councils	District / Unitary Councils

3. Local Economic Factors

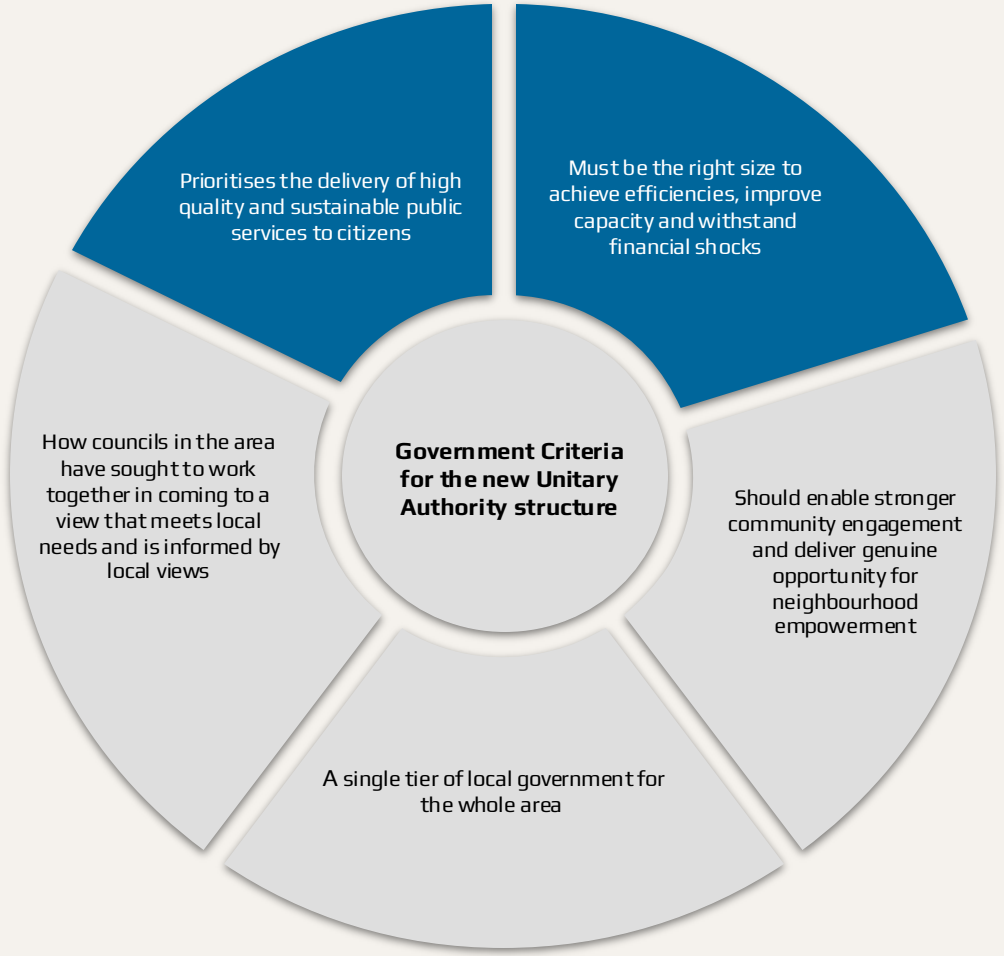
Local Economic Factors | Summary

Why have we selected these measures?

These indicators provide insight into Oxfordshire's economic conditions and potential for future growth. They show both how strong the local economy is right now, using measures like GVA, employment rate, and job density, and whether the infrastructure is in place to support future success, such as digital connectivity, access to travel, and housing supply. These factors affect how much demand there is for public services and what level of funding may be needed. In areas with fewer jobs or weaker growth, there is often more pressure on public services and financial support. In contrast, stronger economies can ease those pressures and make service delivery more sustainable. For Local Government Reorganisation, these indicators help us understand whether new councils would be starting from a balanced economic position or taking on deeper economic challenges.

What do these measures tell us?

These measures tell us how ready an area is to grow and cope with change. If a place has good transport links, fast internet, and enough homes, it is more likely to attract new businesses and workers. This can lead to more local jobs and higher incomes. On the other hand, places that lack these things may find it harder to grow and may rely more on help from government services. By looking at these indicators, we can see where extra support or investment might be needed. This helps make sure that any changes to local government are fair and take into account the different needs of each area.



Economic Output and Growth

Description of Indicator

These figures help us understand how productive and resilient each area's economy is. Gross Value Added (GVA) per hour worked shows how much economic value is created for every hour worked. It gives a clear picture of how efficient and productive the local economy is. Business growth shows whether the number of businesses in an area is going up or down, which reflects economic strength and stability. The percentage of Developed Land Use shows how much land is already built on, which helps us see the differences in development patterns and what infrastructure each area might need.

LGR Implications

Ridgeway has a higher GVA per hour worked at £49.3, compared to £39.0 in the Oxford & Shires. This means Ridgeway produces more economic value for each hour worked. However, business growth is also stronger in Oxford & Shires, with a positive growth rate of 0.43 percent, while Ridgeway saw a decline. The percentage of developed land is higher in Oxford & Shires at 8.6 percent, compared to 7.2% percent in Ridgeway (these figures are somewhat skewed by the presence of Oxford city at 38% developed land). These figures show that while Ridgeway has stronger productivity, Oxford and Shires has more developed land and greater economic performance.

	GVA	Business Growth	Developed Land Use
Oxfordshire CC	**£41.30**	**0.1%**	**7.9%**
West Berkshire	£54.10	-0.8%	7.2%
South Oxfordshire	£45.70	0.0%	6.8%
Vale of White Horse	£45.70	-0.56%	7.6%
Ridgeway	**£49.30**	**-0.46%**	**7.2%**
Cherwell	£37.80	0.40%	9%
Oxford City	£40.30	0.46%	38.1%
West Oxfordshire	£38.00	0.42%	6.3%
Oxford and Shires	**£39.00**	**0.43%**	**8.6%**
England	**£42.40**	**0.24%**	**8.7%**
South East	**£36.90**	**0.14%**	**9.9%**
Units and Period	£ per hour worked, 2022/2023	% change, 2023/2024	%, 2022/2023
Source	Gross Value Added (GVA) per hour, ONS	Business Demography, ONS	Land use in England, GOV.UK

Employment and Access to Work

Description of Indicator

These indicators show how easy it is for people to find and access jobs in each area. Employment rate tells us how many working-age adults are in paid work. Job density shows how many jobs are available compared to the number of working-age people, helping us understand how well the local job market matches the size of the workforce. The number of adults with no qualifications shows how prepared the local workforce is, and where there may be a need for more training or support. Travel to work patterns show how far people need to go to reach their jobs, which can highlight transport or access issues, especially in rural areas. Together, these indicators give a picture of both the number of jobs and how accessible they are for local residents.

LGR Implications

Ridgeway has a larger employment rates, with 62.98 percent compared to Oxford & Shires at 60.15 percent. Both are better than the regional and national averages. Oxford & Shires has more adults with no qualifications, at 13,738 per 100,000 people, compared to 12,704 in Ridgeway.

Job density shows there are greater jobs available in relative to the working-age population against national and regional averages and similar across both regions. These figures suggest that workforce skills, job opportunities, and access to employment vary between the two areas. Local Government Reorganisation should consider these differences when planning for skills, job growth, and transport improvements.

	Employment	Adults with no qualifications	Job density	Travel to work
Oxfordshire CC	**61.27%**	**13,061**	**0.94**	**12.29**
West Berkshire	63.0%	13,957	1.17	12.65
South Oxfordshire	62.9%	12,052	0.73	13.88
Vale of White Horse	63.0%	11,989	0.91	13.13
Ridgeway	**62.98%**	**12,704**	**1.00**	**13.22**
Cherwell	65.1%	15,577	0.92	13.19
Oxford City	53.6%	12,283	1.19	8.21
West Oxfordshire	62.8%	13,297	0.83	13.06
Oxford and Shires	**60.15%**	**13,738**	**1.01**	**11.49**
England	57.39%	**17,682**	**0.87**	-
South East	59.19%	**15,054**	**0.86**	-
Units and Period	%, 2021/2022	Per 100k, 2022/2023	Ratio, 2023/2024	Km/person, 2021/2022
Source	Economic Activity Status, ONS	Highest level of qualification, ONS	Job Density, Nomis	Travel to work, England and Wales, ONS

Digital Economy and Infrastructure

Description of Indicator

These indicators show how strong each area's infrastructure is and whether it can support future growth. Low digital connectivity shows where people have poor internet access, which can limit access to services and opportunities. High digital connectivity measures how much of the area has 5G coverage, showing how ready the area is for faster, more advanced digital services.

The Digital Propensity Index shows how likely people are to use digital services, giving an idea of digital skills and comfort with technology. Housing land supply tells us how many years' worth of land is available for building new homes, which helps us understand whether the area can keep up with future housing needs.

LGR Implications

Oxford & Shires performs slightly better on low-speed internet, with only 1.33 percent of properties having access below 30mbps. It also has greater high-speed coverage overall, due to Ridgeway having more rural areas. However, Oxford & Shires has less land available for new housing, with only 4.31 years of supply compared to 5.23 years in Ridgeway. Both areas have similar levels of digital propensity, meaning residents are equally likely to use digital services. These figures suggest that decisions on Local Government Reorganisation should consider fair access to digital infrastructure and support for sustainable housing and infrastructure growth.

	Digital Connectivity (Low)	Digital Connectivity (High)	Digital Propensity Index	Housing Land Supply
Oxfordshire CC	**1.54%**	**86.90%**	**94.98%**	**4.59**
West Berkshire	1.8%	63.6%	95.0%	5.7
South Oxfordshire	1.7%	76.8%	94.9%	4.07
Vale of White Horse	2.0%	83.1%	95.4%	5.93
Ridgeway	**1.83%**	**74.52%**	**95.1%**	**5.23**
Cherwell	2.0%	86.0%	94.7%	3.1
Oxford City	1.4%	100%	95.6%	5.93
West Oxfordshire	0.6%	88.5%	94.3%	3.9
Oxford and Shires	**1.33%**	**91.52%**	**94.87%**	**4.31**
England	**2.5%**	**76.18%**	**94.00 %**	**-**
South East	**2.50%**	**79.3%**	**94.50 %**	**-**
Units and Period	% < 30mbps access, 2024/2025	% with 5G access, 2024/2025	% DPI, 2021/2022	Years of Supply, 2023/2024
Source	Premises below 30Mbps, OFCOM	5G coverage, OFCOM	Digital Propensity Index, ONS	District / Unitary Councils

4. Service Delivery Factors

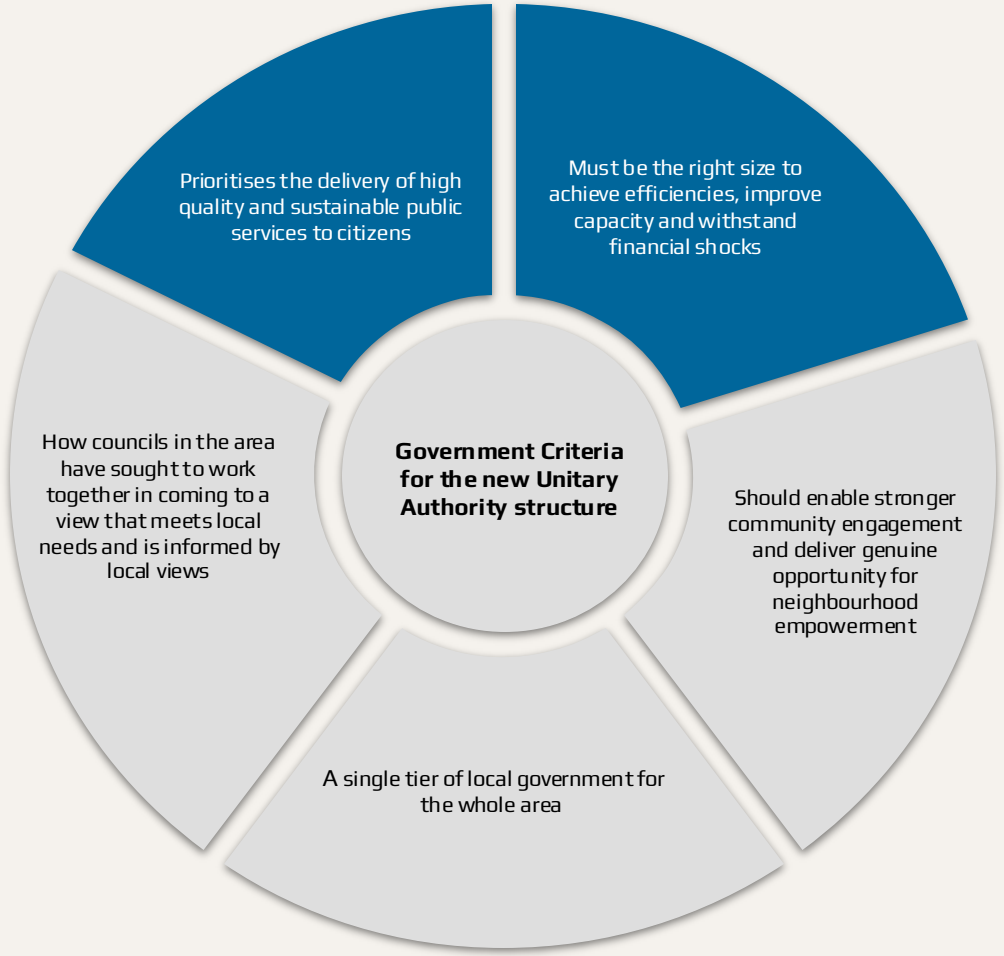
Service Delivery Factors | Summary

Why have we selected these measures?

These measures provide insight into the scale, distribution, and complexity of service demand. They help illustrate how need varies by geography, age group, and service type, offering a view of future demand pressures a new authority would have to manage. By looking at outcomes across social care, education, housing, and health, we can assess how well existing services are coping. This helps identify whether a new unitary model would benefit from economies of scale and consistency, or whether disaggregation could risk deepening local inequalities. The indicators also reflect broader challenges such as deprivation, long-term health conditions, and educational disadvantage, all of which will shape the sustainability and financial resilience of any new local government structure.

What do these measures tell us?

These indicators highlight variation in service demand, population needs, and social outcomes across the proposed unitary areas. People services data reflect differences in the volume and complexity of social care, particularly in adult services. Adult service indicators show levels of economic vulnerability, disability, youth disengagement, and housing need. Children's indicators capture variation in special educational needs, attainment, and child poverty. Health and wellbeing measures reflect physical and mental health outcomes, deprivation, and life satisfaction. Together, these measures illustrate differing service pressures and community needs that would influence future delivery and resource planning under any new structure.



Adult Services

Description of Indicator

The Household Benefit Claim Rate and Disability Allowance Claim Rate reflect the proportion of residents relying on financial support, highlighting economic vulnerability and potential pressure on welfare services. The NEET rate (young people not in education, employment, or training) measures youth disengagement across the areas. Also, Homelessness rates provide a snapshot of housing need and acute service demand.

LGR Implications

Both regions record similar levels of household benefit claim need and disability allowance claim rate. Both rates are below that of national and regional averages. Oxford & Shires faces a homelessness rate of 0.12%, only 0.03% higher than Ridgeway (0.09%). These factors are important when weighing up LGR options particularly in managing social need relative to resources and enabling more targeted, needs-based investment and planning.

	Household Benefit Claim Rate	Disability Allowance Claim Rate	Homelessness
Oxfordshire CC	11.75%	1.73%	0.1%
West Berkshire	13.87%	1.90%	0.11%
South Oxfordshire	11.67%	1.60%	0.05%
Vale of White Horse	11.33%	1.85%	0.07%
Ridgeway	11.60%	1.75%	0.09%
Cherwell	11.69%	1.87%	0.10%
Oxford City	12.6%	1.55%	0.18%
West Oxfordshire	11.45%	1.80%	0.10%
Oxford and Shires	11.91%	1.74%	0.12%
England	**21.33 %**	**2.06%**	**0.19%**
South East	**11.10%**	**1.93%**	**0.22%**
Units and Period	%, 2023/2024	%, 2023/2024	%, 2024
Source	DWP benefits, GOV.UK (requires log in)	DWP Benefits Statistics, GOV.UK (requires log in)	Statutory homelessness in England, ONS

Children's Need and Educational Outcomes

Description of Indicator

These indicators highlight where children's educational challenges are most concentrated across Oxfordshire. These figures are critical for understanding where demand for children's services is most acute, identifying where school improvement and inclusion efforts will need targeted coordination, and flagging the need for consistent service quality and resource alignment. For any new unitary arrangement, these indicators help assess where inequalities in children's life chances could widen or be addressed through joined-up governance and delivery.
Statistics are by parliamentary constituency so do not map onto District areas.

LGR Implications

Oxford & Shires has slightly higher levels of pupil need, with greater SEN support demand. Ridgeway outperforms Oxford & Shires for GCSE (1.74% vs -0.51%) and EBacc, as well as national and regional averages. Oxford & Shires also has a higher rate of children in low-income families (10,836 per 100k vs 8,372). These differences should be considered when deciding how to reorganise local government, to ensure the new councils have enough funding, staff, and support to meet the specific needs of their local populations.

Statistics (input source)

Option	Area	Pupils Receiving SEN Support	Pupils with an EHCP	GCSE Attainment minus National Average	Pupils Receiving grade 4+ in EBacc	Pupils Receiving Grade 4+ in English/Maths	Children in Low-Income Families
Oxfordshire 1UA		15.7%	3.2%	0.11	23.9%	65.6%	9,643
West Berkshire UA		14.5%	3.2%	2.3	31.7%	69.7%	9,257
2UA	Oxford & Shires	15.7%	3.1%	-0.51	22.6%	64.1%	10,836
	Ridgeway	14.9%	3.1%	1.74	28.2%	69.3%	8,372
England		**13.6%**	**2.9 %**	**-**	**25.4 %**	**65.4 %**	**18,981**
South East		**13.3%**	**3.1 %**	**1.2**	**27.3 %**	**67.4%**	**12,355**
Units and Period:		%, 2023/2024	%, 2023/2024	% Point Difference, 2023/2024	%, 2023/2024	%, 2023/2024	Per 100k, 2023/2024
Sources		Special educational needs and disabilities, House of Commons Library	Local area data: Special educational needs and disabilities, House of Commons Library	Parliamentary constituency of school location data, GOV.UK	Parliamentary constituency of school location data, GOV.UK	Parliamentary constituency of school location data, GOV.UK	Stat-Xplore (requires log in)

Health and Wellbeing Indicators

Description of Indicator

These indicators provide a snapshot of the general health and wellbeing of residents across Oxfordshire. The Overall Health Index scores reflect physical and mental health outcomes, behaviours and environmental influences. Life expectancy and obesity prevalence indicates long-term health inequality, while deprivation highlights broader socioeconomic disadvantage. Measures such as high anxiety, low happiness, life satisfaction and prevalence of common mental disorders offer insight into mental wellbeing across age groups. Collectively, these indicators point to underlying demand for health and care services.

LGR Implications

Ridgeway consistently performs better, with higher life expectancy, a stronger overall health index (116.93 vs 109.13), although has slightly higher adult obesity rates (21.29% vs 20.45%). Ridgeway also has lower levels of deprivation. Oxford & Shires reports lower levels of anxiety, less people experiencing low happiness, and a greater prevalence of common mental disorders in both 16+ and 65+ populations. When considering the deliverability of unitary options, the balance between needs and resources should be addressed, alongside health strategies, investment in prevention and allocation of public health and adult social care resources.

Statistics (input source)

The table overleaf presents the headline statistics, with units and sources, for the following data categories:

Overall Health Index	Obesity Prevalence in Adults	Deprivation	Life Satisfaction	High Anxiety	Low Happiness	Common Mental Disorders - 16+	Common Mental Disorders - 65+

Health and Wellbeing Indicators

	Overall Health Index	Obesity Prevalence in Adults	Deprivation	Life Satisfaction	High Anxiety	Low Happiness	Common Mental Disorders - 16+	Common Mental Disorders - 65+
Oxfordshire CC	**112.80**	**20.86%**	**11.58**	**7.76**	**18.4**	**6.5**	**13.70**	**8.60**
West Berkshire	114.2	21.99%	9.89	7.50	24.38	8.8	13.16	8.29
South Oxfordshire	120.2	17.33%	8.33	7.81	16.00	6.2	12.32	7.86
Vale of White Horse	116.4	21.99%	8.38	7.73	28.75	-*	12.48	7.98
Ridgeway	**116.93**	**21.29%**	**8.92**	**7.68**	**23.0**	**7.5**	**12.7**	**8.0**
Cherwell	106.2	26.43%	14.47	7.57	16.96	6.8	14.20	8.81
Oxford City	101.4	16.17%	16.99	7.80	11.26	-*	17.75	10.88
West Oxfordshire	119.8	21.23%	8.77	7.94	18.92	-*	11.89	7.70
Oxford and Shires	**109.13**	**20.45%**	**13.78**	**7.75**	**15.7**	**6.8**	**14.6**	**9.10**
England	**100.80**	**26.5%**	**21.67**	**7.44**	**23.32**	**8.85**	**16.90**	**10.25**
South East	**106.10**	**24.6%**	**15.48**	**7.49**	**22.1**	**8.50**	**15.60**	**9.90**
Units and period	2021	%, 2023/2024	IMD, 2019/2020	Mean %, 2022/2023	%, 2022/2023	%, 2022/2023	%, 2017	%, 2017
Source	Health Index scores, England, ONS	Public Health Profiles, NHS	English indices of deprivation, MHCLG	Personal well-being estimates, ONS	Public health profiles, NHS	Public health profiles, NHS	Public health profiles, NHS	Public health profiles, NHS

**Value suppressed for disclosure control due to small count*

5. Demographic and Economic indicator sources and description

Comparative Demographic, Economic, Social and Environmental Analysis | Data Source Key

Heading	Source, Period	Unit	Description
Total council tax receipts	MHCLG, 2023/2024	£'000s	Cumulative amount a household must pay annually to cover local government services, based on property valuation bands, localauthority rates, and any additional charges like precepts, net of council tax support.
Business rates Income	MHCLG, 2023/2024	£'000s	Business rates, also known as non-domestic rates, are a tax levied on commercial properties by local councils in the UK to help fund local services. The amount is calculated based on the property's rateable value and a uniform business rate multiplier set by the government,allowing councils to raise revenue from businesses operating within their jurisdiction.
LA Debt per capita	GOV.UK, 2023/2024	£	LA Debt per head refers to the average amount of public or governmental debt allocated to each individual within a population It is calculated by dividing the total public debt by the number of people, providing a measure of the debt burden on a per-person basis in a particular jurisdiction
Operating Expenditure per capita	MHCLG, 2023/2024	£	Operating expenditure per capita refers to the average amount of money spent on operating expenses for each individual in a specific population or area. It is calculated by dividing the total operating expenditures by the number of people, providing insight into how resources are allocated relative to the population size.
Net Assets per capita	District Councils, 2023/2024	£	Net assets refer to the total value of a council's assets (such as property, equipment, and financial reserves) minus its liabilities. This measure indicates the underlying financial strength and resilience of the authority, showing its capacity to absorb fiscal shocks, invest in services, and support long-term financial planning (£).
Current DSG Deficit	GCC SoA, 2025	£m	Current DSG deficit refers to the cumulative shortfall between Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG) funding received and the local authority's spending on high needs and other DSG-supported services. We have apportioned by EHCPs by area.
Projected DSG Deficit	GCC SoA, 2026	£m	Projected DSG deficit refers to the cumulative shortfall between Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG) funding received and the local authority's spending on high needs and other DSG-supported services based on Statement of Accounts. We have apportioned by EHCPs by area.
Deprivation	MHCLG, 2019/2020	IMD	Deprivation refers to the condition of lacking essential resources, opportunities, or advantages, resulting in a lower standard of living and well-being. It encompasses various dimensions such as income poverty, poor access to education, inadequate housing, limited healthcare, and employment opportunities, often leading to social and economic disadvantages
Population	ONS, 2023/2024	Num	Population refers to the total number of individuals or inhabitants living in a specific geographic area, such as a city, country, or the world

Comparative Demographic, Economic, Social and Environmental Analysis | Data Source Key

Heading	Source, Period	Unit	Description
GVA per hour worked	ONS, 2022/2023	£ per hour worked	GVA, or Gross Value Added, is a measure of the economic productivity of a particular region, industry, or sector within an economy. It represents the value of goods and services produced, minus the costs of inputs and raw materials used in production, serving as an indicator of economic performance and contribution to GDP.
Business Growth	ONS, 2023/2024	% change	Business growth is measured as the difference between the number of business births and business deaths over the past year. This provides a net change in the local business population and serves as an indicator of economic dynamism and the overall health of the business environment.
Job Density	ONS, 2023/2024	Ratio	This represents the number of jobs in an area divided by the working-age population. In a local government context, it helps assess the balance between available employment opportunities and the resident workforce, indicating potential pressures on commuting, skills alignment, and local economic capacity.
Employment	ONS, 2021/2022	% of adults	Employment refers to the condition of having paid work, where individuals engage in tasks or activities in exchange for wages or salaries. This indicator measure % of working age adults in employment in a given area.
GDHI per capita	Nomis, 2022/2023	£	Gross Disposable Household Income, measuring the total income households have available for spending and saving after accounting for taxes, social contributions, and receiving benefits. It serves as an indicator of the economic well-being of households, reflecting their ability to consume goods and services and maintain living standards
Net assets per head	Financial Statements	£	Net assets per head is a financial metric that represents the average value of an entity's net assets allocated to each individual within a population. It is calculated by dividing the total net assets (assets minus liabilities) by the number of people, providing insight into the wealth or economic resources available on a per-person basis.
Digital connectivity (Low)	OFCOM, 2024/2025	%	Low digital connectivity indicates inadequacies in access to or quality of digital networks and technologies, such as limited internet availability, slow connection speeds, or poor mobile network coverage. This can hinder effective communication, access to information, and participation in digital services, impacting both economic opportunities and social engagement.
Digital connectivity (High)	OFCOM, 2024/2025	%	High digital connectivity signifies robust access to digital networks and technologies, characterized by widespread internet availability, fast connection speeds, and reliable mobile network coverage. This facilitates efficient communication, seamless access to information and digital services, and enhanced opportunities for economic and social engagement.of area with 5G coverage from at least one mobile network provider.

Comparative Demographic, Economic, Social and Environmental Analysis | Data Source Key

Heading	Source, Period	Unit	Description
Digital propensity	ONS, 2021/2022	%	Digital propensity refers to the likelihood or tendency of individuals or groups to use and adopt digital technologies and services in their daily lives. It encompasses behaviors and preferences related to online activities, such as internet usage, digital communication, e-commerce, and engagement with digital platforms, reflecting readiness and inclination towards incorporating digital solutions into various aspects of life.
Travel to Work	Census, 2021/2022	Km per person	This measures the average kilometres residents travel from home to their workplace. It reflects accessibility of employment, reliance on transport infrastructure, and spatial distribution of jobs, helping identify areas with potential transport or service accessibility challenges
Housing Land Supply	Council Data, 2023/2024	Years of supply	Availability of land that is designated and approved for residential development, ensuring sufficient capacity to meet current and future housing needs within a specific area. It is a critical component of urban and regional planning, influencing housing affordability, growth strategies, and the availability of new housing units to accommodate population growth and reduce housing shortages
ASC Need (18-64)	District Councils / NHS, 2022/2023	No. of adults	ASC need for 18-64 year olds typically refers to the requirement for Adult Social Care services among individuals within this age group. This encompasses support and care needed due to physical disabilities, mental health issues, learning disabilities, or other health conditions that impact daily living and independence, thereby necessitating intervention or assistance from social care services.
ASC Need (65+)	District Councils / NHS, 2022/2023	No. of adults	ASC need for 65+ year olds refers to the demand for Adult Social Care services among older adults who may require support due to age-related challenges. This includes assistance with activities of daily living, managing health conditions, providing mobility support, and ensuring safety and well-being, often necessitated by physical frailty, cognitive decline, or chronic health issues associated with aging.
Household Benefit Claim Rate	GOV.UK, 2023/2024	%	This reflects the percentage of households claiming one or more income-related benefits. It serves as a proxy for financial vulnerability and demand for welfare and support services across different areas

Comparative Demographic, Economic, Social and Environmental Analysis | Data Source Key

Heading	Source, Period	Unit	Description
Disability Allowance Claim Rate	GOV.UK, 2023/2024	%	This measures the proportion of the population receiving disability-related benefits, indicating the prevalence of disability and associated care needs that local authorities must plan for in service delivery and social care support.
Homelessness	ONS, 2024	%	This reflects the percentage of individuals or households without stable housing, including those in temporary accommodation or rough sleeping, and highlights pressure on local authority housing, social services, and public health support systems.
Children in Care	District Councils / GOV.UK, 2023/2024	No. of children	CSC need refers to the demand for Child Social Care services, which are designed to support and protect children and young people who may be at risk or in need due to various factors such as abuse, neglect, disability, or family difficulties. These services aim to ensure the safety, well-being, and development of children, often involving interventions like foster care, family support, and safeguarding measures.
Pupils Receiving SEN Support	House of Commons Library, 2023/2024	% of pupils	Pupils receiving Special Educational Needs support are students identified as requiring additional assistance in school due to learning difficulties that affect their ability to learn compared to their peers. It involves tailored interventions and resources designed to meet these students' individual needs, helping them achieve their full potential in an educational setting.
Pupils with an EHCP	House of Commons Library, 2023/2024	% of pupils	Pupils with an Education, Health, and Care Plan, are students who have been assessed as needing comprehensive support due to significant special educational needs. An EHCP provides a detailed outline of the support required across education, health, and social services, ensuring a coordinated approach to meeting the child's specific needs and facilitating their development.
GCSE Attainment vs National	GOV.UK, 2023/2024	% Point Difference	The percentage point difference between the local area's GCSE performance and the national average. It shows how far ahead or behind pupils in the area are compared to national attainment levels, typically based on key measures like achieving Grade 5 or above in English and Maths.

Comparative Demographic, Economic, Social and Environmental Analysis | Data Source Key

Heading	Source, Period	Unit	Description
Pupils Receiving grade 4+ EBacc	GOV.UK, 2023/2024	%	Refers to the proportion of students who achieve at least a grade 4 (equivalent to a C in the old grading system) in all the subjects required for the English Baccalaureate (EBacc). The EBacc is a set of subjects at GCSE level, including English, mathematics, science, a language, and either history or geography, and indicates the student's proficiency in these core academic areas. This metric helps in assessing the school's effectiveness in guiding students toward achieving foundational educational standards across a broad range of disciplines.
Pupils Receiving Grade 4+ in English/Maths	GOV.UK, 2023/2024	%	Proportion of students who achieve at least a grade 4 in both English and Mathematics GCSE exams. A grade 4 is considered a standard pass in the UK educational system, and this metric is often used to gauge the school's effectiveness in ensuring students meet basic proficiency levels in these critical subjects, which are essential for further education and employment opportunities.
High Anxiety	NHS, 2022/2023	%	Individuals within a specific population who have assessed themselves as experiencing high levels of anxiety. This measure is typically derived from surveys or assessments where participants are asked to evaluate their anxiety levels using a standardised scale or questionnaire.
Low Happiness	NHS, 2022/2023	%	Refers to the percentage of individuals in a given population who have evaluated themselves as having low levels of happiness or life satisfaction. This information is typically gathered through surveys using standardised assessment tools, where participants rate their happiness on a scale.
Common Mental Disorders 16+	NHS, 2017	% of 16+	Percentage or rate of individuals aged 16 and older in a population who are experiencing one or more common mental disorders at a given time. Common mental disorders include conditions such as depression, anxiety disorders, and bipolar disorder. This metric is used to understand how widespread these disorders are within the adult population, highlighting the need for mental health services and informing public health strategies. It can guide resource allocation, policy development, and efforts to improve mental health care and support for those affected.
Common Mental Disorders 65+	NHS, 2017	% of 65+	Experiencing one or more common mental disorders at a specific time. Common mental disorders include conditions such as depression, anxiety disorders, and cognitive disorders like dementia. This age-specific prevalence measure is important for understanding the mental health needs of older adults, who may face unique challenges related to aging, such as isolation, physical health issues, or bereavement. By analysing this data, healthcare providers and policymakers can better tailor services, interventions, and support systems to address the mental health requirements of the elderly population, ensuring that adequate resources are allocated to improve their quality of life.
Overall Health Index	ONS, 2021	Health Index	This composite measure from the ONS captures health outcomes, health-related behaviours, and wider determinants of health (like employment and environment), providing a single score to assess the general health and wellbeing of an area's population.

Comparative Demographic, Economic, Social and Environmental Analysis | Data Source Key

Heading	Source, Period	Unit	Description
Children in Low Income Families	DWP 2024	%	Absolute low income is defined as a family in low income Before Housing Costs (BHC) in the reference year in comparison with incomes in financial year ending 2011. A family must have claimed Child Benefit and at least one other household benefit (Universal Credit, tax credits, or Housing Benefit) at any point in the year to be classed as low income in these statistics.
Developed Land Use	GOV.UK , 2022	%	The percentage of total land area that is classified as developed, including residential, commercial, industrial, infrastructure, and other built environments. It reflects the extent of urbanisation and land that is no longer natural or agricultural, indicating the intensity of physical development across an area
Life Satisfaction Mean Score	ONS , 2022/2023	Mean %	The average response to the question: "Overall, how satisfied are you with your life nowadays?" asked on a scale from 0 (notat all) to 10 (completely). This score reflects overall personal wellbeing and is used as a subjective measure of quality of life across the population. Higher scores indicate greater life satisfaction
Adults with No Qualifications	CENSUS / ONS , 2023	Per 100k	The percentage of working age adults (aged 16–64) who have not achieved any formal educational qualifications, such as GCSEs, A-levels, vocational awards, or higher education. This indicator reflects the skills base of the working-age population and is linked to employability, income potential, and reliance on public services
Obesity Prevalence in Adults	NHS , 2023/2024	%	The percentage of adults (aged 18 and over) classified as obese, typically defined as having a Body Mass Index (BMI) of 30 or above. This indicator reflects population-level health risks and is associated with increased likelihood of chronic conditions such as diabetes, heart disease, and certain cancers

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Oxford and Shires | Ridgeway

Financial Options Appraisal

October 2025

Contents

Context: In response to the publishing of the White Paper, and the subsequent letter from the Minister of State inviting Leaders within remaining two tier areas to work with other Council Leaders in their areas to develop a proposal for local government reorganisation, an appraisal of potential local government reorganisation options available within Oxfordshire & West Berkshire has taken place.

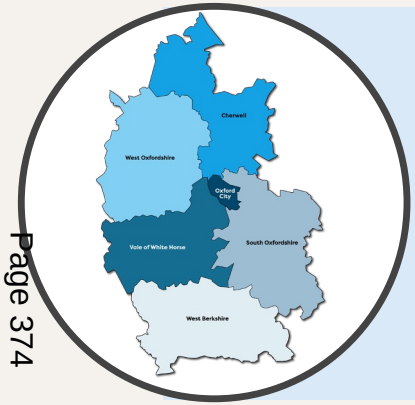
Purpose: This document provides a financial appraisal of the three options for local government reorganisation in the geographic area of Oxfordshire & West Berkshire. Using a consistent methodology, it sets out the assumed benefits of reorganisation and transformation to be achieved from staffing, third party spend, members and elections costs, and assets. It also details anticipated disaggregation costs and one-off transition costs to implement the new structural arrangements.

This Options Appraisal therefore offers a high-level view of the LGR aggregation and subsequent transformation benefits as a starting point for the three options for local government reorganisation, using consistent assumptions and publicly available data. The detailed financial cases for each option will build in more localised insight and factors to inform the costs and benefits of the relevant proposal.

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Context including reorganisation options	8 - 14
Financial Options Appraisal	15 - 25
Appendices	26 - 44

Executive Summary

Context | About the Locality



Oxfordshire is a nationally significant region, known for its world-class research institutions, vibrant communities, and high-value economy. Together, Oxfordshire and West Berkshire are home to over 900,000 residents across a mix of urban, rural and market town communities. Oxfordshire currently operates under a two-tier system, with Oxfordshire County Council delivering county-wide services and five district councils. West Berkshire is a unitary authority, providing all services to around 163,000 residents.

The region is a vital contributor to the South East's economy, with strong transport links including the M4 and A34 corridors, proximity to London and Heathrow, and access to key rail routes. Oxfordshire is internationally recognised for its academic excellence, innovation clusters, and science parks, while West Berkshire hosts significant logistics and defence operations.

Despite its strengths, the area faces challenges such as housing affordability, transport connectivity, and disparities in access to services. Local government reorganisation presents a chance to address these issues more holistically, equitably and collectively.

This reorganisation aims to reduce duplication, improve financial resilience and ensure decisions remain close to the communities they affect. It offers an opportunity to align services more effectively, enhance local accountability, and create a more sustainable governance model.

The area at a glance...

Area	GVA	Business Growth	Employment	Digital Propensity Index	Children in Low-Income Families	Deprivation	Overall Health Index	Household Benefit Claim Rate
Oxfordshire	**£41.30**	**0.14%**	61.27%	94.98%	9,643	**11.58**	112.8	11.75%
West Berkshire	**£54.10**	**-0.80%**	63.0%	95.00%	9,257	**9.89**	114.20	13.87%

Options for reorganisation

Three options for Local Government Reorganisation have been proposed for the Oxfordshire region which involve the creation of either 1, 2 or 3 new Unitary Authorities. The three selected options, in the table, show the geographical split of each option and estimated population spread.

Option	Components (City / district / borough level)	Population	Guidance
A 1 Unitary Authority	**Unitary Authority:** Covering Oxfordshire County Council and 5 districts; Oxford City, West Oxfordshire, Vale of White Horse, South Oxfordshire and Cherwell **West Berkshire Council** as a separate and unchanged unitary.	**Oxfordshire Unitary Authority:** 790,608 **West Berkshire Council:** 163,811	The size of the 1UA is greater than the MHCLG guidance figure of 500k.
B 2 Unitary Authorities	**Oxford & Shires:** Oxford City, West Oxfordshire and Cherwell **Ridgeway:** South Oxfordshire, Vale of White Horse and West Berkshire.	**Oxford & Shires:** 471,716 **Ridgeway:** 482,703	The size of the proposed Unitary Authorities are broadly in line with the general steer from MHCLG, noting that the 2UAs would cover a population of approximately 500k.
C 3 Unitary Authorities	**Greater Oxford:** Covers the City of Oxford and parts of Cherwell **Ridgeway Council: Parts of** South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse, as well as West Berkshire **Northern Unitary:** Parts of West Oxfordshire and Cherwell.	**Greater Oxford:** c272,000 **Northern Oxfordshire:** c.246,000 **Southern Oxfordshire:** c436,000	Due to the anticipated boundary shifts, this option has not determined the exact size and population of the proposed unitary authorities. To note, initial figures suggest that two out of the three proposed UAs would be notably smaller than the steer set out by MHCLG, indicating a lesser opportunity to realise financial benefit.

Source: *Based on 2028 ONS projections*

Options Appraisal - Reorganisation Summary view (1 of 2)

The table below shows, for ease of reference, the gross annual benefit that the financial options appraisal estimates could be achieved in each of the LGR options for Oxfordshire and West Berkshire. It also shows the estimated annual costs of disaggregation, the net annual benefit and the one-off transitions costs that it is estimated would be incurred in order to implement each option, plus subsequent transformation benefits and costs (with base and stretch scenarios). Finally it shows the cumulative net benefit after one year and after five years.

Category		Gross annual benefit	Additional annual costs	Recurring net annual benefit	One-off transition costs	Payback period	Net benefit after 1 year	Net benefit after 5 years	Comments
Single UA for all of Oxfordshire (Excluding West Berkshire)	Reorganisation	£27.3m	£0	£27.3m	£23.8m	3.1 years	-£16.3m	£44.3m	This option achieves greater financial benefits from LGR due to consolidation, economies of scale and addressing duplication. As County services are not disaggregated, there are no additional annual costs. Transition costs are lower to reflect the lower complexity involved in not disaggregating County services when setting up the new Unitary Authority arrangement.
	Transformation (base)	£20.9m	N/A	£20.9m	£14.6m	1.7 years	-£1.5m	£37.7m	
	Transformation (stretch)	£31.1m	N/A	£31.1m	£21.7m	1.7 years	-£2.2m	£55.9m	
2 UAs - Oxford & Shires and Ridgeway	Reorganisation	£24.9m	£3.0m	£21.9m	£30.4m	4.2 years	-£24.9m	£16.6m	The inclusion of West Berkshire means that while % savings from LGR are lower, the proportion is applied against a larger baseline. While existing West Berkshire infrastructure will be used (eg senior leadership, statutory posts are already in place), this option incurs additional annual costs for running disaggregated County services that do not currently exist at the same level in West Berkshire.
	Transformation (base)	£25.6m	N/A	£25.6m	£17.9m	1.7 years	-£1.8m	£46.1m	
	Transformation (stretch)	£37.9m	N/A	£37.9m	£26.5m	1.7 years	-£2.7m	£68.2m	
3UAs - Greater Oxford, North Oxfordshire and Ridgeway	Reorganisation	£20.2m	£10.7m	£9.5m	£32.5m	8.7 years	-£34.7m	-£35.5m	There are lower financial benefits due to the reduced opportunities for consolidation. While existing West Berkshire infrastructure has been taken into consideration, additional annual costs are incurred due to additional senior leadership, management for disaggregated servicers, and democratic costs. Additional transition costs are incurred due to new council infrastructure and redrawing boundaries.
	Transformation (base)	£25.8m	N/A	£25.8m	£18.1m	1.7 years	-£1.8m	£46.5m	
	Transformation (stretch)	£38.2m	N/A	£38.2m	£26.7m	1.7 years	-£2.7m	£68.7m	

Options Appraisal - Reorganisation Summary view (2 of 2)

The table below shows the combined reorganisation and transformation costs and benefits position for all three LGR options based on the high-level analysis within this Options Appraisal.

Category		Gross annual benefit	Additional annual costs	Recurring net annual benefit	One-off transition costs	Payback period	Net benefit after 1 year	Net benefit after 5 years
Single UA for all of Oxfordshire (Excluding West Berkshire)	Combined reorganisation and transformation (base)	£48.2m	£0	£48.2m	£38.4m	2.8 years	-£17.8m	£81.9m
	Combined reorganisation and transformation (stretch)	£58.4m	£0	£58.4m	£45.5m	2.7 years	-£18.5m	£100.2m
2 UAs - Oxford & Shires and Ridgeway	Combined reorganisation and transformation (base)	£50.5m	£3m	£47.5m	£48.3m	3.4 years	-£26.7m	£62.7m
	Combined reorganisation and transformation (stretch)	£62.8m	£3m	£59.8m	£56.9m	3.2 years	-£27.6m	£84.8m
3UAs - Greater Oxford, North Oxfordshire and Ridgeway	Combined reorganisation and transformation (base)	£46.0m	£10.7m	£35.3m	£50.6m	4.7 years	-£36.5m	£11m
	Combined reorganisation and transformation (stretch)	£58.4m	£10.7m	£47.7m	£59.2m	4.2 years	-£37.4m	£33.2m

The analysis for this Options Appraisal uses publicly available data and consistent assumptions applied in the same way across all three proposals for local government reorganisation. More detailed analysis is undertaken for the Financial Case of the Oxford & Shires and Ridgeway proposal to further develop anticipated benefits and costs, using local insights and tailored assumptions. This results in more refined and prudent totals in the Financial Case. It is anticipated that the councils preparing proposals for other options will have refined their more detailed cases in a similar way.

Context

Context | Local Government Challenges

The national relationship with local government is evolving, with councils being encouraged to align to a single tier of governance and increased regional collaboration. Government is pursuing local government reorganisation (LGR) to create simpler, more efficient local structures, which pave the way for greater devolution. While local authorities have adapted to local challenges to date, the pace of change requires reform.

1 FINANCIAL PRESSURE

Local government in the UK is facing significant financial challenge. The LGA estimates a £4 billion funding gap over the next two years.[1]

Despite additional funding, many councils must make substantial cost savings after a prolonged period of austerity, and increases in council tax to balance budgets are inevitable.

This financial strain impacts delivery of local services and living standards for residents.

2 DEMAND FOR SERVICES

Population growth, ageing demographics, and increasingly complex community needs are driving increased demand for higher-cost services.

This is particularly the case for special educational needs and disabilities, where deficits in the Dedicated Schools Grant are affecting general funding and and increasing financial pressures for local areas.

3 SOCIAL CARE COSTS

The costs of commissioning and delivering social care for adults and children are a rising significant financial pressure.

Over the past five years, adult social care costs have increased by 9% in real terms, while children's social care costs have risen by 18%.[2]

These services are heavily regulated, leaving local authorities with limited options to reduce costs and demands whilst still meeting the expected standards.

Sources: (1) LGA - Local Government Finances, (2) CCN - The Forgotten Story of Social Care

Context | Devolution and Reorganisation

Local Government Reorganisation (LGR) refers to the national ambition to simplify and strengthen local governance by moving from a two-tier system (county and district councils) to more streamlined and strategic unitary authorities. This is part of a wider shift in public service delivery aimed at improving outcomes, efficiency, and accountability.

The Devolution White Paper signals a major change in how local government is structured and funded, promoting **country-wide reform** to address financial sustainability, improve service delivery, and empower local areas. The White Paper supports both **Reorganisation** (creation of new or consolidated unitary authorities) and **Devolution** (the transfer of powers and responsibilities to strategic local bodies, with or without elected mayors).

The Devolution White Paper is driven by three primary objectives:

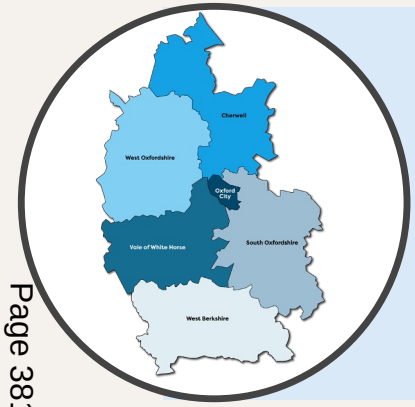
- Enhancing the powers vested in local and regional governments
- New entities that cover larger geographic areas whilst respecting local identifies
- Implementing changes at pace, in order to support swift benefit realisation

*To realise these, the **White Paper** provides **two routes to the consolidation of governance**...*

Reorganisation
This approach involves creation of new unitary authorities to replace the existing 'two tier' delivery model. This may involve the creation of a new unitary council which amalgamates or merges a current county council and districts into a single 'county unitary' council, or creation of new unitary authorities to replace counties, which brings together groups of districts with disaggregated county services.

Devolution
This focuses on establishing Strategic Authorities with or without a Mayor, which coordinate and commission services at a regional level. This could include collaboration of multiple unitary authorities to provide a strategic regional authority. The white paper includes specific ambitions and incentives for these authorities to drive economic growth and lead regional transport initiatives.

Context | About the Locality



Oxfordshire is a nationally significant region, known for its world-class research institutions, vibrant communities, and high-value economy. Together, Oxfordshire and West Berkshire are home to over 900,000 residents across a mix of urban, rural and market town communities. Oxfordshire currently operates under a two-tier system, with Oxfordshire County Council delivering county-wide services and five district councils. West Berkshire is a unitary authority, providing all services to around 163,000 residents.

The region is a vital contributor to the South East's economy, with strong transport links including the M4 and A34 corridors, proximity to London and Heathrow, and access to key rail routes. Oxfordshire is internationally recognised for its academic excellence, innovation clusters, and science parks, while West Berkshire hosts significant logistics and defence operations.

Despite its strengths, the area faces challenges such as housing affordability, transport connectivity, and disparities in access to services. Local government reorganisation presents a chance to address these issues more holistically, equitably and collectively.

This reorganisation aims to reduce duplication, improve financial resilience and ensure decisions remain close to the communities they affect. It offers an opportunity to align services more effectively, enhance local accountability, and create a more sustainable governance model.

The area at a glance...

Area	GVA	Business Growth	Employment	Digital Propensity Index	Children in Low-Income Families	Deprivation	Overall Health Index	Household Benefit Claim Rate
Oxfordshire	**£41.30**	**0.14%**	61.27%	94.98%	9,643	**11.58**	112.8	11.75%
West Berkshire	**£54.10**	**-0.80%**	63.0%	95.00%	9,257	**9.89**	114.20	13.87%

Context | Current State Overview

Oxfordshire and West Berkshire is home to over 900,000 people across its seven councils. These are comprised of one unitary authority, West Berkshire Council, and Oxfordshire County Council and its 5 districts; Cherwell, West Oxfordshire, South Oxfordshire, Oxford City and Vale of White Horse - operating in a two tier system.

West Oxfordshire District Council
Population: 120,905
Net Current Expenditure: £18.23m

Vale of White Horse District Council
Population: 150,552
Net Current Expenditure: £19.75m

Oxfordshire County Council
Population: 773,130
Net Current Expenditure: £709.3m

West Berkshire Unitary Authority
Population: 163,712
Net Current Expenditure: £192.3m



Cherwell District Council
Population: 172,283
Net Current Expenditure: £26.19m

Oxford City District Council
Population: 171,498
Net Current Expenditure: £27.26m

South Oxfordshire District Council
Population: 157,893
Net Current Expenditure: £17.87m

Sources:
Population estimates are ONS population projections for 2025
Net Operating Expenditure is for 2025/26 from each council's MTFS/MTFP

Context | Current State Overview

The population of Oxfordshire is set to increase, leading to different demographics and challenges faced in each of the areas as well as different quantities of benefits delivered by LGR, with vesting day set for 2028/29. The estimated figures up to that point and for the first 5 years after have been used in calculations.

Organisation	2024	2025	2026	2027	2028	2029	2030	2031	2032
Cherwell	170,119	172,283	174,214	176,065	177,917	179,804	181,661	183,507	185,337
Vale of White Horse	148,246	150,552	152,620	154,532	156,414	158,299	160,110	161,864	163,566
Oxford City	171,899	171,498	170,562	169,946	169,797	170,096	170,562	171,052	171,425
South Oxfordshire	156,126	157,893	159,508	160,995	162,478	163,954	165,404	166,825	168,232
West Oxfordshire	119,739	120,905	121,965	122,987	124,002	125,056	126,101	127,115	128,137
West Berkshire	163,540	163,712	163,754	163,725	163,811	163,953	164,123	164,303	164,507

*Note: The population estimates are ONS 2022-based datasets are the latest projection

Options for reorganisation

Three options for Local Government Reorganisation have been proposed for the Oxfordshire region which involve the creation of either 1, 2 or 3 new Unitary Authorities. The three selected options, in the table, show the geographical split of each option and estimated population spread.

Option	Components (City / district / borough level)	Population	Guidance
A 1 Unitary Authority	**Unitary Authority:** Covering Oxfordshire County Council and 5 districts; Oxford City, West Oxfordshire, Vale of White Horse, South Oxfordshire and Cherwell **West Berkshire Council** as a separate and unchanged unitary.	**Oxfordshire Unitary Authority:** 790,608 **West Berkshire Council:** 163,811	The size of the 1UA is greater than the MHCLG guidance figure of 500k.
B 2 Unitary Authorities	**Oxford & Shires:** Oxford City, West Oxfordshire and Cherwell **Ridgeway:** South Oxfordshire, Vale of White Horse and West Berkshire.	**Oxford & Shires:** 471,716 **Ridgeway:** 482,703	The size of the proposed Unitary Authorities are broadly in line with the general steer from MHCLG, noting that the 2UAs would cover a population of approximately 500k.
C 3 Unitary Authorities	**Greater Oxford:** Covers the City of Oxford and parts of Cherwell **Ridgeway Council: Parts of** South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse, as well as West Berkshire **Northern Unitary:** Parts of West Oxfordshire and Cherwell.	**Greater Oxford:** c272,000 **Northern Oxfordshire:** c.246,000 **Southern Oxfordshire:** c436,000	Due to the anticipated boundary shifts, this option has not determined the exact size and population of the proposed unitary authorities. To note, initial figures suggest that two out of the three proposed UAs would be notably smaller than the steer set out by MHCLG, indicating a lesser opportunity to realise financial benefit.

Source: *Based on 2028 ONS projections*

Financial Options Appraisal

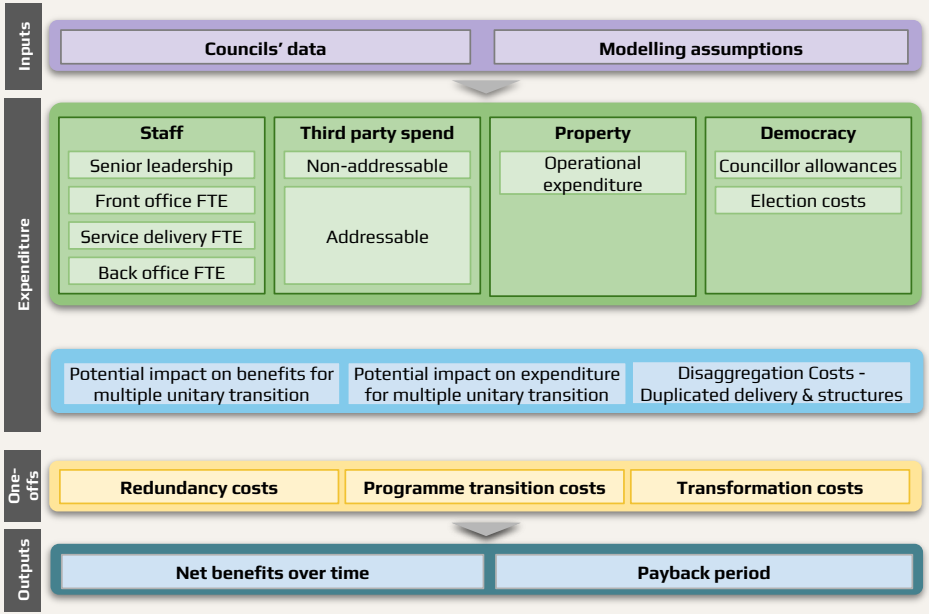
Options Appraisal vs detailed Financial Case

The financial analysis was undertaken across two phases. The initial phase focussed on a financial options analysis for all the LGR options at a high level for comparative purposes.The second phase undertook a detailed financial model for the Oxfordshire Districts and West Berkshire's preferred option of 2 unitary authorities,refining assumptions and bringing deeper insights.

	Options Appraisal (this document)	**Financial Case**
Description	The outputs are an objective appraisal of the costs and benefits of different reorganisation options. It looks to illustrate **the high-level financial implications of implementing and operating** a single unitary authority, two unitary authorities or three unitary authorities.	The financial case sets out the detailed implications of the preferred option. It helps to model **what the future budgets will look like**, provides a more detailed view on the **starting financial position**, and **draws out the financial implications of local government reorganisation and wider transformation benefits**.
Includes	• Aggregation and disaggregation of net revenue expenditure in simple terms, grouped primarily by FTE Spend, Third Party Spend, Property and Democracy expenditure. • One-off costs related to the transition to the new authority (ie. redundancy). • A phased view of net benefits in relation to the costs of LGR and any recurring service costs.	• Refined view of the benefits of aggregation and/or disaggregation, through a detailed look at Assets, Third Party Spend, Income, Borrowing and Debt, Policy and Transformation, Member Numbers, Demand Increases, MTFS and Staffing Pay. • A range of outcomes depending on the direction organisations choose to put ahead, including a upper and lower boundary financial forecast for specific components (ie. cost of members).
This does NOT...	It **does not** provide any commentary around service quality, democratic representation or any other factors that may factor into the wider strategic case.	The outputs present a detailed view of the Year 1 financial budgets and position of the reorganised entities. While a detailed model, it remains an estimation. It does not forecast the exact annual income (ie. figure for Tax Receipts) or outgoing expenditure, as those are reliant on policy decisions.

Financial Options Appraisal: Methodology

The illustration below sets out the key components of the modelling undertaken for the purposes of this financial options appraisal. The detailed financial case then builds in more detail and refines assumptions to build deeper understanding of costs and benefits.



Inputs
Include data supplied by County and District councils, public data and assumptions based on prior LGR activity. This relates to General Fund only and excludes HRA.

Benefits of Reorganisation
Weightings applied to three types of spend, with proportionate percentage reductions applied. Democracy benefits are based on the number of councils involved in the analysis, and the cost per vote cast in most recent elections.

Benefits of Transformation
Increased leverage of the above benefits available through transformation.

Disbenefits / Disaggregation Costs
In many LGR scenarios resulting in multiple unitaries, there are typically additional disbenefits and assumed costs of disaggregating county-level services, including children's services and adult social care. However, this options appraisal reflects the existing infrastructure available in West Berkshire for the 2UA and 3UA scenarios and addresses these costs accordingly.

Costs of Transition
One-off costs and proportional redundancy costs incurred to transition / implement the new UAs.

Outputs
Projected net benefits from different re-organisation scenarios.

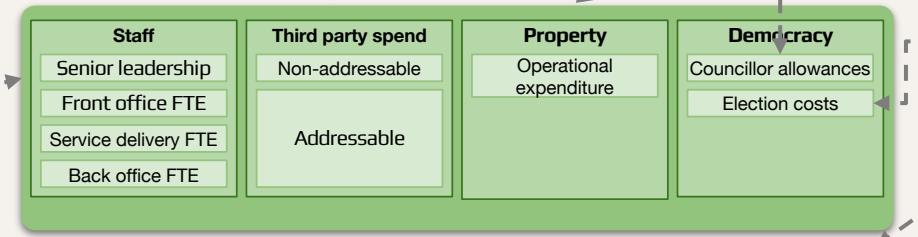
Financial Options Appraisal: Methodology

Third party spend relates to all payments for goods and services, and excludes grants, taxation and other charges. The **addressable element** is a percentage based on the elements which can be influenced by procurement or commissioning.

Property expenditure relates to the cost of maintaining and operating the premises from which council services are delivered. It does not include housing stock or capital expenditure or investment in property for other purpose.

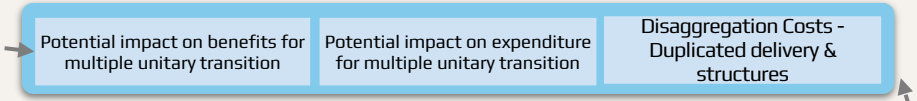
Member allowances are based on rates of Basic and Special Responsibility payments published in transparency reporting. These costs are used to determine the likely cost of one or more new democratic structures in new authorities

FTE is calculated as a proportion of spend as supplied in public spending data. **Net revenue expenditure** is used to avoid double-counting any income or grant transfers. **Senior leadership** salaries are calculated across the top three organisational tiers as per transparency reporting.



Election costs use a total of votes cast in a previous election cycle across district and county elections, and a cost-per-vote of £5.

Impact of multiple unitaries amended for the 2UA and 3UA scenarios due to existing West Berkshire unitary infrastructure negating or significantly dampening disbenefits or disaggregation costs.



Benefits are profiled to be fully effective in Year 5, to account for the need to complete staff changes and undertake contract renegotiations. The final model includes scenarios for stretch transformation which **increase the expected benefits through use of technology and service redesign.**

Costs such as creation of new councils, marketing, ICT and consultation are increased proportionately where more than one new council is to be formed. Similarly, fixed **benefits of transition** are shared across all new bodies. **Redundancy costs do not include actuarial strain** as this is highly individualised



Transition costs include anticipated redundancies due to duplicated leadership structures, and elements of one-off spending relating to creating, marketing and programme managing transition to a new council.

Disaggregation Costs are incurred where an option involves dividing a county level authority into two or more unitaries, and represents the ongoing cost of duplicating management and operations of statutory services, including social care. **An element of disaggregated costs therefore recur each year in options with more than one unitary authority. However these are dampened for the 2UA and 3UA scenarios due to existing West Berkshire infrastructure.**

Options Appraisal - Reorganisation Summary view

The table below shows, for ease of reference, the gross annual benefit that the financial options appraisal estimates could be achieved in each of the LGR options for Oxfordshire and West Berkshire. It also shows the estimated annual costs of disaggregation, the net annual benefit and the one-off transitions costs that it is estimated would be incurred in order to implement each option, plus subsequent transformation benefits and costs (with base and stretch scenarios). Finally it shows the cumulative net benefit after one year and after five years.

Category		Gross annual benefit	Additional annual costs	Recurring net annual benefit	One-off transition costs	Payback period	Net benefit after 1 year	Net benefit after 5 years	Comments
Single UA for all of Oxfordshire (Excluding West Berkshire)	Reorganisation	£27.3m	£0	£27.3m	£23.8m	3.1 years	-£16.3m	£44.3m	This option achieves greater financial benefits from LGR due to consolidation, economies of scale and addressing duplication. As County services are not disaggregated, there are no additional annual costs. Transition costs are lower to reflect the lower complexity involved in not disaggregating County services when setting up the new Unitary Authority arrangement.
	Transformation (base)	£20.9m	N/A	£20.9m	£14.6m	1.7 years	-£1.5m	£37.7m	
	Transformation (stretch)	£31.1m	N/A	£31.1m	£21.7m	1.7 years	-£2.2m	£55.9m	
2 UAs - Oxford & Shires and Ridgeway	Reorganisation	£24.9m	£3.0m	£21.9m	£30.4m	4.2 years	-£24.9m	£16.6m	The inclusion of West Berkshire means that while % savings from LGR are lower, the proportion is applied against a larger baseline. While existing West Berkshire infrastructure will be used (eg senior leadership, statutory posts are already in place), this option incurs additional annual costs for running disaggregated County services that do not currently exist at the same level in West Berkshire.
	Transformation (base)	£25.6m	N/A	£25.6m	£17.9m	1.7 years	-£1.8m	£46.1m	
	Transformation (stretch)	£37.9m	N/A	£37.9m	£26.5m	1.7 years	-£2.7m	£68.2m	
3UAs - Greater Oxford, North Oxfordshire and Ridgeway	Reorganisation	£20.2m	£10.7m	£9.5m	£32.5m	8.7 years	-£34.7m	-£35.5m	There are lower financial benefits due to the reduced opportunities for consolidation. While existing West Berkshire infrastructure has been taken into consideration, additional annual costs are incurred due to additional senior leadership, management for disaggregated servicers, and democratic costs. Additional transition costs are incurred due to new council infrastructure and redrawing boundaries.
	Transformation (base)	£25.8m	N/A	£25.8m	£18.1m	1.7 years	-£1.8m	£46.5m	
	Transformation (stretch)	£38.2m	N/A	£38.2m	£26.7m	1.7 years	-£2.7m	£68.7m	

Options Appraisal - 1 UA

Set out below is the view to total benefits and costs of the reorganisation. For the 1UA assumption, it is assumed that there are no recurring disaggregation costs as there are no duplicated senior leadership, service delivery and democratic costs as it maintains the same number of Upper Tier Level Authorities (UTLAs) in the area.

BENEFITS OF AGGREGATION

Category	Staffing Front Office	Staffing Service Delivery	Staffing Back Office	Staffing Management	Third Party Spend	Property	Democracy	Total aggregation benefits (annual)
Saving (£)	5,147,894	3,703,624	3,088,736	7,508,699	3,136,811	2,201,271	2,463,724	**27,250,759**

TRANSITION COSTS

Category	Programme transition costs	Redundancy costs	Total transition costs (one-off)
Cost (£)	17,990,364	5,834,686	**23,825,050**

DISAGGREGATION COSTS

Category	Additional senior leadership costs	Additional service delivery costs	Additional democratic costs	Total disaggregation costs (annual)
Cost (£)	0	0	0	**0**

NET BENEFITS

Total net benefit after one year	Total net benefit after five years	Payback period
-16,334,964	44,301,847	3.1 years

Options Appraisal - 2 UA

Set out below is the view to total benefits and costs of the reorganisation. For the 2UA assumption, disaggregation costs have been dampened to reflect the net neutral change in the number of Upper Tier Level Authorities (UTLAs) post reorganisation, from 2UAs to 2UAs with the inclusion of West Berkshire unitary authority.

BENEFITS OF AGGREGATION

Category	Staffing Front Office	Staffing Service Delivery	Staffing Back Office	Staffing Management	Third Party Spend	Property	Democracy	Total aggregation benefits (annual)
Saving (£)	4,993,230	1,924,474	2,808,692	7,508,699	3,028,930	2,214,130	2,463,724	**24,941,879**

TRANSITION COSTS

Category	Programme transition costs	Redundancy costs	Total transition costs (one-off)
Cost (£)	25,297,020	5,135,299	**30,432,319**

DISAGGREGATION COSTS

Category	Additional senior leadership costs	Additional service delivery costs	Additional democratic costs	Total disaggregation costs (annual)
Cost (£)	0	3,058,000	0	**3,058,000**

NET BENEFITS

Total net benefit after one year	Total net benefit after five years	Payback period
-24,909,667	16,632,379	4.2 years

Options Appraisal - 3 UA

Set out below is the view to total benefits and costs of the reorganisation. For the 3UA assumption, disaggregation costs have been dampened to reflect what may be typically expected from a 2UA model neutral change in the number of Upper Tier Level Authorities (UTLAs) post reorganisation, from 2UAs to 3UAs with the inclusion of West Berkshire unitary authority. To note, certain programme transition costs have been further uplifted (eg. creation of a new Council) to recognise the added complexity of redrawing boundaries under the 3UA option.

BENEFITS OF AGGREGATION

Category	Staffing Front Office	Staffing Service Delivery	Staffing Back Office	Staffing Management	Third Party Spend	Property	Democracy	**Total aggregation benefits (annual)**
Saving (£)	3,744,923	1,282,983	1,872,461	7,508,699	1,514,465	1,771,304	2,463,724	**20,158,559**

TRANSITION COSTS

Category	Programme transition costs	Redundancy costs	**Total transition costs (one-off)**
Cost (£)	28,155,420	4,322,720	**32,478,140**

DISAGGREGATION COSTS

Category	Additional senior leadership costs	Additional service delivery costs	Additional democratic costs	**Total disaggregation costs (annual)**
Cost (£)	3,137,107	7,549,159	445,300	**10,686,266**

NET BENEFITS

Total net benefit after one year	Total net benefit after five years	Payback period
-34,652,922	-35,513,074	8.7 years

Options Appraisal - Phasing of reorganisation costs and benefits

Year	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1UA (£'000)											
Cumulative Benefit (£m)	0	2,725	8,175	21,801	40,876	68,127	95,377	122,628	149,879	177,129	204,381
Cumulative Cost	-9,530	-19,060	-23,825	-23,825	-23,825	-23,825	-23,825	-23,825	-23,825	-23,825	-23,825
Total Cumulative Net Benefit	-9,530	-16,335	-15,649	-2,024	17,051	44,302	71,552	98,803	126,054	153,305	180,556
2UA (£'000)											
Cumulative Benefit (£m)	0	2,494	7,483	19,954	37,413	62,355	87,297	112,238	137,180	162,122	187,064
Cumulative Cost	-12,173	-27,404	-36,548	-39,606	-42,664	-45,722	-48,780	-51,838	-54,896	-57,954	-61,012
Total Cumulative Net Benefit	-12,173	-24,910	-29,066	-19,653	-5,252	16,632	38,516	60,400	82,284	104,168	126,052
3UA (£'000)											
Cumulative Benefit	0	2,016	6,048	16,127	30,238	50,396	70,555	90,714	110,872	131,031	151,189
Cumulative Cost	-12,991	-36,669	-53,851	-64,537	-75,223	-85,909	-96,596	-107,28	-117,968	-128,655	-139,341
Total Cumulative Net Benefit	-12,991	-34,653	-47,803	-48,410	-44,985	-35,513	-26,041	-16,568	-7,096	2,376	11,848

Options Appraisal - Phasing of transformation costs and benefits

Year	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1UA (£'000)										
Cumulative Benefit (£m)	0	4,184	14,642	31,376	52,294	73,211	94,129	115,046	135,964	156,882
Cumulative Cost	-1,464	-3,661	-8,053	-12,446	-14,642	-14,642	-14,642	-14,642	-14,642	-14,642
Total Cumulative Net Benefit	-1,464	523	6,589	18,930	37,652	58,569	79,487	100,404	121,322	142,240
2UA (£'000)										
Cumulative Benefit (£m)	0	5,117	17,909	38,376	63,960	89,544	115,128	140,711	166,295	192,123
Cumulative Cost	-1,791	-4,477	-9,850	-15,222	-17,909	-17,909	-17,909	-17,909	-17,909	-17,909
Total Cumulative Net Benefit	-1,791	640	8,059	23,154	46,051	71,635	97,219	122,803	148,386	174,214
3UA (£'000)										
Cumulative Benefit	0	5,166	18,079	38,742	64,569	90,397	116,225	142,052	167,880	193,708
Cumulative Cost	-1,808	-4,520	-9,944	-15,367	-18,079	-18,079	-18,079	-18,079	-18,079	-18,079
Total Cumulative Net Benefit	-1,808	646	8,135	23,375	46,490	72,318	98,146	123,973	149,801	175,629

How do the different options measure against the baseline?

	Annual Net Revenue Expenditure (£m) (Incl. reorganisation benefits only)					
	Year 0	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Year 4	Year 5
0) Option 0 - No Change	885.7	885.7	885.7	885.7	885.7	885.7
A) Option 1 - 1UA	895.1	895.1	887.9	880.2	873.2	866.6
B) Option 2 - 2UA	897.8	900.8	892.3	889.8	876.2	871.3
C) Option 3 - 3UA	898.6	907.3	898.8	886.3	882.2	876.2
	Annual Net Transformation Benefits (Cumulative) (£m)					
0) Option 0 - No Change	0	0	0	0	0	0
A) Option 1 - 1UA	0	-1.5	0.5	6.6	18.9	37.7
B) Option 2 - 2UA	0	-1.8	0.6	8.1	23.2	46.1
C) Option 3 - 3UA	0	-1.8	0.6	8.1	23.4	46.5

**Note that at this stage, projections do not factor in inflation on net revenue expenditure.*

Annual Net Revenue Expenditure

- Projected expenditure **factors in one-off transition costs, disaggregation costs and aggregation benefits.**
- Measured against the baseline, **Option 1(1UA)** would provide the **largest cumulative net saving of £44.3m** across five years, **Option 2 (2UA) would realise £16.6m** and **Option 3 (3UA)** would **incur additional costs of £35.5m**
- In the 1UA scenario, West Berkshire's expenditure has been included in the baseline for comparative purposes but would not benefit from any savings made by reorganisation.
- The **1UA option** is projected to deliver a **combined benefit** of approximately **£82.0m**, the **2UA** is projected to deliver **£62.7m** and the **3UA** is set to deliver **£11.0m** by **2028/29.** This is primarily realised through a **reduction in expenditure**, and some additional input from anticipated income generation under transformation.

Appendix 1 - Assumptions Detailed Breakdown

Financial Analysis: Approach

The approach to the financial case for reorganisation assesses the benefits, costs and payback period for the three options. This enables understanding of the length of time for savings to cover the costs of reorganisation and transformation across the options. Detailed baseline data has been used and wherever an actual figure was available via a local or publicly available source, this has been used in preference to a generalisation. This appendix includes details of the approach and assumptions.

1 **Financial calculations consider costs and benefits of the following scenarios:**

1. Transition from one county and 5 districts to one unitary authority, plus West Berkshire as an existing unchanged unitary authority.
2. Transition from one county, 5 districts and West Berkshire as an existing unitary authority, to a two unitary authority model.
3. Transition from one county, 5 districts and West Berkshire as an existing unitary authority, to a three unitary authority model.

2 **The following costs and benefits are considered:**

1. **Aggregation Benefits:** Weightings applied to three types of spend, with percentage reductions then applied. Democracy benefits uses the number of districts multiplied by an average cost.
2. **Transition Costs:** Fixed cost and proportional redundancy costs incurred (excluding disaggregation). These are one off costs of reorganisation.
3. **Disaggregation Costs:** This is the additional recurring cost of splitting county-wide services into multiple unitaries. This would also include the reduction in benefit from reorganisation to multiple unitaries, as opposed to a single unitary option.

3 **Data sources and assumptions applied**

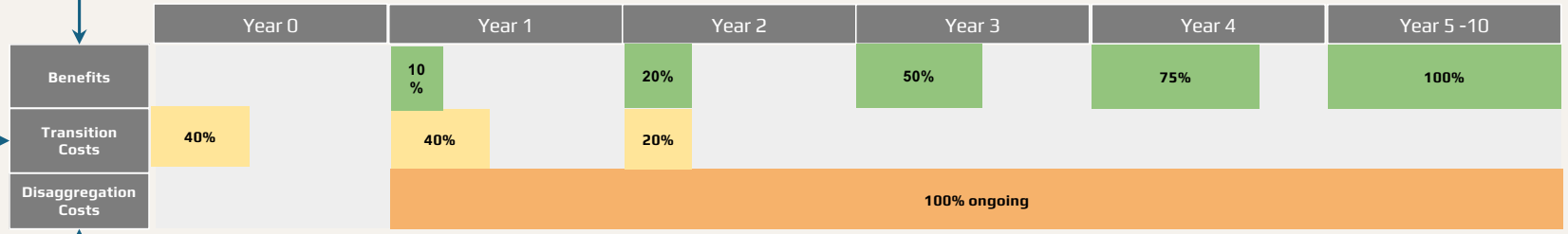
The data sources and assumptions that are applied are a combination of publicly available data; some benchmarking; data from the Oxfordshire Districts, Oxfordshire County Council and West Berkshire; and experience of completing similar work on local government reform business cases in other areas. The assumptions have been refined and validated with representatives from the Oxfordshire Districts, Oxfordshire County Council and West Berkshire.

Cost and Benefits

The following sets out how benefits, transition costs and disaggregation costs have been phased in the model.

Transition costs are expected to land across Year 0, the year before vesting day, and Year 1 and 2. This recognises that much of the preparation to support with reorganisation occurs before Y1.

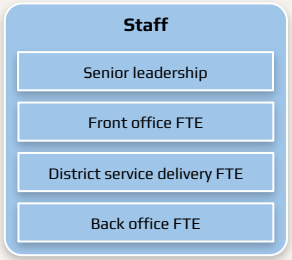
Benefits are phased over five years to indicate the relative timescales over which some aspects of delivery will occur (eg. ongoing programme of cost reductions, next election date, various contract end dates for third party spend)



Disaggregation costs are incurred where county services are split into new councils, and are an ongoing cost of duplicating leadership and operational delivery, but do not include the cost of services delivered.

Reorganisation Benefit | Staff

Financial Analysis Element



Note: where local data has been provided this has been used in the model, rather than the assumption.

Benefit Driver & Methodology

1	Staff expenditure has been estimated and categorised into front office, service delivery, and back office functions, using local authority averages as a baseline, to be refined based on Oxfordshire & West Berkshire-specific knowledge to ensure assumptions reflect local operational structures in the detailed Financial Case.

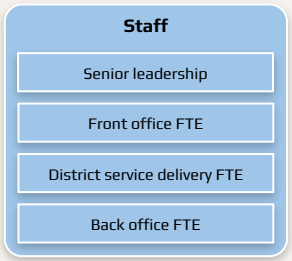
Assumptions applied

Area	Key figures			Rationale
	1UA	2UA	3UA	
Proportion of net revenue expenditure spent on staff	40%			**A localised value was agreed between OCC, District Councils and West Berkshire.** Initial CCN assumption was 34%.
Front Office* FTE	36.0%			Average proportions of effort, previously calculated by PwC through unitary authority activity analysis, this work conducted across 60+ local authorities.
Service Delivery FTE**	37.0%			
Back Office FTE	27.0%			

** **Front office staff** refers to staff who serve as the first point of contact for the public, handling inquiries, processing requests, and managing complaints. Their roles focus on customer service, including application processing, administrative procedures, and general support to ensure smooth communication between the council and residents.*
*** **Service delivery staff** refers to staff who are responsible for maintaining and executing council services such as waste collection, road maintenance, park services, and community safety. While they have limited direct interaction with the public, their work is essential to delivering effective and high-quality local services.*

Reorganisation Benefit | Staff cont.

Financial Analysis Element



Note: where local data has been provided this has been used in the model, rather than the assumption.

Benefit Driver & Methodology

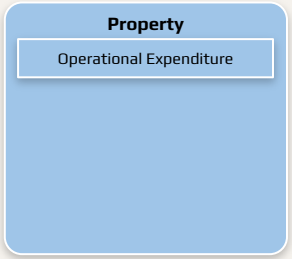
2	Efficiency-driven percentage reductions have been applied to front office, district service delivery, and back office FTE to reflect savings from eliminating duplicate roles and streamlining operations.
3	Greater economies of scale are expected in the one and two-unitary model, leading to higher percentage reductions, whereas the three unitary model achieves fewer efficiencies due to a more fragmented structure.
4	Senior leadership reductions, including the removal of duplicated posts and associated on-costs, contribute to additional financial benefits.

Assumptions applied

Area	Key figures			Rationale
	1UA	2UA	3 UA	
Reduction in front office FTE	5.0%	4.0%	3%	Percentage reductions in line with previous work undertaken for the County Councils Network.
Reduction in service delivery FTE	3.5%	1.5%	1.0%	Percentage reductions in line with previous work undertaken for the County Councils Network.
Reduction in back office FTE	4.0%	3.0%	2.0%	Percentage reductions in line with previous work undertaken for the County Councils Network.
Senior management team costs	£1.5m			Calculated using an average of the higher band of the top three tier senior salaries for each individual district, county and unitary. Assumption that a generic senior management team includes: (1) Chief Exec (3) Directors (2) ADs (6) HoS and additional oncosts

Reorganisation Benefit | Property

Financial Analysis Element



Note: where local data has been provided this has been used in the model, rather than the assumption.

Benefit Driver & Methodology

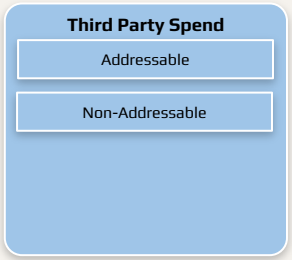
1	Net Expenditure is based on local data provided by the councils on property assets
2	This is spend relating to the ongoing running costs of office spaces such as energy, cleaning and repairs rather than from the one-off sale of capital assets, or rental income from available office space. Any council-owned housing stock has also been excluded from this calculation.
3	A percentage reduction has been applied to the property baseline to provide the estimated benefit of a consolidated property portfolio through shared occupation, reduced duplication of office locations and more efficient use of space.
4	The potential to rationalise and use office spaces more effectively and innovatively is increased in a one or two unitary authority scenario compared to a three unitary authority scenario.

Assumptions applied

Area	Key figures			Rationale
	1UA	2UA	3UA	
Proportion of net expenditure spent on property	2%			Assumption based on an average of available national figures was 5%. Additional data has been provided by the council shown limited portfolio heritage and community assets, which has served to dampen property operational expenditure assumptions to 2%.
Reduction in property spend	15%	12.5%	10%	This percentage has been calculated using the England average from revenue outturns submitted to the Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government 2018 - 2019. Reduction drawn primarily from property rationalisation.

Reorganisation Benefit | Third Party Spend

Financial Analysis Element



Note: where local data has been provided this has been used in the model, rather than the assumption.

Benefit Driver & Methodology

1	Net Expenditure is based on local data provided by the councils on external spend across different service categories.
2	This is spend relating to third party and externally delivered services, and includes contractual costs related to systems, agency resource and more. In this Oxfordshire and West Berkshire context, both Ubico and Publica spend is addressed via Third Party Spend.
3	It is assumed that some Third Party Spend data is not addressable (eg. long-term contracts), and a portion will remain unchanged throughout the reorganisation process.
4	It is assumed that additional costs will be incurred when existing Third Party Spend contracts are dissolved, notably for upper tier level services

Assumptions applied

Area	Key figures			Rationale
	1UA	2UA	3UA	
Proportion of Third Party Spend which is addressable	38%			Additional data has been provided by the council to update this assumption, notably that there is limited addressability via in both the 1UA, 2UA and 3UA option in regards to Social Care and Education spend, and has been influenced by further rationale behind actual change in number of UTLAs pre- and post-reorganisation.
Disaggregation Benefits on Operational Expenditure	2.5%	2.0%	1.0%	Additional data has been provided by the council to update the 2UA assumptions to recognise the potential capacity to leverage West Berkshire and Oxfordshire County Council's existing service infrastructure.

Reorganisation Benefit | Democracy

Financial Analysis Element



Note: where local data has been provided this has been used in the model, rather than the assumption.

Benefit Driver & Methodology

1	The one, two and three unitary council models will require fewer councillors than the current seven-council makeup of Oxfordshire and West Berkshire. Therefore a saving can be made in terms of the base and special responsibility allowances paid to elected Members.
2	Fewer councils will also mean fewer elections, reducing the administrative costs of running local elections. However, some of these savings may be offset by the need for alternative local decision-making arrangements, such as area committees or devolved governance models.

Assumptions applied

Area	Key figures (£)			Rationale
	1UA	2UA	3UA	
SRA and base allowances incurred as part of the democratic structure	0	0	445,300	This is calculated by identifying the difference between current and future unitary local authorities which is multiplied by the structure cost per unitary. A reduced SRA increases annual benefit. **Note:** In both the 1UA and 2UA model (due to the inclusion of West Berkshire) there is no net gain or loss of Upper Tier Local Authority (UTLA), meaning it is cost neutral. In the 3UA model there is a net gain of 1 UTLA, meaning it would incur additional costs offsetting some of the benefits.
Annual savings against elections	502,105			This has been calculated using data from the election turnout and the cost per vote during an election. NOTE: this is used within the broader Democracy calculations but accounts for the net change to the number of UTLA's. Savings against elections does not form the total of the Democracy calculations. **If there is a requirement to hold additional shadow elections in 2027 then an additional cost will be incurred (not currently factored into calculations).**
Cost per vote during an election	5.00			The cost per vote has been uplifted from the HM Government's estimated cost of an election of £3 per vote, as per the last General Election.

Transition Costs | One-off Costs

Financial Analysis Element

Transition Costs

- Contingency
- Organisation closedown
- Creating the new council
- Public consultation
- ICT costs
- Redundancy

Benefit Driver & Methodology

1	One-off redundancy costs will be incurred as part of restructuring local authorities. These have been calculated as a proportion of savings from FTE reductions. Due to the variability among individual cases, using a general proxy for pension strain is not sufficiently reliable and has therefore been omitted from the analysis.
2	Transition costs will arise from closing down existing local authorities and establishing new unitary authorities. While efficiencies will be gained, the process requires investment in legal, financial, and administrative restructuring, with the majority of these costs impacting all new unitary authorities.
3	To enable transformation while maintaining service continuity, one-off costs will be incurred for external support and internal programme management. These will provide capacity and expertise for change management, governance structures, and operational transformation.
4	Further costs will relate to the safe and secure migration of information and consolidation of systems in order to maintain operational delivery. As transformation relies on technology to enable efficiencies, this requires substantial investment.

Assumptions applied

Area	Key figures (£m)			Rationale
	1UA	2UA	3UA	
Contingency	2.12	3.23	4.23	Provision for extra expenses potentially incurred through reorganisation.
Organisation closedown	0.37	0.73	1.10	Costs involved with legally and financially closing down councils and create sound budgetary control systems, estimated through averages of similar costs for other councils.
Creating the new council	0.73	1.46	2.20	The legal costs of setting up a new council, supporting with training staff etc. To note the 3UA option has been uplifted due to need for boundary changes.
Public consultation	0.33	0.49	0.49	Assuming costs for adverts in local media and surveys to consult public on proposed changes.
ICT costs	6.20	6.86	7.29	Costs reflect phased system migration, past LGR cases, and scaling complexity, factoring in reporting changes, security, licences, data migration, and cloud transition cost increases.
Redundancy	5.83	5.14	4.32	One-off redundancy payments, assumed as 30% of staff salary. This does not consider pension strain.

Transition Costs | One-off Costs cont.

Financial Analysis Element

Transition Costs

- Shadow Chief Exec and Member costs
- External support for implementation
- Internal programme management costs
- External communications, rebranding

Benefit Driver & Methodology

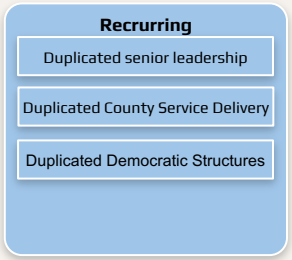
1	One-off redundancy costs will be incurred as part of restructuring local authorities. These have been calculated as a proportion of savings from FTE reductions. Due to the variability among individual cases, using a general proxy for pension strain is not sufficiently reliable and has therefore been omitted from the analysis.
2	Transition costs will arise from closing down existing local authorities and establishing new unitary authorities. While efficiencies will be gained, the process requires investment in legal, financial, and administrative restructuring, with the majority of these costs impacting all new unitary authorities.
3	To enable transformation while maintaining service continuity, one-off costs will be incurred for external support and internal programme management. These will provide capacity and expertise for change management, governance structures, and operational transformation.
4	Further costs will relate to the safe and secure migration of information and consolidation of systems in order to maintain operational delivery. As transformation relies on technology to enable efficiencies, this requires substantial investment.

Assumptions applied

Area	Key figures (£m)			Rationale
	1UA	2UA	3UA	
Shadow Chief Exec/Member costs	0.37	0.75	0.75	This refers to the costs of establishing and running a shadow leadership team ahead of a new unitary authority taking control, with figures aligned to previous local government reorganisations
External support	5.12	7.69	7.69	Assuming costs for external implementation support.
Internal Programme Management Costs	2.28	3.43	3.43	Aligned with previous local government reorganisations, uplifted for inflation and long-term programme management requirements.
External Comms and rebranding	0.44	0.66	0.99	Communications, branding and advertising needed to support the set up of the new Council, including subscriptions for services to support with communications delivery.

Disaggregation Costs | Recurring

Financial Analysis Element



Note: where local data has been provided this has been used in the model, rather than the assumption.

Benefit Driver & Methodology

1	Disaggregation costs apply only where multiple unitary authorities are created, arising from the need to replicate county-level services, such as Social Care, Education, and Public Health, across separate unitary areas. They reflect the cost of providing the structures needed to safely and legally deliver these services, but not the cost of commissioned or provided services.
2	Additional senior leadership teams will be required to manage the new unitary authorities. These costs are estimated using Oxfordshire County Council senior leadership salaries, based on the top three tiers of management in existing District Councils.
3	Disaggregating services currently provided at county level will require additional FTE to effectively lead and support high quality outcomes. The amount of effort used in service delivery management & supervision has been used as a proxy to estimate the size of the increase required under the new unitary authorities.
4	The cost of a representative democratic structure has been estimated as an additional requirement in the new unitary authorities.

Assumptions applied

Area	Key figures (£m)			Rationale
	1UA	2UA	3UA	
Senior management cost for additional unitaries	0	0	3.1	Additional leadership and frontline service management FTE will be required in new unitary authorities. Proportion of effort spent on management and supervision has been used as a proxy to estimate this cost. Note: this has been calculated based on the net change to the number of UTLA's i.e. for 2UA option, there is no change in UTLAs, and therefore warranting no additional costs.
Duplicated Service Delivery management layers	0	3.1	7.6	To note, the original CCN service delivery management assumptions for both the 2UA and 3UA have been dampened and tailored to recognise the potential to leverage existing upper tier Oxfordshire County and West Berkshire infrastructure.
New SRA costs	0	0	0.5	This is calculated by identifying the difference between current and future unitary local authorities which is multiplied by the SRA cost per unitary.

Appendix 2 - Options Appraisal Transformation Modelling

Overview of Transformation Opportunities

Purpose

This component looks at the **additional efficiency savings and income growth the new authorities could achieve post-vesting day** through localised service delivery agreements and transformation. **At the Financial Appraisals level, it takes a set of standard assumptions, which have not been closely amended to localised factors and conditions.**

The specific outputs from the module aims to:

- Develop an indicative view of savings potential over and above reorganisation benefits.
- Transformation potential is considered independent of structural model and delivered once consolidation is complete.

FTE (Front Office, Service Delivery, Back Office)	Following the same approach to identifying and sizing the FTE-related benefits of aggregation, and disaggregation, it assumes that there may be additional opportunities to optimise service delivery across the new unitary authorities beyond the combination of like services.
Addressable Third Party Spend	Transformation around Third Party Spend moves a step beyond the removal of duplicate contracts and commissioned services, and considers the future organisation's capability to strengthen commissioning, contract management and procurement processes.
Income Generation	The Income Generation component of transformation considers whether there may be a need to apply more consistent or uplifted sales, fees and charges across the new geographies and boundaries.

Transformation Assumptions

Detailed below are the set of standard transformation assumptions, applied to the refined baseline of each reorganised unitary authorities' Net Revenue Expenditure. The refined Net Revenue Expenditure has already factored in the anticipated benefits from reorganisation.

Category	Transformation Assumptions	
	Base %	Stretch %
Front office FTE	6%	10%
Service delivery FTE	3%	5%
Back office FTE	7%	8%
TPS	2.5%	3%
Income	0%	1%

Standard Assumptions

In contrast to reorganisation, which is impacted by net change in upper tier level authorities pre-and post reorganisation, it is assumed that all future organisations have the similar potential for transformation at the Financial Options Appraisal level. The figures are then refined via a more nuanced assessment of the size of transformation opportunity as part of the detailed Financial Case.

Transformation Opportunities: 1UA

Detailed below are the high-level transformation opportunities for the future 1UA. To note, this does not take into extensive account of previous or ongoing transformation activity that has already taken place. The 1UA option does not include West Berkshire it expenditure baseline.

Category	Refreshed Baseline (£'000)	Base %	Base Savings (£'000)	Stretch %	Stretch Savings (£'000)
Front office FTE	97,810	6%	5,869	10%	9,781
Service delivery FTE	102,114	3%	3,063	5%	5,106
Back office FTE	74,130	7%	5,190	8%	5,930
TPS	271,857	2.5%	6,796	3%	8,156
Income	209,229	0%	0	1%	2,092
Total			**20,918**		**31,065**

Transformation Opportunities: 2UA

Detailed below are the high-level transformation opportunities for the future 2UA. To note, this does not take into extensive account of previous or ongoing transformation activity that has already taken place. The 2UA option does include West Berkshire it expenditure baseline.

Category	Refreshed Baseline (£'000)	Base %	Base Savings (£'000)	Stretch %	Stretch Savings (£'000)
Front office FTE	119,838	6%	7,190	10%	11,984
Service delivery FTE	126,374	3%	3,791	5%	6,319
Back office FTE	90,814	7%	6,357	8%	7,265
TPS	329,817	2.5%	8,245	3%	9,895
Income	240,729	0%	0	1%	2,407
Total			**25,584**		**37,869**

Transformation Opportunities: 3UA

Detailed below are the high-level transformation opportunities for the future 3UA. To note, this does not take into extensive account of previous or ongoing transformation activity that has already taken place. The 3UA option does include West Berkshire it expenditure baseline.

Category	Refreshed Baseline (£'000)	Base %	Base Savings (£'000)	Stretch %	Stretch Savings (£'000)
Front office FTE	121,086	6%	7,265	10%	12,109
Service delivery FTE	127,015	3%	3,810	5%	6,351
Back office FTE	91,751	7%	6,443	8%	7,340
TPS	336,548	2.5%	8,330	3%	9,995
Income	240,729	0%	0	1%	2,407
Total			**25,828**		**38,202**

Transformation: Cost and Benefits Phasing (Base)

Transformation is anticipated to be delivered within the first five years of vesting day. It assumes that the benefits and costs are spread across the five year period, starting from 2028/29. To note, there is an additional assumption that there is a one-off transformation cost set at 70% of base benefits.

Cost / Benefits Phasing					
	Y1	Y2	Y3	Y4	Y5
Transformation benefits (recurring)	***0%***	***20%***	***50%***	***80%***	***100%***
Transformation costs (one-off)	***10%***	***15%***	***30%***	***30%***	***15%***

Benefits and Cost Summary	1UA (£'000)	2UA (£'000)	3UA (£'000)
Transformation Benefit (Base)	20,918	25,584	25,828
Transformation Cost *(Assumed 70% of Transformation Benefit)*	14,652	17,909	18,070

One-off transformation costs are modelled on a high-level assumption of 70% of the total recurring transformation benefits (for both the base and stretch scenarios). These costs would consist of additional capacity and delivery resources, additional investment for systems and software, plus contingency and ad hoc costs. For the stretch scenario, it is assumed costs would scale due to the additional capacity and potential investment in systems required to achieve a greater level of benefit. The detailed financial case will further refine the estimated costs based on the anticipated transformation opportunities using more local insight and refined assumptions.

Transformation Phasing Modelled (Base)

1UA Cost / Benefits Phasing	Y1	Y2	Y3	Y4	Y5
Transformation benefits (recurring) (£m)	0	4.2	10.5	16.7	20.9
Transformation costs (one-off) (£m)	-1.5	-2.2	-4.4	-4.4	-2.2
Net total (£m)	-1.5	-2.0	6.1	12.3	18.7

2UA Cost / Benefits Phasing	Y1	Y2	Y3	Y4	Y5
Transformation benefits (recurring) (£m)	0	5.1	12.8	20.5	25.6
Transformation costs (one-off) (£m)	-1.8	-2.7	5.4	5.4	2.7
Net total (£m)	-1.8	2.4	7.4	15.1	22.9

3UA Cost / Benefits Phasing	Y1	Y2	Y3	Y4	Y5
Transformation benefits (recurring) (£m)	0	5.2	12.9	20.7	25.8
Transformation costs (one-off) (£m)	1.8	2.7	5.4	5.4	2.7
Net total (£m)	-1.8	2.5	7.5	15.2	23.1

Oxford and Shires | Ridgeway

Detailed Financial Case
October 2025

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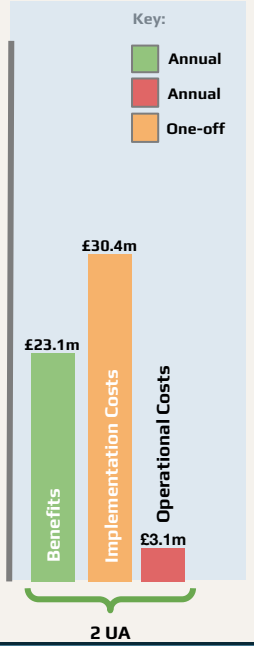
This document presents the detailed financial case for the two unitary authority option for Oxfordshire and West Berkshire, with the proposed Oxford & Shires and Ridgeway UAs. It builds on the comparative options appraisal undertaken, which used consistent assumptions and publicly available data to model benefits and costs across all three options as a starting point. **The more detailed analysis in this Financial Case further refines the logic and assumptions for the Oxford and Shires and Ridgeway proposal, resulting in more refined and prudent totals compared with the initial Options Appraisal.**

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1.0 Executive Summary

Overview of Outputs

The analysis considers the detailed financial implications of LGR for Oxfordshire, **building off of the high-level Financial Options Appraisal to focus specifically on the configuration of the 2 UA model**. It is important to note in the period leading to vesting day there are a number of changes which could occur to funding, priorities and policy - the modelling completed is therefore based on the **data available at this point in time**.



The Financial Case has taken a prudent approach to assessing the impacts of local government reorganisation for Oxfordshire, drawing from similar data sources and applying consistent methodology to support wider comparisons. **Oxford and Shires and Ridgeway** are not an exact comparator to the **1UA option**. This is due to the inclusion of West Berkshire to the income and expenditure baseline as well as the nuances of its current financial circumstances. Through reorganisation, **Oxford and Shires** is set to realise approximately **£13.5m** recurring savings against its 27/28 baseline expenditure, while Ridgeway is set to realise some **£9.6m.** With additional recurring disaggregation costs of £3.1m, the 2UA option results in a total net recurring saving of **£20.0m**.

Implementation Cost Drivers:

1. **Combining existing services**: the cost associated with merging services of seven councils, as well as the commissioning and procurement of new systems to cover the Oxfordshire footprint.
2. **Dissolving delivery of upper tier services:** the costs associated with dissolving existing partnerships and service provision for upper tier services against new geographies.

Benefit Drivers:

1. **Economies of scale**: larger authorities are able to deliver services more efficiently through shared infrastructure, procurement advantages, and consolidated back-office functions.
2. **Reduced management structures:** simplifying the governance model results in recurring savings from fewer senior posts and decision-making layers.
3. **Transformation following reorganisation:** reorganisation would primarily look to amalgamate services, but would not involve the detailed service improvement that may realise benefits from optimised operations, digitisation and automation. It is noted that there is significant benefits in addition to reorganisation which could be pursued under the new authority, which is particularly relevant for the **Ridgeway** authority to **support greater long-term financial sustainability and mitigate further need to rely on Exceptional Financial Support.**

Projected Financial Position on Vesting Day - (p1 of 2)

The Income and Expenditure and Assets and Liabilities position has been set out for Oxford and Shires and Ridgeway in the 2UA option. **This is the balance position prior to any benefit realisation from local government reorganisation or further transformation.**

Income and Expenditure			
	2 UA (£m)		
Category	Oxford and Shires	Ridgeway	Notes
Income*			
Council Tax	377.4	431.5	Currently 27/28 view. Includes Council Tax Surpluses.
Grants (inc. non-AEF)	45.8	63.0	Currently 27/28 view
Business Rates	114.4	55.0	Currently 27/28 view
Total Income	537.6	549.5	
Expenditure**			
All Staff	171.8	164.5	Does not include any staffing consolidation impact. Proportion based on FY25/26 establishment data shared.
All Non Staff	384.1	396.7	Expenditure excluding staff
Total Expenditure	555.9	561.2	Total Expenditure for all authorities in Oxfordshire and West Berkshire. FY27/28
Net Position	-18.3	-11.7	
Total Reserve Draws	13.4	6.8	Draws from reserves for FY27/28 to cover budget deficit
Final Position	-4.9	-4.9	

**Income Sources: Draft statement of accounts (24/25), MTFS and MTFPs, Pixel Outputs*

***Expenditure Sources: Statement of Accounts 24/25, Net Operating Expenditure (25/26 onwards), Newton Analysis, Establishment data (provided by LAs).*

Projected Financial Position on Vesting Day - (p2 of 2)

The Income and Expenditure and Assets and Liabilities position has been set out for Oxford and Shires and Ridgeway in the 2UA option.

Assets and Liabilities (Core Considerations - not exhaustive)*				
	2 UA (£m)			
Category	Oxford and Shires	Ridgeway	Oxford and Shires HRA	Notes
Assets				
Fixed Assets	2,968.6	1,692.2	1,339.1	Long-term assets only, projected to 28/29 using Capital Expenditure
Liabilities				
Long Term Borrowing	892.1	441.7	345.8	Debt, Long Term Borrowing, EFS
Short Term Borrowing	318.3	358.5	0	Short Term Borrowing

**Asset Sources: Statement of Accounts, Capital Expenditure from 2027/28 MTFS and MTFP Capital Programmes*
***Liabilities: MTFS and MTFPs, information supplied by LAs*

Cost Benefit Analysis: Aggregation Benefit

The following sets out a view of the aggregation benefits (recurring) for the 2UA option.

Key benefits include:

- **Staffing (Leadership):** Benefits from reduction in duplicated top-line and associated transition costs.
- **Staffing:** Benefits from reduction of in-scope roles and associated transition costs.
- **Third Party Spend:** Benefits from reduction in addressable spend across all in-scope contract categories.
- **Democracy:** Benefits from reduction in election costs and member allowances.
- **Property:** Benefits from reduced property operational expenditure for rationalised assets.

Note: *Capital receipts from rationalisation of assets are not included above.*

Option 2UA					
	Y1	**Y2**	**Y3**	**Y4**	**Y5**
Total Aggregation Benefits (£m)	2.3	4.6	11.6	16.2	23.2

Benefits Phasing					
	Y1	**Y2**	**Y3**	**Y4**	**Y5**
Aggregation benefits profile (recurring)	**10%**	**20%**	**50%**	**70%**	**100%**

Staffing Benefits		Oxford and Shires (£m)	Ridgeway (£m)	2UA Total (£M)
Estimated Senior Leadership Structures Saving	Recurring	5.6	1.9	7.5
Estimated Front Office FTE Reorganisation savings	Recurring	2.4	2.3	4.7
Estimated Service Delivery FTE Reorganisation savings	Recurring	0.9	0.9	1.8
Estimated Back Office FTE Reorganisation Savings	Recurring	1.4	1.3	2.7
Total Staffing Benefit	Recurring	**10.3**	**6.4**	16.7
Third Party Spend Benefits				
Total TPS Aggregation Saving	Recurring	1.0	0.9	1.9
Democracy Benefits				
Estimated Total Allowances+SRA Saving	Recurring	0.22	0.46	0.68
Estimated Total Election Costs Savings	Recurring	0.63	0.45	1.08
Property Benefits				
Total OpEx Property Savings (not including disposal of surplus assets)	Recurring	1.4	1.4	2.8
Total Aggregation Benefits	**Recurring**	**13.55**	**9.61**	**23.16**

Cost Benefit Analysis: Reorganisation Costs

The following sets out a view of the aggregation costs (one off) for the 2UA.

Key costs include:

- **New unitarites setup & closedown costs:** Spend to design the new structure and manage the change (e.g. training, comms, process redesign).
- **IT & Systems costs:** Spend on new or upgraded systems to support a single organisation (e.g. finance, HR, CRM).
- **External transition, design and implementation support costs:** Resources needed to run the transformation programme (e.g. project management, governance).
- **Redundancy Costs:** Payments and support for staff reductions due to structural changes. This has been uplifted.
- **Contingency:** A buffer for unexpected costs, reflecting risk and complexity.

Recurring Disaggregation costs are expected to primarily impact Ridgeway UA due to disaggregating County-wide services that do not currently exist at the same level in West Berkshire.

It is assumed that transition costs will be funded.

Option 2 - Oxford and Shires and Ridgeway (£'000)						
	Y0	**Y1**	**Y2**	**Y3**	**Y4**	**Y5**
Total One-Off Transition Costs (£M)	-12.1	-12.1	-6.2	0	0	0
Total Disaggregation Cost (recurring)* (£m)	0	-3.1	-3.1	-3.1	-3.1	-3.1

Benefits Phasing						
	Y0	**Y1**	**Y2**	**Y3**	**Y4**	**Y5**
Transition costs (one-off)	40%	40%	20%	0%	0%	0%
Disaggregation costs (recurring)	0%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

One off transition / implementation costs	Total (£M)	Note
New unitarities setup & closedown costs • External Comms, Rebranding & implementation: • Internal Programme Management: • Creating the new council • Organisation closedown • Public Consultation • Shadow Chief Exec Costs	***7.5***	Programme management, administrative and legal activities linked to new council creation and closedown, public consultation, rebranding and communications ahead of vesting day, and shadow member and executive costs. Based on other actuals from other previous LGR experience.
IT & Systems Costs	***6.9***	Costs of data migration, systems migration, setting up new systems, hardware costs, integrating business systems etc. Based on other actuals from other previous LGR experience.
External transition, design and implementation support costs	***7.7***	Based on other actuals from other previous LGR experience.
Redundancy costs	***5.1***	Redundancy cost as a proportion of salary (current assumption) x total FTE saving
Contingency	***3.2***	Estimated 40% of total one off transition / implementation cost (excl. ICT)
TOTAL	***30.4***	

Cost Benefit Analysis: 5 Year Outlook

This takes into account:

- **Aggregation and disaggregation benefits / costs (recurring)**
- **One-off transition costs.**

Both options have a net cost in Year 1 due to transition spend, followed by strong and rising net in year benefit.

Note: *Modelling reflects assumptions agreed as in August 2025.*

Recurring Disaggregation costs are expected to primarily impact Ridgeway UA due to disaggregating County-wide services that do not currently exist at the same level in West Berkshire.

2UA Model

	Y0	Y1	Y2	Y3	Y4	Y5	Total 5 year Benefit / (Costs)
Total Aggregation Benefits (£m)	0	2.3	4.6	11.6	16.2	23.2	57.9
Total Disaggregation Benefits / Costs (£m)*	0	-3.1	-3.1	-3.1	-3.1	-3.1	-15.5
Total Transition Costs (£m)	-12.1	-12.1	-6.2	0	0	0	-30.4
Net in year Benefit/(Cost) (£m)	-12.1	-12.9	-4.7	8.5	13.1	20.1	12.0

Benefits Phasing

	Y1	Y2	Y3	Y4	Y5
Aggregation benefits profile (recurring)	**10%**	**20%**	**50%**	**70%**	**100%**
Disaggregation costs (recurring)	**100%**	**100%**	**100%**	**100%**	**100%**
Transition costs (one-off)	**100%**	**0.00%**	**0.00%**	**0.00%**	**0.00%**

Based on the cost/benefit analysis, the payback period for the 2UA LGR option would be 4.4 years, or within 5 years of reorganisation.

Transformation - 2 UA

There is an opportunity to deliver additional transformation savings based on the view from the MTFS and Policy module. The scope of transformation savings would be refined by the new authorities including identifying individual opportunities. The phasing of transformation benefits has been tapered to show a five year implementation period. Investment and delivery costs have been included. An updated view of net benefits over the five year period has been provided.

Transformation Opportunities						
Benefit Area	O&S Baseline (£m)	Savings Assumption (O&S)	O&S (£m)	Ridgeway Baseline (£m)	Savings Assumption (Ridgeway)	Ridgeway (£m)
Reduction in front office FTE spend	**57.4**	1%	0.6	**56.2**	3%	1.7
Reduction in service delivery FTE spend	**60.6**	1%	0.6	**59.3**	1%	0.6
Reduction in back office FTE spend	**43.5**	3%	1.3	**42.6**	5%	2.1
Reduction in TPS	**367.1**	1.5%	5.5	**382.7**	2%	7.6
Increase in Income	**126.3**	0.5%	0.6	**73.5**	0.5%	0.4
Assets (Operational Expenditure	**11.1**	0.5%	0.05	**11.2**	0%	0

Oxford and Shires UA					
Year	1	2	3	4	5
Yearly Benefit (£m)	0	0	4.3	6.5	8.6
Yearly Cost (£m)	-2.4	-2.4	-0.6	-0.6	0
In-year Net Benefit / (Costs) (£m)	-2.4	-2.4	3.7	5.9	8.6

Ridgeway UA					
Year	1	2	3	4	5
Yearly Benefit (£m)	0	0	6.2	9.3	12.4
Yearly Cost (£m)	-3.5	-3.5	-0.9	-0.9	0
In-year Net Benefit / (Costs) (£m)	-3.5	-4.5	5.3	8.4	12.4

Consolidated View - Benefits

Detailed below is a consolidated view of the benefits of local government reorganisation as well as the transformation post reorganisation, which would be expected to be annual, recurring benefits from Y5 onwards.

Benefit Area	Oxford and Shires		Ridgeway	
	O&S LGR Benefits (£m)	O&S Transformation Benefits (£m)	Ridgeway LGR Benefits £m)	Ridgeway Transformation Benefits £m)
Senior Management	5.6	N/A	1.9	N/A
Front Office FTE	2.4	0.6	2.3	1.7
Service Delivery FTE	0.9	0.6	0.9	0.6
Back Office FTE	1.4	1.3	1.3	2.1
Third Party Spend	1.0	5.5	0.9	7.6
Democracy	0.8	N/A	0.9	N/A
Assets (Operational Expenditure)	1.4	0.05	1.4	0
Income Generation	N/A	0.6	N/A	0.4
Gross benefits	**13.5**	**8.6***	**9.6**	**12.4**
Less disaggregation cost	0	0	3.1	0
Net benefits	**22.1**		**18.9**	
Total 2UA net benefits	**41.0**			

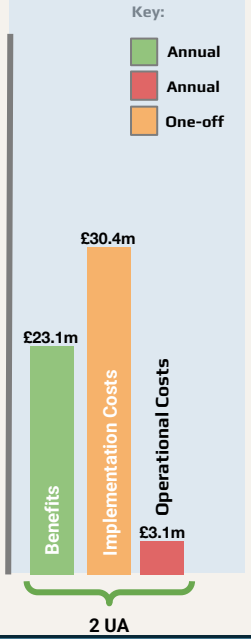
**To note, there is a slight discrepancy here due to rounding, with the original sum figure being £8,623,395.*

These figures are more refined than the initial Options Appraisal which uses publicly available data and consistent assumptions applied in the same way across all three proposals for local government reorganisation. The detailed analysis undertaken for this Financial Case further develops anticipated benefits and costs, using local insights and tailored assumptions. This results in more refined and prudent totals. It is anticipated that the councils preparing proposals for other options will have refined their more detailed cases in a similar way.

2.0 Approach and Summary Outputs

Overview of Outputs

The analysis considers the detailed financial implications of LGR for Oxfordshire, **building off the high-level Financial Options Appraisal to focus specifically on the configuration of the 2 UA model**. It is important to note in the period leading to vesting day there are a number of changes which could occur to funding, priorities and policy - the modelling completed is therefore based on the **data available at this point in time**.



The Financial Case has taken a prudent approach to assessing the impacts of local government reorganisation for Oxfordshire, drawing from similar data sources and applying consistent methodology to support wider comparisons. **Oxford and Shires and Ridgeway** are not an exact comparator to the **1UA option**. This is due to the inclusion of West Berkshire to the income and expenditure baseline as well as the nuances of its current financial circumstances. Through reorganisation, **Oxford and Shires** is set to realise approximately **£13.5m** recurring savings against its 27/28 baseline expenditure, while Ridgeway is set to realise some **£9.6m.** With additional recurring disaggregation costs of £3.1m, the 2UA option results in a total net recurring saving of **£20.0m**.

Implementation Cost Drivers:

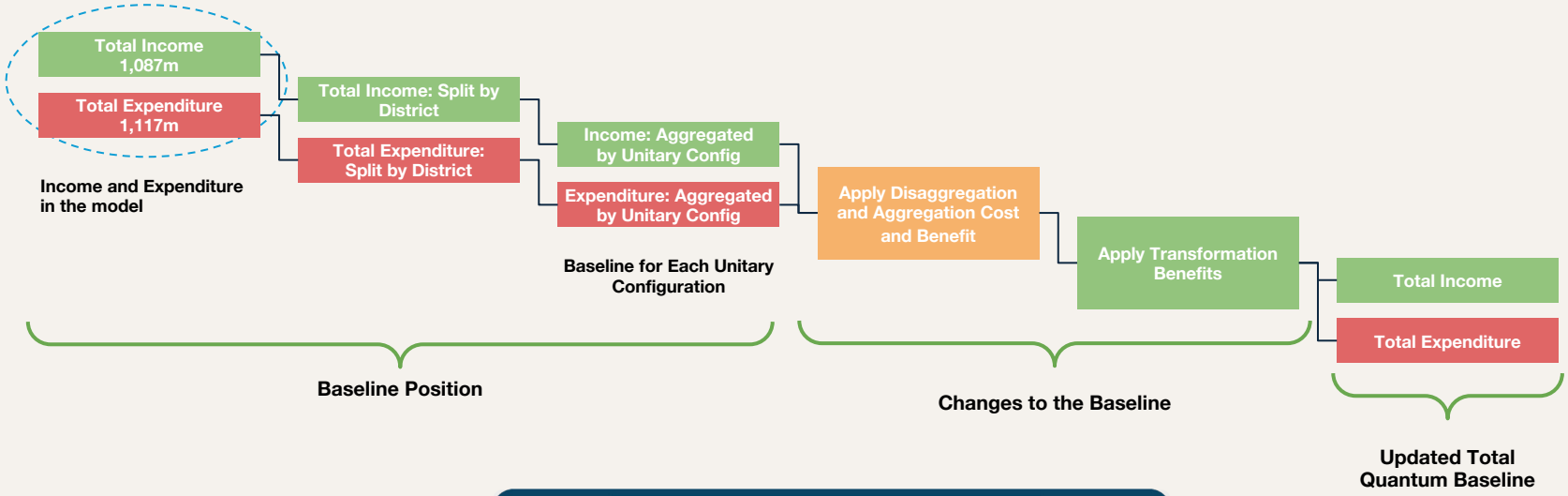
1. **Combining existing services**: the cost associated with merging services of seven councils, as well as the commissioning and procurement of new systems to cover the Oxfordshire footprint.
2. **Dissolving delivery of upper tier services:** the costs associated with dissolving existing partnerships and service provision for upper tier services against new geographies.

Benefit Drivers:

1. **Economies of scale**: larger authorities are able to deliver services more efficiently through shared infrastructure, procurement advantages, and consolidated back-office functions.
2. **Reduced management structures:** simplifying the governance model results in recurring savings from fewer senior posts and decision-making layers.
3. **Transformation following reorganisation:** reorganisation would primarily look to amalgamate services, but would not involve the detailed service improvement that may realise benefits from optimised operations, digitisation and automation. It is noted that there is significant benefits in addition to reorganisation which could be pursued under the new authority, which is particularly relevant for the **Ridgeway** authority to **support greater long-term financial sustainability and mitigate further need to rely on Exceptional Financial Support.**

Financial Analysis Approach

The financial model established an agreed baseline input that can be split via Districts (based on either actuals or an apportionment of Oxfordshire County Council costs) for each of the components of the model and then mapped to the configurations of each new Unitary Authority. Benefits, dis-benefits and transformation opportunities can then be mapped based on the configuration of each Unitary. As part of this baseline, an apportionment of Oxfordshire County Council costs was applied to the Districts, reflecting their role as part of the existing two-tier structure where they benefit from county-level services and are assumed to share in the associated financial liabilities.



3.0 Modules

Modules

The detailed modules of analysis are explained separately within each of the following subsections. Each of these modules connects back into the top-level financial model to show the comparative cost-benefit to the system of the LGR option.

Section	Module	Description
3.1	Income, borrowing & debt	Review of income and debt within the existing councils to provide a view of the financial position of each new Unitary Authority in Year 1. This includes sub modules of: Council Tax, Debts and Grants and Business Rates.
3.2	Demand increases	Review of service areas where significant and material demand increases are expected, using Newton Analysis to quantity and indicate demand increases, to ensure the model reflects the most accurate view of demand and expenditure in the system.
3.3	Third Party Spend	Review of spend by aggregating third-party spend, identifying disaggregation costs, and quantifying transformation benefits, to assess the financial impact of a one Unitary Authority configuration.
3.4	Assets	Review of properties to categorise into land and buildings based on their use type in the asset register, to evaluate income and expenditure associated with assets and how these change under different options.
3.5	Staffing & Pay	Review of staff costs and FTE counts, to understand the impact of pay harmonisation, leadership restructuring, service demand changes, and transformation-driven staffing changes.
3.6	Member numbers	Review of election cost across the existing councils using previous turnout data and standard rate of £ per vote/elector, to understand the projected election costs following the creation of two Unitary Authority configuration.
3.7	MTFS	Review of current and past MTFS documents to baseline existing and future saving plans and historic savings delivered, to use as a proxy to review the maturity of transformation across the system.
3.8	Policy & Transformation	Review of existing service delivery to inform assumptions used through the financial model, based on decisions of the current authorities, to ensure the model accurately reflects what is materially possible in each new authority.

Assumptions: Overall Model

Assumptions for the Overall Model
It was agreed to maintain consistent, comparative assumptions across 1UA and 2UA options as far as possible.
The following benefits realisation profile has been applied, focussed on a gradual approach. Yr 1, 10% Yr 2, 20% Yr 3, 50% Yr 4, 70% Yr 5+, 100%.
An earlier phasing of transition costs has been applied. The current profile is as follows, Yr 0, 40% Yr 1, 40% Yr 2, 20% Yr 3+, 0%.
The preferred approach for maintaining a comparative and consistent baseline between 1UA vs 2UA Financial Case is to include a parallel figure for West Berkshire in the 1UA and narratively emphasise the presence of West Berkshire in both scenarios, but to exclude the UA from calculations in the 1UA analysis.
The impacts of the Fair Funding Reform is not formally included in the model given the complexity and uncertainty around potential consequences, but recognise that individual councils may have factored in elements of the reform into their MTFS.
HRA-related (eg. addressable assets) factors are out of scope of the model.
The RA 25/26 data has been used where possible (eg. net revenue expenditure for the Financial Options appraisal), but some modules have required more specific data (eg. view of Sales, Fees and Charges)

3.1 Income, Borrowing and Debts

Overview of Income, Borrowing and Debts

Overview

As part of the LGR process, OCC and O&WB debt, income and borrowing will need to be apportioned to the new Unitary Authorities.

From vesting day, the new unitaries will receive funding that was previously allocated to the legacy authorities. Funding currently allocated to Oxfordshire and West Berkshire needs to be apportioned across the proposed unitary authorities for modelling purposes. Council tax will also need to be harmonised across the new organisations, which will impact the amounts paid by residents and received by the new unitaries.

Detail of the future forecast income for the new unitary authorities is set out in the following pages.

The following categories of income have been considered throughout this module to provide a view of the financial position of each new Unitary Authority in Year 1.

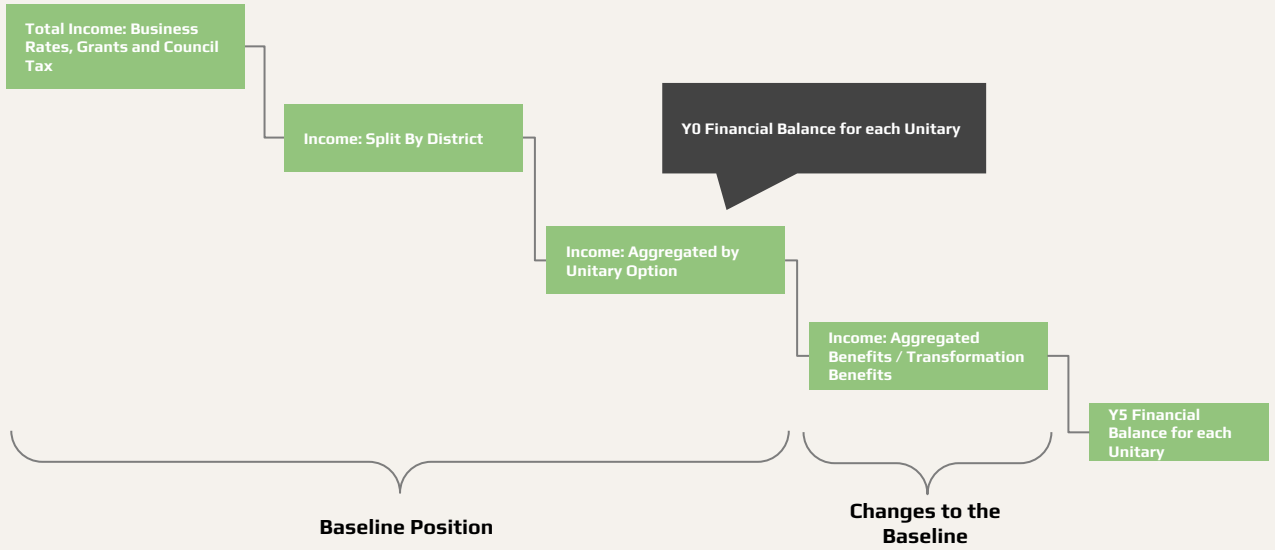
Categories of Income	Description
Business Rates	Local share of Non-Domestic Rates (NDR) retained by the council after redistribution and top-up/tariff adjustments.
Council Tax	Income from residents based on property valuations and bandings, used to fund local services.
Grant Funding	Aggregated government grants within the Aggregate External Finance (AEF) system, such as Revenue Support Grant.

Local Context

- Each Council presents their MTFS in a slightly different manner, but broadly the figures reconcile to a consistent income position.
  - **South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse**: Business rate figures are presented as growth against baseline which then present lower figures to other organisations. This is balanced out through the greater flow through from grant income.
  - **Oxfordshire County Council (OCC):** Reports Council Tax Surpluses as a separate line, which has been included in total Council Tax Income figures.
- Some Councils have taken into account the impacts of the Fair Funding Review as part of their MTFS. Where that has made a significant, material difference, local authorities have provided figures and forecasts that exclude Fair Funding Review.
  - **Cherwell** has provided revised figures not in the MTFS that dampens the impact of the reform.
- Council tax income currently includes Fire and Rescue precepts, however it is noted that it is ring-fenced income and to be delivered by a lead authority following reorganisation.

Methodology

Following LGR, the financial baseline across different Unitary Authority configurations is shaped by how income is distributed between areas. This assessment considers how current income streams are split across districts and re-aggregated based on the proposed unitary options to determine both the starting financial position and the impact of transformation over time.



Assumptions

Assumptions for Income, Borrowing and Debts
The Pixel model is used as the guide for disaggregating County income across the five district councils.
The impacts of the Business Rates Reset have been treated differently in each MTFS. It is understood that some discrepancies may exist in presentation, but the final figures for income have been reviewed by Section 151 Officers and show a consistent income position.
Council tax harmonisation has primarily been shown as harmonised on Day 1, against the weighted average. It has been additionally modelled for alternative harmonisation scenarios (across extended timeline of 1 year, 4 years or 7 years) for additional views.
County and District precept increases until vesting – For each year between the reorganization start date and the harmonisation year, we assumed an annual increase at the maximum rates permitted by MHCLG (4.99%, 2.99% or £5 respectively).
The guiding principle is that debt follows the asset, allocating liabilities to the old authority assuming responsibility for the related asset which can then be aggregated back up into the new unitary configurations.
The cost of transferring debt between organisation has not been included.
Projected year-on-year Capital Financing Requirement (CFR) is used as a proxy to forecast the total debts and liabilities set to land on vesting day.
HRA debt and liabilities will be removed from total debts, to support with a focused view on General Revenue Fund impact and analysis across the model.
The Newton SEND Demand analysis has been used as the guide for disaggregating County DSG High Needs deficit to the new Councils.

Inputs: Overview of Income and Funding currently

The following sets out the Oxfordshire breakdown of Business Rate, Grant and Council Tax income distributed to each of the individual organisations. This then means that a view of income can be derived for each Unitary construct. The following is based on data from FY 25/26 to FY 27/28, as per the MTFS.

	Business Rates (£'000)			Grants (£'000)			Council Tax(£'000)		
Council	**25/26**	**26/27**	**27/28**	**25/26**	**26/27**	**27/28**	**25/26**	**26/27**	**27/28**
Cherwell District Council	14,988	13,873	14,425	1,303	623	311	9,903	9,944	10,384
Oxford City Council	12,779	12,644	12,667	770	739	739	16,730	17,241	17,768
West Oxfordshire Council	6,684	3,559	3,897	5,331	6,893	5,652	6,306	6,655	6,999
South Oxfordshire Council	780	570	360	7,863	7,243	6,771	9,625	10,092	10,571
Vale of White Horse Council	297	248	199	9,635	8,524	7,452	9,564	10,037	10,525
Oxfordshire County Council	101,925	103,648	105,439	64,839	62,254	62,242	542,549	572,292	605,079
West Berkshire Council	30,600	31,500	32,500	24,900	24,300	25,600	131,600	139,400	147,500
Total	**168,053**	**166,042**	**169,487**	**114,641**	**110,576**	**108,767**	**726,277**	**765,661**	**808,826**

Outputs: Apportionment of OCC's income

The following table sets out the Oxfordshire & West Berkshire breakdown of Business Rate and Grant income aggregated up to the new unitary arrangements. **County Council funding has been disaggregated based on the pixel model.**

Income Categories	OCC Baseline 27/28 (£'000)	Oxford & Shires Pixel Disaggregation	Ridgeway Pixel Disaggregation	Oxford & Shires Actuals (£'000)	Ridgeway Actuals (£'000)
Business Rate	105,439	79%	21%	83,455	21,984
Grant Funding	62,242	63%	37%	39,066	23,176
Council Tax	605,079	57%	43%	342,204	262,875

Outputs: Total Income - 2 UA

The table below presents the Total Business Rates, Council Tax and Grant funding for the years 2025/26 through 2027/28, accounting for the apportionment of the County's income for the new authorities.

	2025/2026 (£'000)			2026/2027(£'000)			2027/2028(£'000)		
	Business Rates	Council Tax	Grant Funding	Business Rates	Council Tax	Grant Funding	Business Rates	Council Tax	Grant Funding
Oxford & Shires	115,124	339,779	48,100	112,113	357,501	47,328	114,444	377,355	45,768
Ridgeway	52,929	386,498	66,541	53,929	408,160	63,248	55,043	431,471	62,999
Total	**168,053**	**726,277**	**114,641**	**166,042**	**765,661**	**110,576**	**169,487**	**808,826**	**108,767**

3.1.1 Council Tax

Introduction to Council Tax

The harmonisation process brings together varying Council Tax rates from different districts into a single rate over a set time period.

The aims are to:

- Provide a clear, consistent approach to setting council tax across all residents in the new unitary structures.
- Ensure equitable treatment of taxpayers by harmonising to the lowest, highest, median or weighted average rate.
- Provide evidence for the final business case narrative, demonstrating the potential impacts of council tax changes on residents and overall viability of the new Council(s).

This analysis does **not** forecast any additional financial impacts to residents that might arise from parish precepts. They are not directly affected by the reorganisation of principal councils into unitary structures. As a result, their treatment remains unchanged in all reorganisation scenarios and sits outside the scope of this analysis, which focuses solely on harmonising the principal council element of council tax.

The model is directional and does not seek to accurately forecast tax receipts for the new Councils. It seeks to illustrate the range of options that Members of the new Councils will have to consider.

Methodology: Council Tax

The methodology follows four key stages:

1. **Project Future Tax Base**
   a. Use Council MTFS forecasts of the Tax Base where possible, or previous historical tax base data to forecast future growth.

1. **Project Future Tax Rates**
   a. District tax rates increase at the maximum of £5 or 2.99% per year, and Unitary/County rates at 4.99% per year.
   b. Model harmonisation by aligning to the lowest, highest, median or weighted average rate (in Year 1 only).

1. **Calculate Unitary Authority Tax Receipt**
   a. Apply the harmonised rate to the projected taxbase.
   b. Calculate receipts for the two-unitary scenario.

1. **Calculate Foregone or Gained Income**
   a. Compare projected harmonised receipts with a baseline (assuming current rates continue with max increases).
   b. Foregone Income = Baseline receipts – Harmonised receipts

Inputs: Council Tax

The module uses three main inputs. This ensures we are basing the projections on official, up-to-date, and locally relevant data (where it has been provided).

Input	Description	Source
Current tax base (2025/26)	Current tax base population	MTFS
Band D rates	Band D council tax for local authorities excluding parish precepts for 2025 to 2026	Council Tax levels set by local authorities in England 2025 to 2026 (revised)
Tax base growth projections	Tax base growth projections from MTFS and/or external analyses completed by the district councils.	MTFS

Outputs: Council Tax Base Projections

Council tax base growth projections have been taken from MTFS for each council. Where only 2026/2027-2028/2029 have been provided, an average of those year's tax base has been used up to 2034/35.

District	2026/2027	2027/2028	2028/2029	2029/30	2030/31	2031/32	2032/33	2033/34	2034/35
Oxfordshire	1.75%	1.75%	1.75%	1.75%	1.75%	1.75%	1.75%	1.75%	1.75%
Cherwell	1.20%	1.20%	1.20%	1.20%	1.20%	1.20%	1.20%	1.20%	1.20%
Oxford City	0.76%	0.76%	0.76%	0.76%	0.76%	0.76%	0.76%	0.76%	0.76%
West Oxfordshire	1.60%	1.40%	1.30%	1.25%	1.40%	1.40%	1.40%	1.40%	1.40%
South Oxfordshire	1.50%	1.50%	1.50%	1.50%	1.50%	1.50%	1.50%	1.50%	1.50%
Vale of White Horse	1.80%	1.80%	1.80%	1.80%	1.80%	1.80%	1.80%	1.80%	1.80%
West Berkshire	2.00%	2.00%	2.00%	2.00%	2.00%	2.00%	2.00%	2.00%	2.00%

Outputs: Council Tax Band D Projections

Council tax Band D projections until 2034/35 have been detailed below. This assumes a maximum increase of either £5 or 2.99% per annum for District councils, and a 4.99% increase for Unitary/County councils.

District	2026/2027	2027/2028	2028/2029	2029/30	2030/31	2031/32	2032/33	2033/34	2034/35
Oxfordshire	£1,911.40	£2,007	£2,107	£2,212	£2,322	£2,438	£2,560	£2,688	£2,822
Cherwell	£158.50	£164	£169	£174	£179	£184	£190	£195	£201
Oxford City	£356.72	£367	£378	£390	£401	£413	£426	£438	£452
West Oxfordshire	£129.38	£134	£139	£144	£149	£154	£159	£164	£169
South Oxfordshire	£151.24	£156	£161	£166	£171	£176	£182	£187	£193
Vale of White Horse	£161.69	£167	£172	£177	£182	£188	£193	£199	£205
West Berkshire	£1,921.41	£2,017	£2,118	£2,224	£2,335	£2,451	£2,573	£2,702	£2,837

Outputs: Weighted Average Option 2UA (Oxford & Shires)

The weighted-average option was modelled on FY28/29 Band D by applying tax base growth and expected precepts from the MTFS, then harmonised to that rate on Day 1. In the 2UA scenario, the harmonised Band D rate will be **£2,441.6 in Oxford & Shires.** This approach—favoured by most councils in recent LGRs—sets the single rate equal to the weighted average of existing rates, so there is no material change to aggregate council tax income (unlike phasing over several years, which changes timing and distributional impacts). It reflects where taxpayers actually are and therefore defines the income envelope for the financial case, enabling like-for-like option comparison and compliance with referendum limits.

District	Tax base	County Precept (£'000)	County Band D (£)	District Precept (£'000)	District Band D (£)	Total Council Tax (£'000)	Total Band D charge (£)	Harmonised Band D (£)	Change on Band D (£)	Change %
Cherwell	62,034	137,223	2,212.1	10,765	173.5	147,989	2,385.6	2,441.6	56.0	2.35%
Oxford City	48,730	107,793	2,212.1	18,989	389.7	126,782	2,601.7	2,441.6	-160.2	-6.16%
West Oxfordshire	50,868	112,523	2,212.1	7,344	144.4	119,868	2,356.4	2,441.6	85.1	3.61%
Totals	**161,632**	**357,540**		**37,099**		**394,639**				

Outputs: Weighted Average Option 2UA (Ridgeway)

The weighted-average option was modelled on FY28/29 Band D by applying tax base growth and expected precepts from the MTFS, then harmonised to that rate on Day 1. I In the 2UA scenario, the harmonised Band D rate will be £**2,325.80 in Ridgeway**. This approach—favoured by most councils in recent LGRs—sets the single rate equal to the weighted average of existing rates, so there is no material change to aggregate council tax income (unlike phasing over several years, which changes timing and distributional impacts). It reflects where taxpayers actually are and therefore defines the income envelope for the financial case, enabling like-for-like option comparison and compliance with referendum limits.

District	Tax base	County Precept (£'000)	County Band D (£)	District Precept (£'000)	District Band D (£)	Total Council Tax (£'000)	Total Band D charge (£)	Harmonised Band D (£)	Change on Band D (£)	Change %
South Oxfordshire	66,547	147,205	2,212.1	11,063	166.2	158,268	2,378.3	2,325.80	-52.5	-2.21%
Vale of White Horse	62,404	138,040	2,212.1	11,034	176.8	149,074	2,388.9	2,325.80	-63.1	-2.64%
West Berkshire	72,705	£0	£0	161,669	2,223.6	161,669	2,223.6	2,325.80	102.2	4.59%
Totals	201,655	285,245		183,766		469,011				

Summary Outputs: Council Tax for 2 UA

The summary tables below provide an overview of the potential range of options under different scenarios. It is for the elected members of the shadow authority to make decisions on council tax alignment. The table below is insight-only: it illustrates possible paths to move legacy rates to a single rate over the chosen period and shows the indicative effect on Band D and total income each year. It helps explain timing and distributional impacts across areas, but it does not drive the financial case.

		Harmonisation Scenarios	Aligning over one year	Aligning over four years	Aligning over seven years	Comments
Oxford & Shires	Weighted Average	Band D rates would change in value by amounts ranging between -£160 to £85.1, with mixed impact on residents.	No income change	N/A	N/A	This scenario is in line with the referendum limits of 2.99% or £5 increases for District Councils. It assumes harmonisation by Day 1.
	Low	Band D rates would change in value by amounts ranging between -£15 to £180, with mixed impact on residents.	Projected total income foregone of £93m	Projected total income foregone of £72m	Projected total income foregone of £48m	This scenario is in line with Council Tax referendum limits, but projects a significant amount of income foregone.
	Mid	Band D rates would increase in value by amounts ranging between £26 to £180, leading to additional costs on residents.	Projected total income foregone of £52m	Projected total income foregone of £38m	Projected total income foregone of £23m	This scenario is not in line with Council Tax referendum limits.
	High	Band D rates would increase in value by amounts ranging between £321 to £517, leading to additional costs on residents.	Projected total income gain of £245m	Projected total income gain of £203m	Projected total income gain of £156m	This scenario is not line with Council Tax referendum limits.

Summary Outputs: Council Tax for 2 UA

The summary tables below provide an overview of the potential range of options under different scenarios. It is for the elected members of the shadow authority to make decisions on council tax alignment. The table below is insight-only: it illustrates possible paths to move legacy rates to a single rate over the chosen period and shows the indicative effect on Band D and total income each year. It helps explain timing and distributional impacts across areas, but it does not drive the financial case.

	Harmonisation Scenarios	Aligning over one year	Aligning over four years	Aligning over seven years	Comments
Ridgeway	Weighted Average	Band D rates would change in value by amounts ranging between -£63.1 to £102.2, with mixed impact on residents.	No income change	N/A	N/A	This scenario is in line with the referendum limits of 2.99% or £5 increases for District Councils. It assumes harmonisation by Day 1.
	Low	Band D rates would decrease in value by amounts ranging between -£159 to -£450, leading to resident savings.	Projected total income foregone of £164m	Projected total income foregone of £132m	Projected total income foregone of £95m	This scenario is in line with Council Tax referendum limits, but projects the least amount of income gain along the three scenarios.
	Mid	Band D rates would change in value by amounts ranging between -£238 to £52, with mixed impact on residents.	Projected income income gain of £107m	Projected income income gain of £90m	Projected income gain of £71m	This scenario is not in line with Council Tax referendum limits.
	High	Band D rates would change in value by amounts ranging between -£224 to £67, with mixed impact on residents.	Projected income gain of £126m	Projected income gain of £106m	Projected income gain of £82m	This scenario is not line with Council Tax referendum limits.

3.1.3 Debts and Liabilities

Introduction to Debts and Liabilities

The following categories of debt and borrowing have been considered to provide a view of the financial position of each new Unitary Authority in Year 1.

The debts and liabilities module looks at the financial obligations that would transfer into any new unitary councils. It brings together debt, borrowing, and the Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG) High Needs deficit to provide a clear Day 1 picture of the liabilities position.

The aim is to:

- Show the size and sustainability of liabilities under each reorganisation scenario.
- Ensure transparency about what each new authority would inherit.
- Support prudent financial planning and early risk management.

Local Context

As part of the overall model's focus on understanding the future financial position from a General Fund perspective, HRA-related debts and liabilities has been excluded from calculations.

- **Oxford City Council**: The geography's HRA funds are largely concentrated in the city, which has been removed from total baselines.

- Some Councils have had limited external borrowing, leading to lower figures for total debts and liabilities as well as MRP payments.
  - **South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Hors**e have a borrowing need but would not need to borrow externally to fund its Capital Programme Growth Bids. It has no anticipated MRP in 2024/25 or 2025/26.
- **West Berkshire** has received Exceptional Financial Support. This is treated as a long-term liability in the model potential to increase ahead of vesting day. However, as the model provides a 'moment-in-time' view of the financial position, any increased need for EFS is not explicitly projected in the model.
- DSG High Needs Deficits are currently calculated against the latest published data (July 2025) and is not included in the Y1 Balance Sheet due to the uncertainty around Government's approach. However, the deficit is expected to increase up until vesting day.

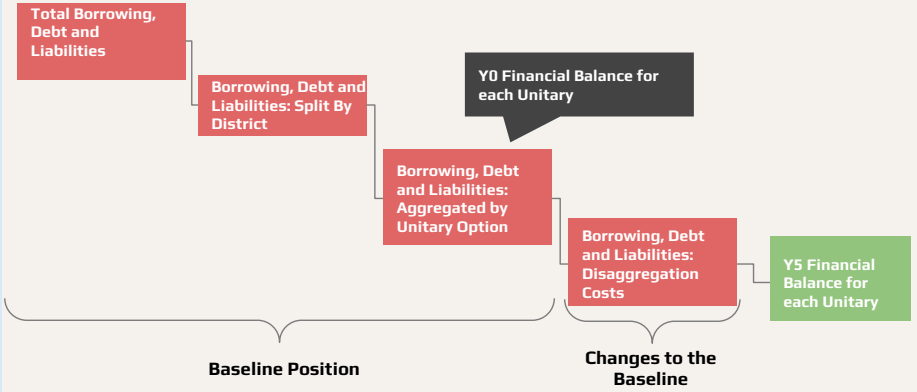
Categories of Debt	Description
Debt	Total current outstanding debt obligations
Short-Term Borrowing	Temporary borrowing repayable within 12 months
Long-Term Borrowing	Borrowing repayable over multiple years
Capital Financing Requirement (CFR)	Underlying need to borrow for capital purposes
Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG) High Needs Deficit	Prior year overspends on DSG
Exceptional Financial Support (EFS)	Exceptional central government-approved borrowing to cover revenue pressures

Methodology: Debts and Liabilities

In the analysis, debt associated with current districts and unitaries remains with those organisations. Oxfordshire County Council debt must be apportioned to the new unitaries so that the overall debt for each new unitary can be seen. The basis for doing this in the analysis is set out in the following slides. In reality the apportionment of debt will be worked through in detail as part of the implementation of any new authorities.

The analysis follows three main steps:

1. **Start with forward-looking liabilities**
   - Use each council's capital financing requirement (CFR) as a proxy for borrowing need. It is assumed MRP is already accounted for in the CFR.
   - Assume councils use reserves where available (as set out in their MTFS).
2. **Apportion County liabilities**
   - County debt allocated to Oxford and Shires /Ridgeway based on the distribution of assets.
   - DSG High Needs deficit split by the proportion of Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs) in each area.
3. **Aggregate totals**
   - Combine County liabilities with each District's own liabilities to produce a unitary-level position.



Assumptions

Assumptions for Debts and Liabilities
The guiding principle is that debt follows the asset, allocating liabilities to the old authority assuming responsibility for the related asset which can then be aggregated back up into the new unitary configurations.
The cost of transferring debt between organisation has not been included.
Projected year-on-year Capital Financing Requirement (CFR) is used as a proxy to forecast the total debts and liabilities set to land on vesting day.
HRA debt and liabilities will be removed from total debts, to support with a focused view on General Revenue Fund impact and analysis across the model.
The Newton Analysis on SEND Demand has been used as the guide for disaggregating County DSG High Needs deficit to the new Council

Inputs: Debts and Liabilities

The module uses the following inputs, basing projections on official, up-to-date, and locally relevant data (where it has been provided).

Input	Description	Source
Total Financial Liabilities	**Sum of:** Short term creditors, Short term borrowing, Short term provisions, Deferred liabilities, Long term borrowing, Long term provisions.	Statement of Accounts by County and District councils
Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG) High Needs Deficit	Prior year overspends on DSG High Needs, particularly in the High Needs Block	Specific and special revenue grants (SG) budget 2024 to 2025, GOV.UK
Capital Financing Requirement (CFR) projections	The CFR reflects the Council's underlying need to borrow.	Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS), Treasury Management Strategy, Capital Strategy, Engagement with Finance Leads
Minimum Revenue Provision (For information only)	Minimum payments made to the revenue budget to pay down debts.	Provided by local authorities

Inputs: Council Liabilities & Debt

We then gather the liabilities for each council using data from the Statement of Account, MTFS, and other relevant documents. The adjusted liabilities figure is determined by adding current liabilities, long-term liabilities, and EFS, while removing HRA liabilities.

Councils	2024/2025 Current Liability (£'000)	2024/2025 Long Term Liability (£'000)	2024/2025 HRA (£'000)	2024/2025 & 2025/2026 EFS (£'000)	2024/2025 Total Liability (£'000)
Cherwell District Council	67,768	183,694	-	-	251,462
Oxford City Council	81,013	318,510	270,910	-	128,613
West Oxfordshire Council	19,597	5,280	-	-	24,877
South Oxfordshire Council	48,785	-	-	-	48,785
Vale of White Horse Council	105,661	-	-	-	105,661
West Berkshire Council	148,429	286,366	-	2024/2025: 13,000 2025/2026: 3,000	434,795
Oxfordshire County	205,505	748,721	-	-	954,226
Total	676,758	1,542,571	270,910	-	1,948,419

Inputs: Capital Financing Requirement

Detailed below are the Capital Financing Requirements projected for each council, as detailed in their MTFS. HRA-related CFR have been removed from sum figures.

CFR (£'000)	2024/2025	2025/2026	2026/2027	2027/2028	2028/2029
Cherwell District Council	234,400	239,800	236,900	233,700	233,700
Oxford City Council	74,202	95,131	130,785	159,420	198,394
West Oxfordshire Council	28,620	34,540	33,500	32,150	31,060
South Oxfordshire	-	12,000	13,900	16,800	15,900
Vale of White Horse	-	8,300	10,153	13,032	12,665
West Berkshire	307,345	338,006	350,645	365,281	389,249
Oxfordshire County Council	505,477	559,002	598,412	623,125	623,796
Total	**1,006,872**	**1,089,899**	**1,124,315**	**1,179,694**	**1,208,451**
Oxford City Council (HRA)	406,026	527,632	599,659	663,716	721,262

Outputs: CFR Year-on-Year Change

Year-on-year change was allocated in the CFR as an indicator of future liability fluctuations and used to project liabilities forward.

Y-o-Y change in CFR	2025/2026 (£'000)	2026/2027 (£'000)	2027/2028 (£'000)	2028/2029 (£'000)
Cherwell District Council	5,400	-2,900	-3,200	0
Oxford City Council*	20,929	35,654	28,635	38,974
West Oxfordshire Council	5,920	-1,040	-1,350	-1,090
South Oxfordshire	12,000	1,900	2,900	-900
Vale of White Horse	8,300	1,853	2,879	-367
West Berkshire	30,661	12,639	14,636	23,968
Oxfordshire County Council	53,525	39,410	24,713	671
Total	**83,027**	**34,415**	**55,380**	**28,757**

**Oxford City Council's HRA CFR has been removed from figures.*

Outputs: Reorganised CFR Baselines

The new CFR baselines are set out below. The County Council's CFR liabilities have been apportioned out to the new authorities based on the asset net book value split, following the guiding assumption that debt follows assets.

CFR Y-o-Y Apportionment for OCC (£'000)	2025/2026 (£'000)	2026/2027 (£'000)	2027/2028 (£'000)	2028/2029 (£'000)
Oxford & Shires	39,041	28,746	18,026	489
Ridgeway	14,484	10,664	6,687	182
Total	**53,525**	**39,410**	**24,713**	**671**

Combined Y-o-Y CFR (£'000) follow Reorganisation	2025/2026 (£'000)	2026/2027 (£'000)	2027/2028 (£'000)	2028/2029 (£'000)
Oxford & Shires	71,290	60,460	42,111	38,373
Ridgeway	11,737	-26,044	13,269	-9,617
Total	**83,027**	**34,415**	**55,380**	**28,757**

For information: Council MRP

Minimum revenue provisions for the organisations are shown below for information. To note, South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse do not **have any anticipated MRP in 2024/25 or 2025/26.**

MRP (£'000)	2024/2025	2025/2026	2026/2027	2027/2028	2028/2029
Cherwell District Council	4,111	4,395	4,842	5,019	5,019
Oxford City Council	154	493	746	977	1,951
West Oxfordshire Council	520	560	690	690	620
South Oxfordshire Council	-	-	50	587	1,476
Vale of White Horse Council	-	-	147	621	968
West Berkshire Council	4,500	6,047	6,497	6,983	6,983
Oxfordshire County	16,377	16,377	19,784	22,152	24,026
Total	**25,662**	**27,872**	**32,756**	**37,029**	**41,043**

Outputs: Total Forward Looking Liabilities under 2 UA

All elements of the debt and liabilities module are brought together to develop an outlook of future liabilities for the 2UA option. The total forward looking liabilities includes pension liabilities. This is to ensure consistency in methodology as the long-term assets in the Day 1 Financial Position include pension assets, thus requiring a balanced view of pension liabilities to understand the asset-to-debt ratio.

24/25 Liabilities	Adjusted Liabilities (Excl. HRA Liabilities, Incl. EFS)	Asset Apportionment	Apportioned OCC Liability (Based on Assets)	Total Liabilities Incl. apportioned amount
Oxford & Shires	404,952	73%	696,016	1,100,968
Ridgeway	602,241	27%	258,210	860,451
Total	**1,007,193**	**100%**	**954,226**	**1,961,419**

Reorganised Forward Looking Liabilities (£'000)	2024/2025	2025/2026	2026/2027	2027/2028	2028/2029
Oxford & Shires	1,100,968	1,172,259	1,232,718	1,274,829	1,313,203
Ridgeway*	860,451	875,188	852,143	868,412	861,795
Total	**1,961,419**	**2,047,446**	**2,084,862**	**2,143,241**	**2,174,998**

*includes West Berkshire EFS 2025/26

Outputs: DSG High Needs Deficits

Adjacent to this, the module also models how the DSG High Needs deficit may be disaggregated across the two unitary authorities based on Newton SEND Demand analysis.

Regions	EHCPs	Deficit (24/25) (£'000)	Deficit (25/26) (£'000)	Newton Disaggregation Guide	Disaggregated 24/25 (£'000)	Disaggregated 25/26 (£'000)
Oxford and Shires (OCC)	8000	92,500	137,000	56%	54,575	76,720
Ridgeway (OCC)				44%	37,925	60,280
Total	**8000**	**92,500**	**137,000**	**100%**	**92,500**	**137,000**
West Berkshire	1,707	16,300	37,000	N/A	N/A	N/A

Statutory reporting requirements for the 2025/26 accounts require the closing deficit balance on Dedicated Schools Grant to be held within an unusable reserve. The existing statutory override was due to end on 31 March 2026 but the Government has extended this until 31 March 2028. Councils will continue to take action to manage the deficit through the Deficit Management Plan, it is continuing to grow in line with demand and is expected to increase further by the end of 2025/26.

Outputs: Apportioning DSG High Needs Deficit

Adjacent to this, the module also models how the DSG High Needs deficit may be disaggregated across the two unitary authorities based on Newton SEND Demand analysis.

DSG High Needs Deficit following Reorganisation

Regions	No. EHCPS	Deficit Baseline (24/25) (£'000)	Deficit Baseline (25/26) (£'000)
Oxford and Shires	**4,480**	51,800	72,720
Ridgeway	**5,227**	57,000	97,280

3.2 Demand Increases (Expenditure)

Overview of Demand Increase

This module reviews and models the current and projected net operating expenditure for each proposed unitary authority in Oxfordshire. It combines County and District expenditure to give a complete picture of the cost base in the two-unitary scenario.

The aims are to:

- Provide a clear, consistent view of net operating expenditure across all councils.
- Show how current net operating expenditure would be allocated to new unitary structures.
- Support strategic planning for service design, resource prioritisation, and budget setting.

This analysis does **not** forecast changes in statutory requirements or new cost pressures beyond those already included in councils' MTFS projections**.**

Methodology

The approach has three main stages:

1. **Gather data**
   - Use County Council MTFS forecasts by service area (Adults, Children's, Public Health, etc.) for 2025–2028.
   - Collect District and Unitary Council net operating expenditure forecasts from their MTFS/MTFP.
2. **Allocate County costs**
   - Split Adults and Children's services between Oxford and Shires and Ridgeway using Newton model demand data for Day 1.
   - Split all other County services by population share, based on ONS forecasts.
3. **Combine and total**
   - Add the apportioned County figures to the District expenditure for each geography.
   - Calculate total estimated day 1 net operating expenditure for the Oxford and Shires and Ridgeway unitaries.

Assumptions

Assumptions for Demand Increases
Significant and material demand increases are not expected from lower tier services.
Demand data from 2025 to 2030 in the Newton Report has been used to to apportion Adult Social Care and Children Social Care services.
Other services are split by population share, which changes annually in line with ONS forecasts.
Population forecasts are based on 2025–2029 ONS projections for each local authority.
District net operating expenditure has been taken directly from MTFS or MTFP figures provided by each council.

Inputs: Demand Increase

The module uses three main inputs. This ensures we are basing the projections on official, up-to-date, and locally relevant data (where it has been provided).

Input	Description	Source
Forward Looking Expenditure	Forward Looking Expenditure from MTFS	MTFS from District Councils
Newton Demand	Adult's and Children's Demand Data by Vesting Day/Day 1	Provided by County Council from Newton
Population	Forward looking total population projections	Office of National Statistics

Inputs: Forward looking District & Unitary expenditure

This table shows each district's projected net operating expenditure from their MTFS and MTFP from 2025/26 through to 2027/28, along with the relevant note used from the financial statements.

Council	2025/2026 (£'000)	2026/2027 (£'000)	2027/2028 (£'000)	2UA Split	Source	Note used
Cherwell District Council	26,194	28,147	30,004	Oxford & Shires	MTFS within Budget 25	Net Budget Requirement *(Presented as Year on Year Change)*
Oxford City Council	27,259	33,271	34,016	Oxford & Shires	MTFS within Budget 25	Consultation Budget including 'Subtotal changes since the consultation budget note'
West Oxfordshire Council	18,231	18,717	21,474	Oxford & Shires	MTFS	Net Expenditure
South Oxfordshire Council	17,867	17,389	20,484	Ridgeway	MTFP	Net Expenditure
Vale of White Horse Council	19,746	21,509	23,092	Ridgeway	MTFP	Net Expenditure
West Berkshire Council	192,300	206,200	210,500	Ridgeway	MTFS	Budget Requirement

Inputs: Breakdown of forward looking County expenditure

This table shows the projected net operating expenditure for Oxfordshire County Council from its MTFS. This will need to be apportioned to the new UA's in the future model. For reference, expenditure related to police or fire services has been deemed out of scope.

Programme Budget Areas	2025/26 (£'000)	2026/2027 (£'000)	2027/2028 (£'000)
Adults	254,486	269,493	286,623
Children's	216,650	222,507	234,843
Environment & Highways	53,033	54,374	58,398
Economy & Place	21,235	17,998	18,044
Oxfordshire Fire & Rescue Services and Community Safety	30,626	31,559	32,142
Public Health & Communities	12,960	13,572	13,560
Resources and Law & Governance	62,364	61,357	62,912
Transformation, Digital & Customer Experience	6,596	6,763	6,862
Total Service Area Budgets	657,950	677,623	713,384
Strategic Measures	38,166	49,664	51,135
Contributions to / from Reserves	13,196	12,996	12,996
Budget Shortfall	0	-2,089	-4,815
Net Operating Budget	709,312	740,283	777,515

Inputs: Understanding current & future demand in ASC & CSC across Oxfordshire

Newton demand data has been used and in order to apportion Oxfordshire County council expenditures across ASC & CSC in a equitable manner. The number of working age adults and overage adults across Nursing, Residential care, Domiciliary care, Supporting Living and those categorised as 'Other' has been totaled in 2025 and 2030. The average annual increase taken and applied to FY 2025/26 to FY 2027/28.

The same approach has been applied for Children's services, with the number of children in care, those in residential care, IFA Fostering, Internal Fostering and those categorised as 'Other' totalled as below.

	2025/26		2026/2027		2027/2028	
Council	ASC Service User	CSC Service User	ASC Service User	CSC Service User	ASC Service User	CSC Service User
Cherwell District Council	1,738	329	1,765	328	1,792	326
Oxford City Council	1,280	541	1,297	541	1,315	541
West Oxfordshire Council	1,405	265	1,437	263	1,470	261
South Oxfordshire Council	1,731	330	1,763	330	1,796	330
Vale of White Horse Council	1,541	169	1,524	168	1,507	167
Total	**7,696**	**1,634**	**7,787**	**1,630**	**7,881**	**1,625**

Inputs: Apportioning OCC Adult Social Care and Children's Services expenditure

This table shows the proportions used to split County expenditure between Ridgeway and Oxford and Shires in a 2UA model for Adults and Children's based on the Newton demand data across Adult Social care and Children's services.

	% of Expenditure Apportioned to each area		
Council	**2025/2026**	**2026/2027**	**2027/2028**
Adult Social Care			
Oxford & Shires	59.25%	58.90%	58.55%
Ridgeway	40.75%	41.10%	41.45%
Children's Social Care			
Oxford & Shires	63.60%	63.63%	63.65%
Ridgeway	36.40%	36.37%	36.35%

Inputs: ONS Population Projections

The remaining services County Expenditure are apportioned in the 2UA model using population proportions. This is assumed as a broad proxy for aggregate service demand. The table below shows the population proportions used for the 2UA calculations. The total aggregate population proportions used to split County expenditure between Oxford and Shires and Ridgeway is also shown.

Council	2025/2026	2026/2027	2027/2028	2UA split	Source
Cherwell District	172,283.00	174,214.00	176,065.00	Oxford and Shires	ONS Population Projections
Oxford City	171,498.00	170,562.00	169,946.00	Oxford and Shires	
West Oxfordshire	120,905.00	121,965.00	122,987.00	Oxford and Shires	
South Oxfordshire	157,893.00	159,508.00	160,995.00	Ridgeway	
Vale of White Horse	150,552.00	152,620.00	154,532.00	Ridgeway	

Council	2025/2026	2026/2027	2027/2028
Oxford and Shires	60.10%	59.93%	59.78%
Ridgeway	39.90%	40.07%	40.22%

Outputs: Total Apportioned County Expenditure across the 2UA scenario

This shows Oxfordshire County Councils Total Apportioned County expenditure for all services for both Ridgeway and Oxford and Shires. This does not include West Berkshire.

	Oxford & Shires			Ridgeway		
Programme Budget Areas	**2025/26 (£'000)**	**2026/2027 (£'000)**	**2027/2028 (£'000)**	**2025/26 (£'000)**	**2026/2027 (£'000)**	**2027/2028 (£'000)**
Adults	150,789	158,733	167,819	103,697	110,760	118,804
Children's	137,792	141,571	149,478	78,858	80,936	85,365
Environment & Highways	31,875	32,584	34,911	21,158	21,790	23,487
Economy & Place	12,763	10,785	10,787	8,472	7,213	7,257
Oxfordshire Fire & Community Safety	7,790	8,133	8,106	719	744	761
Public Health & Communities	18,408	18,912	19,215	5,170	5,439	5,454
Resources and Law & Governance	37,484	36,768	37,610	24,880	24,589	25,302
Transformation, Digital & Customer Experience	3,964	4,053	4,102	2,632	2,710	2,760
Total	400,864	411,540	432,027	245,586	254,180	269,191
Strategic Measures	22,939	29,761	30,569	15,227	19,903	20,566
Contributions to / from Reserves	7,931	7,788	7,769	5,265	5,208	5,227
Budget Shortfall	0	-1,252	-2,878	0	-837	-1,937
Net Operating Budget	431,735	449,089	470,365	277,577	291,194	307,150

Outputs: Total Estimated future expenditure

This table highlights the total estimated expenditure by each Unitary Authority that could be created through this process. Ridgeway yields larger expenditure due to the inclusion of West Berkshire, whilst Oxford & Shires inherits a larger share of the county expenditure, bringing the two unitary options close together in terms of expenditure.

Council	2025/2026 (£'000)	2026/2027 (£'000)	2027/2028 (£'000)
2UA			
Oxford and Shires	503,419	529,224	555,859
Ridgeway (including West Berkshire Expenditure)	507,490	536,292	561,226
Total	1,010,909	1,065,516	1,117,085

3.3 Third Party Spend

Introduction to Third Party Spend

This module examines spending with external suppliers, contractual commitments, and ICT systems across all councils. It looks at current patterns of third-party spend, identifies duplication, and highlights opportunities for consolidation and efficiency in a new unitary authority structure.

The aims are to:

- Estimate the overall level of addressable third-party spend.
- Map existing supplier relationships, contracts, and ICT assets across councils.
- Quantify potential savings from supplier consolidation, contract renegotiation, and ICT harmonisation.
- Provide a baseline for a unified procurement and contract management approach in a new authority.

This module captures LGR-only benefits, such as removing duplicate contracts and any other direct LGR efficiencies. Any additional benefits realised post LGR, through policy changes and transformation activities, are captured in the Policy and Transformation module.

Local Context

The model has been tailored to the Local context. The narrative below highlights where discussions have shaped the modeling of third party spend across certain areas :

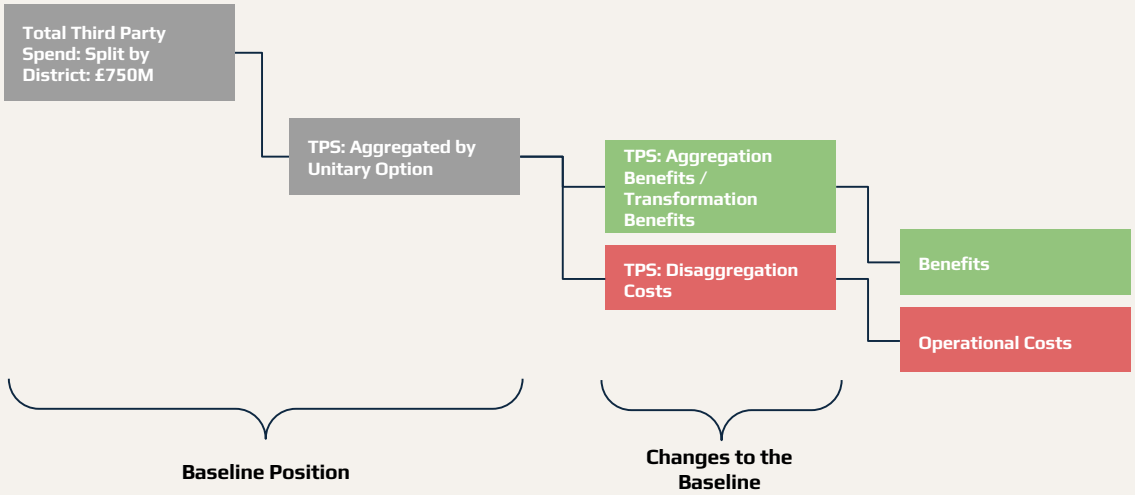
- It is understood that third party spend related to Fire and Rescue services or Police Services are not addressable in both the 1 and 2UA scenarios, and have been removed from the addressability baseline.
- Oxfordshire County Council spend has been apportioned using Newton Demand analysis for Adult Social Care and Children's services, with population projections serving as the proxy for other services.
- Under the 2UA option, addressability is calculated only for services provided by the district councils. As districts do not provide Education, Adult Social Care, Children's Services, or Public Health, any Oxfordshire County Council spend in these categories has 0% addressability and is excluded from the calculations.

Methodology

The TPS module assesses the financial impact of different Unitary Authority configurations by aggregating third-party spend, identifying disaggregation costs, and quantifying transformation benefits. This approach enables a comparison of net financial outcomes under varying structural scenarios, with a view to informing resilient and cost-effective reorganisation options.

The process follows three main steps:

1. **Determine addressable spend**
   - Use a % RO running costs as TPS where specific TPS spend not provided
   - Assume a variable % of those costs are addressable
2. **Apportion County spend**
   - Allocate the County's third-party spend to districts using the same approach as the Expenditure Module.
3. **Aggregate and model savings**
   - Add apportioned County spend to district spend for each geography.
   - Calculate total TPS for a Single UA and for Oxford & Shires / Ridgeway in a 2UA model.
   - Apply a reduction assumption (economies of scale and duplication removal) to estimate achievable savings.



Inputs

The module uses two main inputs. This ensures we are basing the projections on official, up-to-date, and locally relevant data (where it has been provided).

Input	Description	Source
Revenue Outturn 2024/2024 & 2024/2025	Revenue Outturn (RO) 2023-24: Service Expenditure Summary. Running expenses only *(West Berkshire only).* Revenue Outturn (RO) 2024-25: Service Expenditure Summary. Running expenses only.	General Fund Revenue Account Outturn - RSX Service Expenditure Summary 2023-24 24/25 RO provided by LAs.
Demand and Population data	For apportionment of Oxfordshire County Council Third Party spend.	Population projections for local authorities by five-year age groups and sex, England

Assumptions

The following core assumptions have been applied throughout the TPS analysis to ensure consistency and clarity in the dataset and methodology.

Assumptions for Third Party Spend
The 2UA option will involve the disaggregation of the County Council. As such, any shared services and service provision agreements will need to be factored in when developing a view of Third Party Spend in the reconfigured UAs.
County Council spend has been apportioned utilising demand analysis by Newton for Adult and Children Services, and ONS population projections for the rest. This follows the apportionment method in the demand increases module.
Savings assumption Rationale: A variable range % of addressable third-party spend (depending on scenario) can be saved through consolidation and efficiency, based on initial options appraisal. Ranges differ by service as: - Central services are likely to have a larger % as software/licensing, networks, end-user devices and insurance can be rationalised quickly. - Environmental/regulatory and Highways are also high: many contracts are re-tenderable or re-lottable and benefit from route/spec/lot consolidation; exceptions are long-term waste disposal/energy-from-waste and any highways DBFO/PFI. - Cultural varies with leisure trust contracts; if most sites are on long concessions, addressability falls. - Housing (GFRA) is mixed: TA/agency accommodation markets are usually hard to address but R&M frameworks are typically addressable. - Public Health has been deemed as 0% addressable due to ring-fenced funding. It is recognised that efficiencies can still be delivered.

Assumptions

Based on the government's Subjective Analysis – Service Expenditure 2022/23, the % of running expenses that was categorised at TPS has been detailed below. This has been utilised where the Revenue Outturn data for each LA has been used as a baseline for spend.

Area	% of Running Expenses made up by TPS
Education services	38%
Highways and transport services	38%
Children Social Care	64%
Adult Social Care	86%
Public Health	38%
Housing services (GFRA only)	38%
Cultural and related services	38%
Environmental and regulatory services	38%
Planning and development services	38%
Central Services	38%

Inputs: Total TPS Spend

This slide shows the total third-party spend for each council, Revenue Outturn data has been utilised for this module due to the limited data completeness across the contract registers. RO Data 2024/25 has been used where provided. If not provided then publically available RO Data 2023/24 has been utilised, with an inflation multiplier (3.3% as per the ONS) attached to bring level with the 2024/25 datasets.

Council	Type	Spend (£'000)	Source
Cherwell District	District Council	11,120	RO Data 24/25
Oxford City	District Council	23,926	RO Data 24/25
West Oxfordshire	District Council	8,150	RO Data 24/25
South Oxfordshire	District Council	12,476	TPS provided by email
Vale of White Horse	District Council	10,508	TPS provided by email
West Berkshire	Unitary Council	144,187	RO Data 23/24 with inflation multiplier applied
Oxfordshire County	County Council	540,354	RO Data 24/25
Total		**750,722**	

Outputs: Apportioning the County Council TPS Spend

Oxfordshire County Council's Children Social Care and Adult Social Care were apportioned using demand data and the remainder were apportioned using population from the Expenditure Module.

Area	Spend 2 UA - Oxford and Shires (£'000)	Spend 2 UA - Ridgeway (£'000)
Education services	64,388	42,747
Highways and transport services	12,005	7,970
Children Social Care	46,679	26,716
Adult Social Care	171,390	117,876
Public Health	8,237	5,469
Housing services (GFRA only)	1,540	1,023
Cultural and related services	1,563	1,038
Environmental and regulatory services	8,056	5,348
Planning and development services	812	539
Central Services	10,192	6,766
Total	**324,863**	**215,491**

Outputs: Estimated TPS in each LGR scenario

Detailed below is the combined third-party spend for the 2UA Model. This includes the apportioned County Council spend in addition to the relevant district spend.

	2UA	
Area	**Oxford and Shires (£'000)**	**Ridgeway (£'000)**
Education services	64,388	64,661
Highways and transport services	15,270	11,547
Children Social Care	46,679	46,192
Adult Social Care	171,390	198,806
Public Health	8,237	7,521
Housing services (GFRA only)	10,289	5,137
Cultural and related services	5,954	4,499
Environmental and regulatory services	21,368	20,585
Planning and development services	7,068	4,981
Central Services	17,416	18,733
Total	368,060	382,662

Outputs: Estimated Addressable Spend

Detailed below is the combined third-party spend for the 2UA reorganisation option. This considers both an lower and upper limit saving possibility. Social care was excluded from TPS addressability because moving to a 2UA model offers no addressable TPS savings; the statutory requirement and contract volumes remain unchanged, so the opportunity lies in transformation (better contracting and commissioning) rather than TPS savings.

Area	Lower End: Addressability	Upper End: Addressability	Lower End - Oxford and Shires Addressable Spend (£'000)	Higher End - Oxford and Shires Addressable Spend (£'000)	Lower End - Ridgeway Addressable Spend (£'000)	Higher End - Ridgeway Addressable Spend (£'000)
Education services						
Highways and transport services	50%	70%	7,635	10,689	5,774	8,083
Children Social Care						
Adult Social Care						
Public Health						
Housing services (GFRA only)	50%	60%	5,144	6,173	2,568	3,082
Cultural and related services	70%	80%	4,168	4,763	3,149	3,599
Environmental and regulatory services	70%	80%	14,958	17,094	14,409	16,468
Planning and development services	60%	70%	4,241	4,947	2,989	3,487
Central Services	80%	85%	13,933	14,804	14,986	15,923
Total			**50,078**	**58,471**	**43,875**	**50,641**

Outputs: Estimated Savings

This is the combined third-party spend for the 2UA reorganisation option. By applying a modest efficiency assumption in line with reductions found in other local authorities to have undergone LGR, we estimate recurring savings of around £1.88m to £2.2m in Oxford and Shires and Ridgeway authorities.

Area Spend		Combined TPS for reorganisation options (£'000)	Estimated addressable third party spend Lower Limit (£'000)	Estimated addressable third party spend Upper Limit (£'000)	Assumed savings % to be achieved through consolidation	Value of savings Lower Limit (£'000)	Value of savings Upper Limit (£'000)
Two Unitary Authorities	Oxford and Shires	368,060	50,078	58,471	2.00%	1,002	1,169
	Ridgeway	382,662	43,875	50,641	2.00%	878	1,013
Total		**750,722**	**93,954**	**109,113**		**1,879**	**2,182**

3.4 Assets

Introduction to Assets

This module brings together the assets currently held by the County, District Councils and West Berkshire. It estimates what the total asset portfolio would look like for each of the potential new authorities under local government reorganisation.

The aim is to give a clear, evidence-based estimate of what each new authority would own on Day 1, from an existing net book value perspective, once planned and potential disposals are taken into account.

Assets have been disaggregated to district boundaries. Existing district and unitary assets remain in the geography of the current districts/unitaries. Oxfordshire County Council assets have been disaggregated based on their geography and assigned to the new unitaries on this basis.

Local Context

The model has been tailored to the Oxfordshire context. The narrative below highlights where local context have shaped the modelling of potential one-off capital receipts from reorganisation and transformation:

- The module assumes that only assets categorised as 'Operational Assets' and 'Surplus Assets' are disposable.
- **'Operational Assets' are further broken down into subcategories,** with a view that certain types are more addressable than others.
- It is understood that **assets related to Fire and Rescue services are not addressable in both the 1 and 2UA scenarios**, and have been removed from the addressability baseline, alongside other key subcategories that are politically sensitive that would not be rationalised through reorganisation (eg. Schools, Parks, etc.).
- **South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse** assets have been removed from the addressable baseline, following conversations with the respective organisations that significant efficiencies have already been made previously in combining assets under a shared service model and due to their limited addressable portfolio (eg. no additional offices). **This has overall dampened the capital receipts that can be derived from Ridgeway.**
- Where there are assets related to core service provision within a limited asset portfolio (eg. Cherwell District Council's waste disposal facilities), they have also been removed from the addressable baseline.
- It was noted that **certain assets listed under 'Operational Assets' are income generating**, such as Cherwell District Council and West Oxfordshire's shopping centres, and **would not be rationalised through reorganisation**. As a whole, such commercial properties and small holdings have been removed from the addressable baseline.
- It was noted that **certain types of assets** such as Car Parks, Libraries, Community Centres and Leisure Centres **wouldn't feasibly be rationalised through reorganisation,** but **may benefit from repurposing or disposal following a detailed review of service delivery models and strategic ambitions**. This means that such assets could potentially be addressed through transformation.

Methodology

The analysis follows a step-by-step process:

1. **Consolidate registers** – Gather asset data from each council, standardise it, remove Housing Revenue Account assets, and allocate County assets by location.
2. **Include planned disposals** – Use capital receipts already built into council's' MTFS or capital strategies.
3. **Add further disposals** – Include additional rationalisation opportunities identified through engagement.
4. **Adjust portfolios** – Subtract the value of disposals to show the likely Day 1 portfolio for each council.



Assumptions

Assumptions for Assets
The asset register provides an accurate view of the estate portfolio.
Net book value is used as a proxy for market value, noting that future authorities will need to revisit the value of assets during implementation for a more accurate view.
Assets Under Construction and assets labelled as Infrastructure Work have been excluded from addressable baselines as these are recognised to be ongoing property developments, on top of existing assets, which are unlikely to be rationalised through implementation.
OCC's Net Book Value is used for property valuations and used to distribute debt in the Borrowing, Debt and Liabilities module.
Assets categorised as Community Assets, Investment Properties, Council Dwelling and Heritage Assets are considered to be 'unaddressable' through local government reorganisation.
The module maintains the estimated disaggregation benefit of 12.5% for the 2UA option.
A third of surplus assets may be disposed through local government reorganisation.
Capital receipt savings are not built into the comparative analysis, which primarily aims to understand what recurring operational expenditure savings can be made against total expenditure.
The ownership of property assets owned by the County will follow the location of the Unitary they currently sit in, including out-of-county assets.
Fire and Rescue assets will not be rationalised, and have been removed from the baseline.
The original assumption around proportion of Council Revenue Expenditure on Property from the CCN Analysis has been amended from 5% to 2% due to refined NBV of Heritage Assets and Community Assets, which typically require greater asset maintenance spend.

Inputs

The model uses the following inputs to develop the assets module.

Input Asset categories	Description	Data input	Source
Property Asset Register	The Property Assets Register is a detailed inventory of all land and buildings owned or leased by the council, including location, usage, ownership status, and asset value.	Property Asset Register	Data request
Additional land and property consolidation	There are additional opportunities for rationalisation in a unitary, due to duplication of potential property assets, and unused property assets.	Additional land and property consolidation by property category	Engagement with council stakeholders

Inputs: Net Book Value

By taking the current net book value (NBV) of assets for each Council and removing any assets associated with Housing Revenue Accounts, the module estimates the NBV of each Council's current asset portfolio. This has been broken down into 6 categories of Assets which make up the Net Book Value.

	Net Book Value Total (£'000)	1. Operational Assets (£'000)	2. Community Assets (£'000)	3. Surplus Assets (£'000)	4. Investment Properties (£'000)	5. Council Dwellings (£'000)	6. Heritage Assets (£'000)
Cherwell District Council	**173,369**	164,046	324	4,454	4,545	-	-
Oxford City Council	**1,313,460**	294,391	1,92	2,440	145,810	865,219	3,677
West Oxfordshire Council	**129,716**	71,558	994	3,581	53,491	-	91
South Oxfordshire Council	**56,676**	50,275	1,231	-	5,169	-	-
Vale of White Horse Council	**83,108**	78,982	892	-	3,234	-	-
Oxfordshire County Council	**1,509,869**	1,477,700	-	8,274	23,895	-	-
West Berkshire Council	**403,755**	349,947	191	1,855	51,762	-	-
Total	**3,669,952**	**2,486,901**	**5,554**	**20,604**	**287,906**	**865,219**	**3,768**

Outputs: Baseline post Re-organisation

The Net Book Values of the current districts/councils have been used to determine the baseline values. Distribution of Oxfordshire County Council's assets have followed address, leading to a greater concentration of assets in Oxford and Shires.

	Net Book Value Total (£'000)	1. Operational Assets (£'000)	2. Community Assets (£'000)	3. Surplus Assets (£'000)	4. Investment Properties (£'000)	5. Council Dwellings (£'000)	6. Heritage Assets (£'000)
Oxford & Shires	2,717,849	1,607,836	3,240	16,510	221,276	865,219	3,768
Ridgeway	952,103	879,065	2,314	4,094	66,630	-	-
Total	**3,669,952**	**2,486,901**	**5,554**	**20,604**	**287,906**	**865,219**	**3,768**

Outputs: Detailed Analysis of Asset Types

It is assumed that only Operational Assets are addressable as part of LGR aggregation. However, even within that category, certain categories of assets have high, medium, low or no addressability either due to their own particular characteristics, and may only be addressable following detailed review under a transformation programme.

High Addressability (60%)	Medium Addressability (30%)	Low Addressability (10%)	No Addressability (0%)
These types of assets are more easily addressable and more impacted by the aggregation process. In the model, this means that the total NBV of these assets are considered highly addressable.	These assets are somewhat addressable, with the understanding that geographies and current spread of assets may make it more challenging to amalgamate such properties.	These types of assets have limited addressability. It may be more likely that these benefits are delivered through transformation, and would not be rationalised easily from reorganisation.	These types of assets are more sensitive in nature or are overall essential to the provision of core services (eg. Cherwell's waste disposal facility).

	High Addressability (60%)	Medium Addressability (30%)	Low Addressability (10%)	No Addressability (0%)
Reorganisation	• Offices	• Depots • Fleets	N/A	• Schools • Libraries • Parks • Crematoria • Waste Disposal • Commercial property • Caravan Site • Public Convenience • Care Homes • Community Centres
Transformation	N/A	N/A	• Allotments • Car Parks • Leisure Centre • Sports Facility • Libraries • Community Centres	It is assumed that addressable assets from reorganisation will have limited material benefits from transformation to minimise possibilities of double-counting. • Offices, Depots, Fleets

Outputs: Digging Deeper into the Operational Assets

Detailed below is the refined baselines for the property categories listed relevant to both Reorganisation and Transformation. **South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse** assets have been **removed from the reorganisation addressable baseline**, following conversations with the respective organisations that significant efficiencies have already been made previously in combining assets under a shared service model and due to their limited addressable portfolio (eg. no additional offices). However, benefits could be derived through transformation under the future authority.

Reorganisation Baseline	CDC (£'000)	Oxford City (£'000)	West Oxon (£'000)	South Ox (£'000)	Vale (£'000)	OCC (£'000)	West Berkshire (£'000)
High Addressability	6,968	781	292*	N/A	N/A	11,856	8,760
Medium Addressability	6,188	9,512	93	N/A	N/A	10,213	0

Transformation Baseline	CDC (£'000)	Oxford City (£'000)	West Oxon (£'000)	South Ox (£'000)	Vale (£'000)	OCC (£'000)	West Berkshire (£'000)
Low Addressability	53,203	133,206	27,675	450	6,458	83,894	38,119

**West Oxfordshire has offices with no net book value attached (eg. Elmfield Office). This figure may be slightly lower than actuals.*

Outputs: Apportioning Oxfordshire County Council Assets

Detailed below is the new baselines under the Oxford and Shires and Ridgeway authorities.

Reorganisation Baseline

Asset Category	OCC Asset Net Book Value (£'000)	Oxford and Shires (£'000)	Ridgeway (£'000)	Total Oxford and Shires (£'000)	Total Ridgeway (£'000)
High Addressability	11,856	8,648	3,208	16,689	11,967
Medium Addressability	10,023	7,450	2,764	23,244	2,764

Transformation Baseline

Asset Category	OCC Asset Net Book Value (£'000)	Oxford and Shires (£'000)	Ridgeway (£'000)	Total Oxford and Shires (£'000)	Total Ridgeway (£'000)
Low Addressability	83,894	61,192	22,701	275,276	67,729

Outputs: Reorganisation Capital Receipts and Disposals

Detailed below is the potential one-off capital receipts and income that could be delivered through property rationalisation as part of local government reorganisation.

	Total NBV of Category of Asset (£'000)	Addressability	Addressable Property (£'000)	Disaggregation Benefit	Addressable Savings (£'000)	Surplus Disposal (A Third of Surplus Asset, £'000)	Total Saving (£'000)
Oxford and Shires							
High Addressability	16,689	60%	10,014	12.5%	1,251	5,503	7,627
Medium Addressability	23,244	30%	6,973	12.5%	871		
Ridgeway							
High Addressability	11,967	60%	7,181	12.5%	898	1,365	2,366
Medium Addressability	2,764	30%	829	12.5%	104		

Outputs: Property Operational Expenditure Transformation

Property Operational expenditure (Property Opex) is estimated by taking FY 27/28 forecast demand expenditure (from the Demand Increases module) and assuming 2% of revenue relates to property to set the baseline. Applying a 12.5% disaggregation benefit yields LGR savings of £1.4m for Oxford & Shires and £1.4m for Ridgeway—£2.8m in total. This will form part of the consolidated view of aggregation benefits.

	Total Expenditure 27/28 (£'000)	% of Revenue Expenditure on Property	Addressable Property Spend (£'000)	Disaggregation Benefit (%)	Savings (£'000)
Oxford and Shires	555,859	2%	11,117	12.5%	1,390
Ridgeway	561,226		11,225		1,403
Total	**1,117,085**		22,342		2,793

Outputs: Transformation Capital Receipts and Disposals

Detailed below are the potential one-off capital receipts and disposals that could be realised through transformation, noting that **Transformation would require alignment to the new authorities strategic ambitions and optimised service delivery models.** The lower savings potential percentages set for Ridgeway speaks to South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse's limited low addressability asset portfolio, as they overall have less Sports Facilities, Community Centres, Car Parks etc. compared to Oxford and Shires.

	Total NBV of Category of Asset (£'000)	Addressability	Addressable Property (£'000)	Savings Potential (%)	Addressable Savings (£'000)
Oxford and Shires					
Base Assumptions	275,276	10%	27,528	0.5%	138
Stretch Assumption				1.5%	413
Ridgeway					
Base Assumptions	67,729	10%	6,773	0%	-
Stretch Assumption				0.5%	34

3.5 Staffing and Pay

Introduction to Staffing and Pay

This module assesses the financial impact of bringing all staff in the new unitary authorities onto a consistent pay and grading structure. It models the cost of aligning salaries by grade, so that people in the same role and grade are paid the same, regardless of which predecessor council they worked for.

The aims are to:

- Provide a clear picture of current pay structures across all councils.
- Estimate the cost of aligning salaries over different time frames.
- Support workforce design and pay modelling decisions during reorganisation.

This analysis does **not** cover wider changes to terms and conditions (e.g., annual leave, hours of work).

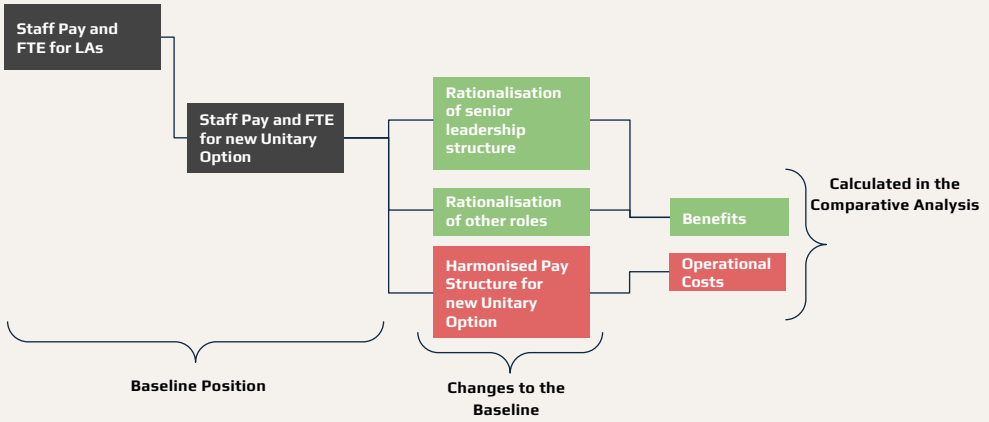
Methodology

The process follows three steps:

1. **Collect data**
   - Gathered each council's pay scales, salary bands, spinal column points (SCPs), and the number of full-time equivalent (FTE) staff in each grade.

2. **Identify alignment requirements**
   - Compared current salaries against the national SCP framework.
   - Flagged "decision points" where:
     - A salary band falls below the minimum SCP for that grade.
     - The midpoint salary is more than two SCP points away from the closest SCP.

3. **Model costs of alignment**
   - Set a consistent pay point for each grade in the new authority (aligned to the max of the new band).
   - Applied this to all staff, with alignment phased evenly over 1–5 years.
   - Calculated total staffing costs for each alignment period.



Assumptions

Assumptions for Staffing and Pay
No pension impact has been included, as individual differences mean costs vary too much to model reliably.
Pay inflation before vesting day has been excluded, salaries are shown in today's terms for Day 1.
Pay inflation during alignment, a figure of 3.5% annual growth used, based on current pay settlement forecasts (OBR, late 2025).
SCP movement limits – salary changes moving more than 2 SCP points trigger a decision point for review.
Schools staff have been excluded, as they are paid under separate national frameworks.
Any unclear or unmapped grades have been removed, this occurs where there was no valid mapping to a SCP.
FTE scope: Only people on the council payroll provided in the establishment data were included (e.g no Ubico, Publica)
The Workforce Salaries have been modelled to show the cost "if no one loses". No district staff will earn on average less in the unitary than in the previous district. Given how wide both the district and county bands are, staff have been aligned to the top of the band to make sure they are above the average district band. In practice, this incurs additional costs to the new Unitary Authority, and it is possible that not all current District Council FTE will earn more in future.

Outputs: Workforce Salary Alignment

The current and future costs of the 'as is' and 'to-be' salary structure of all the Oxfordshire county and district councils. The future costs of the New Salary Structures are taken by *aligning up* in one year. There are no assumptions on the total differences between Oxford & Shires and Ridgeway in the 2UA, so the monetary total is the same. The scenario assumes no one loses pay and all staff are uplifted to the county-level salary point. It does not map specific roles, grades, or structures, and should not be read as an HR proposal.

It provides a useful order-of-magnitude view of potential harmonisation exposure and enables like-for-like comparison across LGR options before detailed work is undertaken. Because the model uplifts everyone to the county rate, it will show additional costs. **These are directional, not definitive. Actual costs will depend on future pay line design, negotiations, phasing decisions, and organisational design.**

Council	Cost of harmonising up in one year (£'000)
Total old cost	275,673
Alignment Benefit / (Cost)	10,117
% Cost of New Structure	3.7%
Salary (New Structure)	285,790

Outputs: Workforce Salary Alignment

Below is a table showing the Cumulative Total Cost Benefit of Aligning Up net of workforce reduction. Pay alignment is split equally over the reorganisation period to distribute the impacts.

	Harmonisation Period (Years) (£'000)					
Year	**Do Nothing**	**1**	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**
1	275,673	285,790	280,732	279,046	278,202	277,697
2	285,322	295,793	295,793	292,303	290,557	289,510
3	295,308	306,146	306,146	306,146	303,436	301,811
4	305,644	316,861	316,861	316,861	316,861	314,617
5	316,341	327,951	327,951	327,951	327,951	327,951
Total	1,478,288	1,532,541	1,527,482	1,522,306	1,517,008	1,511,586
Benefit / (Cost)		-54,253	-49,194	-44,017	-38,720	-33,298

3.6 Members: Numbers and Election Costs

Introduction to Members and Elections

This module estimates the savings and costs linked to changing the number of councillors and streamlining elections under different LGR scenarios.

It examines:

- **Members' costs** – the basic allowances and special responsibility allowances (SRA) paid to elected councillors.
- **Election costs** – the cost of running local elections, and how these change when the county and district tiers are replaced by new unitary authorities.

The aims are to:

- Quantify the financial impact of reducing the number of councillors.
- Identify the election cost savings achievable from consolidating elections from two tiers of local government.
- Support decisions on governance structure and transition planning.

Methodology

The process has three main steps:

1. **Calculate current costs**
   - Collect current Basic Allowance and Special Responsibility Allowance (SRA) totals for all existing councils.
   - Calculate the total cost of county and district elections over a typical four-year cycle, using RO data for 'Conducting Elections' (Net current expenditure).

2. **Calculate anticipated costs for future unitary authorities**
   - Assume a range of councillor numbers from low, medium and high for the new unitary authorities, then use benchmarked allowance rates for all new unitary councillors to establish the base allowance member cost plus SRA allowances.
   - Establish an average cost of an election in each area from the RO data noted above, to be multiplied by the number of assumed elections for each new unitary authority over a four year election cycle.

3. **Estimate savings**
   - To establish the savings from both member allowances and elections, subtract modelled costs for the new unitary authorities from the baseline.

Inputs

The module uses the published basic allowances and SRA data from each, along with RO data. The election cost model also factors in the number of votes cast, the election cycle in each area, and anticipated electoral changes in the new unitary authority arrangements.

Members Input Categories	Description	Data input	Source
Number of Members and Allowances	The total number of elected councillors who sit on the council and represent different areas of the local authority and their total costs.	• Number of Members • Basic Allowances and SRAs	• Website of each council
Cost of Elections	The amount of money spent by the council to run elections including staffing, polling stations, printing, and counting votes.	• Election cycle rate • Total number of votes cast over last 4 years (2021-25) • RO data - Net current expenditure - 'Conducting Elections' category only	• Website of each council • Gov.uk - Local authority revenue expenditure and financing England: Revenue outturn multi-year data set

Assumptions

The following core assumptions have been applied throughout the Members and Elections analysis to ensure consistency and clarity in the dataset and methodology.

Assumptions for Members and Elections
General Members' Allowance in the new unitaries will match the current County rate (Oxford and Shires) or West Berkshire's UA rate (Ridgeway). Only Basic and SRA are included; other expenses such as mileage and IT are excluded due to variability.
A range of members numbers (high, medium and low figures) have been provided by the respective local authorities. The model takes the midpoint figure to model future member allowance costs.
Use of 'Conducting Elections' net current expenditure from published RO data • It is assumed the RO data accurately represents the costs incurred by the councils for running local elections. • Use of net current expenditure addresses any expenditure incurred for general elections due to income received from government to cover these elections. • Net current expenditure is taken across a four year period (one full election cycle) to reflect the different election models in each current organisation. This replaces an earlier modelling approach based on cost per vote due to limited local data and the variability of modelled costs that resulted.
It is assumed that each new unitary authority will elect all local councillors every four years, so there will be one election for each four year cycle. The overall election saving is calculated across the four years, then this is divided by four to provide an annualised saving.

Election and Member Current Baseline

Two-tier governance in Oxfordshire leads to numerous elections. This includes the upper tier local authority of Oxfordshire County Council and all 5 District councils. Unitary arrangements will streamline the elected-governance structure by consolidating district and county responsibilities. Basic Allowances from recent Unitary Authorities were benchmarked to estimate an average assumption for the future Unitary Authority. Where possible, the same was calculated for SRA based on the number of SRA roles and their costs.

Council	Council type	No. of councillors	Basic Allowance (£)	SRA (£)	Election cycle	Votes cast over the last four years
Oxfordshire County	County	69	953,856	384,865	Whole	191,781
South Oxfordshire	District	36	302,076	154,995	Whole	77,810
West Oxfordshire	District	49	255,829	183,824	Thirds	68,173
Oxford City	District	48	262,608	130,316	Halves	80,017
Cherwell	District	48	250,560	108,225	Thirds	113,137
Vale of White Horse	District	38	285,532	169,124	Whole	62,849
Oxfordshire Total						593,767
West Berkshire	Unitary	43	377,024	553,739	Whole	51,561
Grand Total		**331**	**2,687,485**	**1,685,087**		**645,328**

Total (Base + SRA): £4,372,572

Election Costs Baseline

Net Current Expenditure for 'Conducting Elections' from the RO returns for each organisation has been used to establish the overall baseline of election costs. This looks across four years (2021 to 2025) to establish costs for one full election cycle.

Council	Council type	Election cycle	Cost of conducting elections 2021/22	Cost of conducting elections 2022/23	Cost of conducting elections 2023/24	Cost of conducting elections 2024/25	Total cost of conducting elections over 4 years	Average cost per election	Votes cast over the last four years	Average cost per vote
Oxfordshire County	County	Whole	£799	£24	£31	£62	£916	£916	191,781	£4.78
South Oxfordshire	District	Whole	£76	£118	£314	£113	£621	£621	77,810	£7.98
West Oxfordshire*	District	Thirds	£39	£78	£85	£76	£278	£93	68,173	£4.08
Oxford City	District	Halves	£94	£98	£122	£457	£771	£386	80,017	£9.64
Cherwell	District	Thirds	£211	£376	£395	£470	£1,452	£484	113,137	£12.83
Vale of White Horse	District	Whole	£103	£225	£350	£130	£808	£808	62,849	£12.86
Oxfordshire Total			£1,322	£919	£1,297	£1,308	£4,846	£551	593,767	£8.69
West Berkshire	UA	Whole	£16	£8	£367	£48	£439	£439	51,561	£8.51
Grand Total			**£1,338**	**£927**	**£1,664**	**£1,356**	**£5,285**		**645,328**	**£8.67**

*Local data provided as entered into the RO as 'Central Costs'

Outputs: Democracy Savings Post Reorganisation

Financial savings through consolidating Member and Election costs for each of the new Unitary Authorities are shown below. Total councillor numbers will be decided by the shadow leadership for the new authorities and this analysis does not intend to pre-empt these decisions.

Member Costs and Savings

Option	Population	Population per Member (Low)	Population per Member (High)	Population per Member (Mid)	No. Councillors (Low)	No. Councillors (High)	No. Councillors (Mid)	Member Allowance (Low) (£'000)	Member Allowance (High) (£'000)	Member Allowance (Mid) (£'000)	Current Member Cost (£'000)	Saving (£'000)
Oxford and Shires	464,686	5,809	4,647	5,228	80	100	90	1,552	1,940	1,746	1,967	221
Ridgeway	472,156	5,902	4,722	5,312	80	100	90	1,731	2,165	1,948	2,405	457
Total	936,842	-	-	-	160	200	180	3,283	4,105	3,694	4,372	678

Election Costs and Savings

Council	Number of elections pre LGR	Number of elections post LGR	Cost of elections pre-LGR	Cost of elections post-LGR	Election Cost Saving over 4 years	Election Cost Saving annualised
Oxford & Shires	8 (plus OCC election)	1	£3,049	£551	£2,498	£625
Ridgeway	3 (plus OCC election)	1	£2,236	£439	£1,797	£449
Total	12 including OCC election	2	£5,285	£990	£4,295	£1,074

Total annual democracy saving
£846
£906
£1,752

3.7 MTFS

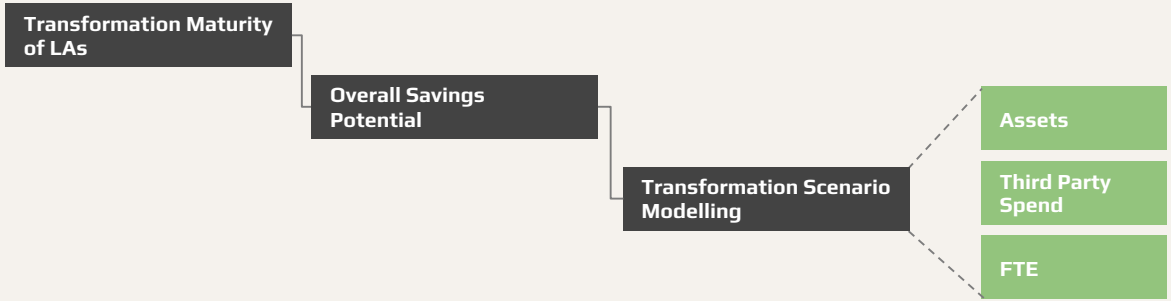
Methodology

The MTFS module applies a structured review of each organisation's medium-term financial strategy, assessing the maturity and deliverability of planned and historic savings, the scale of future savings required to achieve a balanced budget, and savings as a proportion of total expenditure. This assessment informs an aggregated view of transformation maturity at the unitary level and enables scenario modelling of potential financial benefits across three key cost areas: assets, third-party spend, and FTE.

Three components have been considered in the analysis:

1) Planned (identified and unidentified) savings for the next 3 years that are required to deliver a balanced budget
2) Qualitative review of where delivered and identified savings opportunities are in the organisation
3) Planned and delivered savings as a % of budget

The review assesses the maturity of savings, identifies potential opportunities, and references the ongoing budget gap using data from the latest MTFS. *This will directly inform the Policy & Transformation Module.*



Assumptions

Assumptions for MTFS	Elements Impacted
Historic / Present Savings may look like the following: • Vacancy Management and Workforce Restructuring • Back-office efficiencies and automation • Contract Renegotiation and Service Redesign • Income Generation and Cost Control efforts • Transformation and/or Recovery Programmes (ie. Financial Recovery Plans) • Asset Rationalisation and Disposals	**Assets:** Savings via asset disposals, better use of property / assets etc. **Third Party Spend:**Transformation programme can lead to TPS savings, be it through contract rationalisation, more favourable contract conditions, less use of short-term / reactive spend (ie. including savings from better contract management, negotiation and market-scanning through improved strategic commissioning and procurement capabilities) **FTE:** Forecasts for future establishment may decrease depending on assessment of transformation programmes (ie. greater back office efficiencies, digitisation etc.
Planned / Future Savings may look like the following: • Organisational Redesign and Capacity Building • Service Digitisation and Channel Shift • Demand Reduction and Prevention-led Approaches • Expansion of Income Strategies • Efficiency Reviews in Underexplored Areas (ie. IT)	

Inputs: MTFS Historical Performance Data

The module uses various inputs across each council. The main input is the MTFS for base budget & budget gap, where information for delivered savings & planned savings was not available in the MTFS, different inputs have been utilised.

Council	Delivered Savings	Planned Savings	Budget Gap	Base Budget
Oxfordshire	Source: Productivity Plan 24/25 & Comments: Savings identified as being 84% of £28.2m for 23/24. Savings identified as £20m against target of £26m for 24/25.	Source: Revenue Update & Monitoring report for 25/26 savings. Previously Agreed and Proposed Budget Proposals 2025/26 - 2027/28 for 26.27 savings. 27/28 savings provided directly.	Source: Budget Book (MTFS) Comments: Budget gap refers to the Total contributions to and from reserves.	Source: Budget Book (MTFS) Comments: Note used is Net Operating Budget.
Cherwell District	Source: Finance and Performance Monitoring Report 24/25 & Finance and Performance Monitoring Report 23/34 Comments: Savings identified within Table 2: Analysis of variance for FY 24/25 & FY23/24 under Savings non-delivery.	Source: MTFS Comments: Savings identified in Table 4.2.3: Service Efficiencies and Income Proposals.	Source: MTFS Comments: Budget gap refers to the Funding Gap / Surplus line within the MTFS.	Source: MTFS Comments: Note used is Net Budget Requirement.
Oxford City	Source: Spending Plan (23/24) and Statement of Accounts 24/25. Comments: Savings identified for 23/24 was £2.74M within spending plan. Savings identified for 24/25 were pulled from the SoA, with savings totalled to £2.96M.	Source: General Fund Budget Proposals Summary Comments: Planned savings refers to the Cumulative MTFP Position table. The net change each FY has been calculated.	Source: MTFS Comments: Budget gap refers to the additional Budget transfer to/(from) reserves & additional & transfer to/(from) reserves from amendments.	Source: MTFS Note used is Net Budget Requirement.
West Oxfordshire	Source: Outturn Report 23/24 & Outturn Report 24/25 Comments: Savings identified for each year in their respective outturn reports, where specific savings were detailed.	Source: MTFS Comments: Savings identified in MTFS are ones included in Target budget (NOE) lines.	Source: MTFS Comments: Budget gap refers to the use of GF reserves across the relevant years.	Source: MTFS Comments: Note used is Target Budget (NOE).
South Oxfordshire	Source: MTFS Comments: Note used is base budget savings and in-year savings target.	Source: MTFS Comments: Note used is base budget savings and in-year savings target.	Source: MTFS Comments: Budget gap refers to the Contribution to/(Use of) reserves to balance budget.	Source: MTFS Comments: Note used is Total Revised base budget.
Vale of White Horse	Source: MTFS Comments: Note used is base budget savings and in-year savings target.	Source: MTFS Comments: Note used is base budget savings and in-year savings target.	Source: MTFS Comments: Budget gap refers to the Contribution to/(Use of) reserves to balance budget.	Source: MTFS Comments: Note used is Total Revised base budget
West Berkshire	Source: Revenue Financial Performance: Provisional Outturn 2023-24 & 2024-2025 Comments: Delivered savings for 23/34 and 24/25 provided in the Revenue Financial Performance: Provisional Outturn documents.	Source: MTFP Comments: Notes used are: 10a Savings and income proposals identified, 10b Efficiency savings and 10c Savings and income gap.	Source: MTFP Comments: Budget hap refers to use of existing fund reserves or use of exceptional financial support.	Source: MTFP Comments: Note used is budget requirement.

Outputs: Historic MTFS Performance

The following sets out delivered and planned savings, transformation activity and savings maturity across individual authorities for operational expenditure. It should be noted that in the majority of cases savings have not been fully delivered and there has been a requirement to use reserves to balance budgets. Planned savings will also be impacted by the transition to the new model, as such individual savings will need to be reviewed during implementation to understand feasibility of implementation.

	Delivered Savings		Planned Savings			Budget Gap	Base Budget		% Saving of Budget			
	FY23-24 (£M)	FY24-25 (£M)	FY25-26 (£M)	FY26-27 (£M)	FY27-28 (£M)	Cumulative Gap FY25-26 to FY27-28	FY24-25 (£M)	FY25-26 (£M)	FY24-25 (%)	FY25-26 (%)	Historic Savings	Planned Savings
Oxfordshire	23.70	20.40	27.40	9.50	3.0	£32.28m	611.0	646.9	4.48%	4.65%	Achieved through longer-term service reviews, staff restructuring, and operational realignment.	OCC have placed emphasis on delivering cross-cutting savings across the service areas.
Cherwell District	0.20	0.63	1.38	1.70	1.86	£10.11m	26.9	26.2	2.34%	5.27%	Achieved through staff restructuring, increase in income generation through fees.	Savings focus on the process of continuous improvement and service transformation across the district, focussing on improving efficiency.
Oxford City	2.74	2.94	1.58	3.26	1.45	£2.47m	30,812	30.3	9.54%	5.21%	Achieved through staff restructuring, reduction in election costs.	Anticipated savings span all service areas and are based on improved fees & charges along with transformation activities.
West Oxfordshire	0.84	0.65	0.50	0.90	0.0	£6.45m	18.2	18.7	3.57%	2.67%	Improvements in IT systems, trade waste services, as well as streamlined internal processes.	Savings through exploration of Ubico and Waste contracts. Limited information on further saving proposals available.
South Oxfordshire	0.007	0.22	0.1	0.044	0.1	£1.86m	22.1	25.3	4.43%	2.96%	Reduced admin costs and contract costs, savings from office relocation.	Savings primarily focus on income generation, staff structure review and external funding deployment.
Vale of White Horse	1.060	0.207	0.274	0.078	0.1	£7.87m	23.2	24.64	2.03%	2.76%	Income from other local authorities and reduced costs savings from offices.	Reduction in spend across staff apportionment, housing benefits budget and bad debt provision.
West Berkshire	5.0	13.5	8.20	16.80	7.80	£5.3m (only FY 25/26)	174.5	192.3	7.74%	4.26%	Achieved through use of 3rd party partnerships and use of income generation through fees / charges.	Savings proposals focus on transformation programmes, directorate savings through efficiencies through use of technology, etc.

3.8 Policy and Transformation

Overview of Policy and Transformation

Purpose

This module looks at the **additional efficiency savings and income growth the new authorities could achieve post-vesting day** through localised service delivery agreements and transformation. This module has implications on other modules and helps reflect the localised conditions into the otherwise more general modelling approach.

The specific outputs from the module aims to:

- Identify realistic ("base") and ambitious ("stretch") savings potential over and above reorganisation benefits.
- Transformation potential is considered independent of structural model and delivered once consolidation is complete.
- Use evidence from local MTFS performance and the disaggregation and aggregation engagement sessions to inform base and stretch transformation scenarios. This covers:

FTE (Front Office, Service Delivery, Back Office)	Addressable Third Party Spend	Income Generation

Current Service Provision

This facet of of the module looks to capture the nuances of local service provision and how that may impact the anticipated costs and benefits of reorganisation.

These are taken into account at various points of the modelling process, and is largely factored into the baselines or calculations of specific modules (eg. by refining the addressability percentages, impact of the disaggregation of large contracts).*

Policy & Transformation

Transformation benefits are modelled in two stages: delivery pre-reorganisation and the potential change that can be delivered post re-organisation as well as any future local service delivery agreements that may influence the final positions (eg. maintaining a single Fire and Rescue Service regardless of reorganisation option).

**Note that it was agreed to shared service contracts valued less than £100k would not be disaggregated in this process as there will be little material impact.*

Methodology

Approach: Shared Service Provision

Some Councils have made certain efficiencies through setting up shared service delivery agreements, both pre and post-reorganisation. This may mean that existing services do not need to be disaggregated, depending on geography, or may see lesser size of opportunity for consolidation or savings benefits.

Areas Impacted

Third Party Spend: Size of opportunity, costs of disaggregation
Staff and Pay: Informs FTE benefits from consolidation or disaggregation
Transformation: Informs the 'base' and 'stretch' savings range

Approach: Transformation

1. **Use post-reorganisation baseline figures from each of the relevant financial modules:** FTE Spend (split across Front Office, Service Delivery and Back Office), Income (Sales Fees and Charges) and Third Party Spend (Addressability).
2. **Apply revised % savings** (base and stretch) to the 1UA and the 2UA scenario to the relevant transformation categories, noting that the 2UA transformation baseline will be higher to include West Berkshire.
3. **Transformation benefit measured as a savings value (£), calculated** as baseline × % saving.
4. **Articulate totals** sum across categories to give annual recurring savings in year 5 (full realisation).

FTE (Front Office, Service Delivery, Back Office)

Addressable Third Party Spend

Income Generation

Considerations: Existing Transformation Plans

Detailed below are the planned savings to be delivered ahead of the reorganisation process. A high-level review looked to understand how likely will these identified savings and transformation programmes be delivered prior to the reorganisation deadlined of 2028/29. This module does not assume that opportunities will be wholly realised by 28/29, but instead recognises that this may impact the size of opportunity for future, unaddressed transformation.

Change Initiative	Organisation	Anticipated Savings	Impact on...	Deliverability Review
Increase Digitisation of Service Delivery	West Berkshire	£1.4m	FTE (Service Delivery)	**Medium:** Further savings proposals related to transformation are underway, but details currently unknown.
Customer Experience Programme	Oxford City Council	£0.82m	FTE (Front Office)	**Medium**: Relatively prudent savings target for similar programmes, and in line with savings delivered in previous years.
Oxfordshire Waste and Environmental Services Transformation Programme	West Oxfordshire	£3.0m	Third Party Spend	**Medium:** In partnership with Cherwell District Council and Oxford City Council, currently undergoing a review of alternative options for waste and recycling collection. Dependent on wider market conditions.
Delivering the Future Together: Organisational Redesign	Oxfordshire County Council	£5.9m	FTE (All)	**Medium**: Dependent on transformation capacity and capability, but the Council has the ambition to conduct a fundamental redesign, including job evaluations.
Delivering the Future Together: Commissioning and Contract Management	Oxfordshire County Council	£5.0m	Third Party Spend	**Medium**: Dependent on transformation capacity and capability, and addressability of TPS in the lead up to LGR.
Delivering the Future Together: Additional Commercial Opportunities	Oxfordshire County Council	£1.0m	Income Generation	**Low:** Higher dependency on income generating opportunities which can be variable and having the capacity to deliver against them.

**Source: MTFS, Transformation Plans supplied by Councils, Cabinet Decision (Waste Programme)*

Inputs: Potential Transformation post reorganisation

The new authorities may have the opportunity to realise further savings by transforming the way they provide services. Detailed below is a high-level summary of what additional avenues could be explored,allocated against the three primary categories of expenditure.

Service Area	General Projections*	High-level Opportunities for Oxfordshire
Adult's	1-5%	• **Assets:** Examine opportunities to repurpose existing assets to support the provision of community-based services. • **FTE:** Organisational redesign to support effective service delivery model using latest technology to enhance impact and efficiency. Cross-cutting opportunities related to customer and contact management, as well as cultural and behavioural change. • **TPS:** Improved strategic commissioning across housing, mental health, and care homes to reduce duplication and improve' provider rate.
Childrens	1-5%	• **Assets:** Potential reduction in administrative buildings and integration of co-located services (e.g. care with housing, co-locating Family centres). • **FTE:** Rationalisation of commissioning teams and support staff across 2UA option. Cross-cutting opportunities related to customer and contact management, as well as cultural and behavioural change. Review use of data to support with enhance demand management, prediction and holistic care. • **TPS:** Review the care cycle, enhance preventative approach to care provisions and aim to reduce the rate of escalation for high-cost placements.
Place	6-10%	• **Assets:** Develop an asset strategy, identifying additional opportunities for income generation and cost recovery (eg. disposal of surplus assets post-reorganisation and review cost-recovery in comparison to similar Councils). • **FTE**: Review the service delivery model, to identify current service levels and standards, use of digital, efficiencies in existing operating model. Cross-cutting opportunities related to customer and contact management, as well as cultural and behavioural change. • **TPS:** Improved long-term contract management, commissioning and procurement capabilities to support greater grip over long-term management.
Corporate Services	6-15%	• **FTE:** Organisational redesign to remove duplicative activity and shadow spend within services, leveraging automation and emerging technology to streamline processes (eg. recruitment, P2P) and improve self-serve capacity. Cross-cutting opportunities related to customer and contact management, as well as cultural and behavioural change. • **TPS:** Review current use of agency spend as part of organisational redesign and assess opportunities to reduce reliance on external agency spend, particularly relating to specialist services (eg. Legal), and use of data to drive performance management.

**Transformation portfolios developed from working with Councils elsewhere, may vary depending on previous savings delivered, existing transformation in place, resource capacity. Savings projections draw on demand management, FTE release and reduced third party spend.*

Inputs: Transformation Opportunities

Detailed below is the high-level assessment of additional transformation opportunities that may be explored following reorganisation, taking into consideration planned savings and existing transformation programmes, and drawing on conversations with Section 151 Officers to-date.

Category	Reasoning
Front office FTE	Two Customer Experience Programmes are set to be delivered ahead of vesting day, which may give the incoming authorities with more digitised, capability-driven Front Office operations. However, given that this is only being explicitly delivered in two organisation, the overall size of opportunity is likely smaller than Back Office redesign.
Service delivery FTE	Benefits here would be focused on realising the benefits of more effective and efficient service delivery models, including implementing fundamental changes to service provision to reduce demand. Anticipated savings are lower than in the Front and Back Office, as service delivery activity is less impacted by digitisation but would still benefit from process optimisation.
Back office FTE	There are some planned transformation for back office and service delivery as part of OCC's organisational redesign, but there has overall been a greater focus on transforming the front office. Back office services are also more influenced by digitisation, improvements to ways of working and reduction of shadow or duplicative activity via the centralisation of operations.
TPS	There are opportunities to strengthen the grip over the future authorities' commissioning cycle, building on the initiatives underway in Oxfordshire County Council and enhancing the future organisation's overall commissioning, procurement and contract management capabilities.
Income	Some gains from income generation through review of sales. fees and charges for District charging of key services (eg. green waste, planning) and harmonising to new standards. Based on 23/24 RSX data, Oxfordshire has similar fees and charges rates with its comparator group (eg. Gloucestershire, Surrey, Buckinghamshire).
Assets	Review of current use of assets to assess cost recovery and usages of typically income generating assets (eg. car parks) and to align the strategic use of assets with service delivery models (eg. better co-location of services, repurposing certain buildings to enhance place-based service provision).

Inputs: Base and Stretch Assumptions

The following figures are conservative estimates of potential additional benefit that can be delivered through further transformation. It draws from end-to-end transformation programmes and portfolios delivered in other Councils and takes into account where existing initiative may reduce the overall opportunity for change.**With the exception of Assets, it is assumed that there is a greater opportunity for transformation in the Ridgeway option overall due to West Berkshire's current financial position.**

Category	Oxford and Shires		Ridgeway	
	Base %	Stretch %	Base %	Stretch %
Front office FTE	1%	3%	3%	5%
Service delivery FTE	1%	3%	3%	5%
Back office FTE	3%	5%	5%	7%
TPS	1.5%	3%	2%	5%
Income	0.5%	1%	0.5%	1%
Assets	0.5%	1.5%	0%	0.5%

Outputs: Oxford & Shires Transformation

The table below shows the annual recurring savings and income growth that could be achieved by Year 5, through transformation, in both the base and adjusted stretch scenarios. The adjusted stretch reflects the scale and nature of opportunities identified by councils, with the largest uplifts in Third Party Spend and Back Office transformation.

Category	Baseline (£'000)	Base %	Base (£'000)	Stretch %	Stretch (£'000)
Front office FTE spend	**57,429**	1%	574	5%	1,723
Service delivery FTE spend	**60,561**	1%	606	3%	1,817
Back office FTE spend	**43,520**	3%	1,306	5%	2,176
TPS	**367,094**	1.5%	5,506	3%	11,013
Income (Sales, Fees and Charges)	**126,284**	0.5%	631	1%	3,671
Assets (Operational Spend)	**11,117**	0.5%	49	1.5%	146
Total			**8,672**		**20,546**

Outputs: Ridgeway Transformation

The table below shows the savings and income growth that could be achieved by Year 5, through transformation, in both the base and adjusted stretch scenarios for Ridgeway. The adjusted stretch reflects the scale and nature of opportunities identified by councils, with the largest uplifts in Third Party Spend and Back Office.

Category	Baseline (£'000)	Base %	Base (£'000)	Stretch %	Stretch (£'000)
Front office FTE spend	**56,213**	3%	1,686	5%	2,811
Service delivery FTE spend	**59,279**	1%	593	3%	1,778
Back office FTE spend	**42,599**	5%	2,130	7%	2,982
TPS	**382,662**	2%	7,636	5%	19,089
Income	**73,496**	0.5%	367	1%	735
Assets (Operational Spend)	**11,225**	0%	0	0.5%	49
Total			**12,412**		**27,444**

Outputs: Transformation Costs

Exact scale and scope of transformation will need to be refined by the new local authorities, including the anticipated upfront costs and benefits phasing.

Investment Cost

- Transformation typically requires a degree of upfront spend, particularly in delivery resource (change management, service redesign specialists, business architecture development) and investments in tools and technology.
- For the purposes of this modelling, transformation costs are estimated at 70% of anticipated transformation benefits for the **base scenario only**. It is assumed costs would scale for the stretch scenario due to additional investment in systems and capacity requirements.
- There is an opportunity for the organisation to leverage LGR consultation and implementation resource to support with transformation, thereby dampening the total additional investment needed.
- Costs may be further reduced depending on existing in-house transformation capability and capacity.

Oxford and Shires	Estimated Cost (£'000)
Transformation Delivery Resource:	3,018
Additional Investment Costs (eg. IT and Software)	2,414
Contingency Cost:	604

Ridgeway	Estimated Cost (£'000)
Transformation Delivery Resource:	4,344
Additional Investment Costs (eg. IT and Software)	3,475
Contingency Cost:	869

Outputs: Transformation Phasing

Exact scale and scope of transformation will need to be refined by the new local authority, including the anticipated upfront costs and benefits phasing.

Phasing

- Transformation costs are typically expected to be phased across the first 2 years of a programme, with the bulk of upfront assessment, design and implementation work being complete prior to significant benefit realisation.
- Noting that the new authorities will also be dealing with various challenges from reorganisation, a more conservative phasing timeline has been applied to transformation benefits realisation.

Benefits Phasing					
	Y1	Y2	Y3	Y4	Y5
Transformation benefits (recurring)	*0%*	*0%*	*50%*	*75%*	*100%*
Transformation costs (one-off)	*40%*	*40%*	*10%*	*10%*	*0%*

4.0 Implementation Costs

One-off Transition Costs

The estimated one-off transition costs for reorganisation have been detailed. They illustrate the various costs the new unitary councils will face, from redundancy, through IT integration, to consultants and contingency costs. The total is projected to be around £30.4m. These costs have been informed by councils that have undergone reorganisation to provide an insight into the typical costs during LGR.

Category	Transition Costs	Oxfordshire 2UA Cost (£'000)
Programme transition costs	**External Comms, Rebranding & implementation** *Examples include: Staff Advertising, Venue/Room Hire, Subscriptions*	659
	External transition, design and implementation support costs *Examples include: Other Hired & Contracted Services & Consultants Fees*	7,686
	Internal programme management *Examples include: Staff Admin Recharge*	3,426
	Creating the new council: *Examples include: Training, Vehicle Parts/Maintenance and Contents Insurance*	1,464
	Contingency *Examples include: Other Expenses General & Miscellaneous Small Projects*	3,228
	Organisation closedown *Costs involved with legally and financially closing down councils and create sound budgetary control systems*	732
	Public consultation *Examples include: Survey Professional and Other Fees, General Materials, Entertainment and Refreshments*	494
	ICT costs *Examples include: IT Hardware, IT Repair Installation Maintenance and Training, IT Software & IT Licences*	6,862
	Shadow Chief Exec / member costs *Examples include: Electing the shadow cabinet, training costs*	747
Total Programme Transition Costs		25,297
Redundancy Cost - *Examples include: Redundancy payments (does not fully factor in pension strain)*		5,135
Total One-off transition costs		30,432

5.0 Cost and Benefits of Reorganisation

5.1 Changes to the Baseline

Savings Against Expenditure: Oxford and Shires

The Financial Case builds on the findings from the Financial Options Appraisal by refining the baseline and assumptions based on detail provided by local authorities. **For Oxfordshire and West Berkshire, this has meant a refined baseline for overall expenditure and total expenditure on FTE, an evolved assumption around spend on property based on its asset portfolio as well as a refined addressability baseline to develop a prudent view on Third Party Spend savings.**

Expenditure (27/28) ('000)	£555,859

FTE Savings (£'000)

Total Spend on FTE*	£171,803	Leadership Savings**	£5,631
Spend on FTE excluding Leadership Savings	£166,171		

Calculating Aggregation Benefits

		Percentage Reduction from Aggregation**	Savings from Aggregation
Proportion of FTE Spend in Front Office (36%)**	£59,822	4%	£2,393
Proportion of FTE Spend in Service Delivery (37%)**	£61,483	1.5%	£922
Proportion of FTE Spend in Back Office (27%)**	£44,866	3%	£1,346
		Total Savings	£10,292

Assets (Operational Expenditure) (£'000)

The assumption around proportion of spend on property has been reduced to reflect the Councils asset portfolio, including a comparably lower figure for Heritage Assets.

Proportion of Expenditure on Property	2%	£11,117
Disaggregation Benefit	12.5%	£1,390

Third Party Spend

Detailed workings for Third Party Spend savings can be found in the module.

Disaggregation Benefit	2.0%	£1,002

**Refined baseline figure provided by local authorities. To note, spend on Fire and Rescue and Schools have been removed from the total baseline.*
***Builds on original CCN assumptions.*

Savings Against Expenditure: Ridgeway

The Financial Case builds on the findings from the Financial Options Appraisal by refining the baseline and assumptions based on detail provided by local authorities. **For Oxfordshire and West Berkshire, this has meant a refined baseline for overall expenditure and total expenditure on FTE, an evolved assumption around spend on property based on its asset portfolio as well as a refined addressability baseline to develop a prudent view on Third Party Spend savings.**

Expenditure (27/28) ('000)	£561,226

FTE Savings (£'000)

Total Spend on FTE*	£164,531	Leadership Savings**	£1,877
Spend on FTE excluding Leadership Savings	£162,654		

Calculating Aggregation Benefits

		Percentage Reduction from Aggregation**	Savings from Aggregation
Proportion of FTE Spend in Front Office (36%)**	£58,555	4%	£2,342
Proportion of FTE Spend in Service Delivery (37%)**	£60,182	1.5%	£903
Proportion of FTE Spend in Back Office (27%)**	£43,917	3%	£1,317
		Total Savings	£6,439

Assets (Operational Expenditure) (£'000)

The assumption around proportion of spend on property has been reduced to reflect the Councils asset portfolio, including a comparably lower figure for Heritage Assets.

Proportion of Expenditure on Property	2%	£11,225
Disaggregation Benefit	12.5%	£1,403

Third Party Spend

Detailed workings for Third Party Spend savings can be found in the module.

Disaggregation Benefit	2.0%	£880

**Refined baseline figure provided by local authorities. To note, spend on Fire and Rescue and Schools have been removed from the total baseline.*
***Builds on original CCN assumptions.*

5.2 Cost and Benefits of Aggregation

Cost Benefit Analysis: Aggregation Benefit

The following sets out a view of the aggregation benefits (recurring) for the 2UA option.

Key benefits include:

- **Staffing (Leadership):** Benefits from reduction in duplicated top-line and associated transition costs.
- **Staffing:** Benefits from reduction of in-scope role and associated transition costs.
- **Third Party Spend:** Benefits from reduction in addressable spend across all in-scope contract categories.
- **Democracy:** Benefits from reduction in election costs and member allowances.
- **Property:** Benefits from reduced property OpEx for rationalised assets, which excludes South and Vale.

***Note:** Capital receipts from rationalisation of assets are not included above.*

Option 2UA	Y1	Y2	Y3	Y4	Y5
Total Aggregation Benefits (£m)	2.3	4.6	11.6	16.2	23.1

Benefits Phasing	Y1	Y2	Y3	Y4	Y5
Aggregation benefits profile (recurring)	**10%**	**20%**	**50%**	**70%**	**100%**

Staffing Benefits		Oxford and Shires (£m)	Ridgeway (£m)	2UA Total (£M)
Estimated Senior Leadership Structures Saving	Recurring	5.6	1.9	7.5
Estimated Front Office FTE Reorganisation savings	Recurring	2.4	2.3	4.7
Estimated Service Delivery FTE Reorganisation savings	Recurring	0.9	0.9	1.8
Estimated Back Office FTE Reorganisation Savings	Recurring	1.4	1.3	2.7
Total Staffing Benefit	Recurring	**10.3**	**6.4**	**16.7**
Third Party Spend Benefits				
Total TPS Aggregation Saving	Recurring	1.0	0.9	1.9
Democracy Benefits				
Estimated Total Allowances+SRA Saving	Recurring	0.22	0.46	0.68
Estimated Total Election Costs Savings	Recurring	0.59	0.45	1.04
Property Benefits				
Total Property Savings (not including disposal of surplus assets)	Recurring	1.4	1.4	2.8
Total Aggregation Benefits	**Recurring**	**13.5**	**9.6**	**23.1**

Cost Benefit Analysis: Reorganisation Costs

The following sets out a view of the aggregation costs (one off) for the 2UA.

Key costs include:

- **New unitarites setup & closedown costs:** Spend to design the new structure and manage the change (e.g. training, comms, process redesign).
- **IT & Systems costs:** Spend on new or upgraded systems to support a single organisation (e.g. finance, HR, CRM).
- **External transition, design and implementation support costs:** Resources needed to run the transformation programme (e.g. project management, governance).
- **Redundancy Costs:** Payments and support for staff reductions due to structural changes. This has been uplifted.
- **Contingency:** A buffer for unexpected costs, reflecting risk and complexity.
- ***Recurring Disaggregation costs are expected to primarily impact the Ridgeway UA.***

Option 2 - Oxford and Shires and Ridgeway (£'000)						
	Y0	**Y1**	**Y2**	**Y3**	**Y4**	**Y5**
Total One-Off Transition Costs (£M)	-12.1	-12.1	-6.2	0	0	0
Total Disaggregation Cost (recurring) (£m)	0	-3.1	-3.1	-3.1	-3.1	-3.1
Benefits Phasing						
	Y0	**Y1**	**Y2**	**Y3**	**Y4**	**Y5**
Transition costs (one-off)	40%	40%	20%	0%	0%	0%
Disaggregation costs (recurring)	0%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

One off transition / implementation costs	Total (£M)	Note
New unitarities setup & closedown costs • External Comms, Rebranding & implementation: • Internal Programme Management: • Creating the new council • Organisation closedown • Public Consultation • Shadow Chief Exec Costs	***7.5***	Programme management, administrative and legal activities linked to new council creation and closedown, public consultation, rebranding and communications ahead of vesting day, and shadow member and executive costs. Based on other actuals from other previous LGR experience.
IT & Systems Costs	***6.9***	Costs of data migration, systems migration, setting up new systems, hardware costs, integrating business systems etc. Based on other actuals from other previous LGR experience.
External transition, design and implementation support costs	***7.7***	Based on other actuals from other previous LGR experience.
Redundancy costs	***5.1***	Redundancy cost as a proportion of salary (current assumption) x total FTE saving
Contingency	***3.2***	Approximately 10% of total one off transition / implementation cost.
TOTAL	*30.4*	

It is assumed that transition costs will be funded and councils will need to agree around how it is funded.

Cost Benefit Analysis: 5 Year Outlook

This takes into account:

- **Aggregation and disaggregation benefits / costs (recurring)**
- **One-off transition costs**

Both options have a net cost in Year 1 due to transition spend, followed by strong and rising net in year benefit.

Note: *Modelling reflects assumptions agreed as in August 2025.*

Recurring Disaggregation costs are expected to primarily impact the Ridgeway UA.

2UA Model

	Y0	Y1	Y2	Y3	Y4	Y5	Total 5 year Benefit / (Costs)
Total Aggregation Benefits (£m)	0	2.3	4.6	11.6	16.2	23.1	57.8
Total Disaggregation Benefits / Costs (£m)*	0	-3.1	-3.1	-3.1	-3.1	-3.1	-15.5
Total Transition Costs (£m)	-12.1	-12.1	-6.2	0	0	0	-30.4
Net in year Benefit/(Cost) (£m)	-12.1	-12.9	-4.5	8.5	13.1	20.0	12.2

Benefits Phasing

	Y1	Y2	Y3	Y4	Y5
Aggregation benefits profile (recurring)	**10%**	**20%**	**50%**	**70%**	**100%**
Disaggregation costs (recurring)	**100%**	**100%**	**100%**	**100%**	**100%**
Transition costs (one-off)	**100%**	**0.00%**	**0.00%**	**0.00%**	**0.00%**

Based on the cost/benefit analysis, the payback period for the 2UA LGR option would be 4.4 years, or within 5 years.

6.0 Outputs for 2 UA Option

Day 1 Financial Position

The Income and Expenditure and Assets and Liabilities position has been set out for Oxford and Shires and Ridgeway in the 2UA option. **This is the balance position prior to any benefit realisation from local government reorganisation or further transformation.**

Income and Expenditure			
	2 UA (£m)		
Category	Oxford and Shires	Ridgeway	Notes
Income*			
Council Tax	377.4	431.5	Currently 27/28 view. Includes Council Tax Surpluses.
Grants (inc. non-AEF)	45.8	63.0	Currently 27/28 view
Business Rates	114.4	55.0	Currently 27/28 view
Total Income	537.6	549.5	
Expenditure**			
All Staff	171.8	164.5	Does not include any staffing consolidation impact. Proportion based on FY25/26 establishment data shared.
All Non Staff	384.1	396.7	Expenditure excluding staff
Total Expenditure	555.9	561.2	Total Expenditure for all authorities in Oxfordshire and West Berkshire. FY27/28
Net Position	-18.3	-11.7	
Total Reserve Draws	13.4	6.8	Draws from reserves for FY27/28 to cover budget deficit
Final Position	-4.9	-4.9	

**Income Sources: Draft statement of accounts (24/25), MTFS and MTFPs, Pixel Outputs*

***Expenditure Sources: Statement of Accounts 24/25, Net Operating Expenditure (25/26 onwards), Newton Analysis, Establishment data (provided by LA),.*

Day 1 Financial Position

The Income and Expenditure and Assets and Liabilities position has been set out for Oxford and Shires and Ridgeway in the 2UA option.

Assets and Liabilities (Core Considerations - not exhaustive)*				
	2 UA (£m)			
Category	Oxford and Shires	Ridgeway	Oxford and Shires HRA	Notes
Assets				
Fixed Assets	2,968.6	1,692.2	1,339.1	Long-term assets only, projected to 28/29 using Capital Expenditure
Liabilities				
Long Term Borrowing	994.9	503.3	586.1	Debt, Long Term Borrowing, EFS
Short Term Borrowing	318.3	358.5	0	Short Term Borrowing

**Asset Sources: Statement of Accounts, Capital Expenditure from MTFS and MTFP Capital Programmes*
***Liabilities: MTFS and MTFPs, information supplied by LAs*

Transformation - 2 UA

There is an opportunity to deliver additional transformation savings based on the view from the MTFS and Policy module. The scope of transformation savings would be refined by the new authorities including identifying individual opportunities. The phasing of transformation benefits has been tapered to show a five year implementation period. Investment, transition and implementation costs have been included. An updated view of net benefits over the five year period has been provided.

Transformation Opportunities						
Benefit Area	O&S Baseline (£m)	Savings Assumption (O&S)	O&S (£m)	Ridgeway Baseline (£m)	Savings Assumption (Ridgeway)	Ridgeway (£m)
Reduction in front office FTE spend	**57.4**	1%	0.6	**56.2**	3%	1.7
Reduction in service delivery FTE spend	**60.6**	1%	0.6	**59.3**	1%	0.6
Reduction in back office FTE spend	**43.5**	3%	1.3	**42.6**	5%	2.1
Reduction in TPS	**367.1**	1.5%	5.5	**382.7**	2%	7.6
Increase in Income	**126.3**	0.5%	0.6	**73.5**	0.5%	0.4
Assets (Operational Expenditure	**11.1**	0.5%	0.05	**11.2**	0%	0

Oxford and Shires UA					
Year	1	2	3	4	5
Yearly Benefit (£m)	0	0	4.3	6.5	8.6
Yearly Cost (£m)	-2.4	-2.4	-0.6	-0.6	0
In-year Net Benefit / (Costs) (£m)	-2.4	-2.4	3.7	5.9	8.6

Ridgeway UA					
Year	1	2	3	4	5
Yearly Benefit (£m)	0	0	6.2	9.3	12.4
Yearly Cost (£m)	-3.5	-3.5	-0.9	-0.9	0
In-year Net Benefit / (Costs) (£m)	-3.5	-3.5	5.3	8.4	12.4

Consolidated View - Benefits

Detailed below is a consolidated view of the benefits of local government reorganisation as well as the transformation post reorganisation, which would be expected to be annual, recurring benefits from Y5 onwards.

Benefit Area	Oxford and Shires		Ridgeway	
	O&S LGR Benefits (£m)	O&S Transformation Benefits (£m)	Ridgeway LGR Benefits £m)	Ridgeway Transformation Benefits £m)
Senior Management	5.6	N/A	1.9	N/A
Front Office FTE	2.4	0.6	2.3	1.7
Service Delivery FTE	0.9	0.6	0.9	0.6
Back Office FTE	1.4	1.3	1.3	2.1
Third Party Spend	1.0	5.5	0.9	7.6
Democracy	0.8	N/A	0.9	N/A
Assets (Operational Expenditure)	1.4	0.05	1.4	0
Income Generation	N/A	0.6	N/A	0.4
Gross benefits	**13.5**	**8.6***	**9.6**	**12.4**
Less disaggregation cost	0	0	3.1	0
Net benefits	**22.1**		**18.9**	
Total 2UA net benefits	**41.0**			

**To note, there is a slight discrepancy in the sum figures here due to rounding, but the the original sum figure is £8,623,395.*

Year 5 Changes (Oxford and Shires)

The following sets out the Year 5 changes based on the impact of Reorganisation, Transformation and Council Tax Harmonisation.The Year 5 position assumes that there are no changes in the baseline position from Year 1. A significant number of elements could impact the Year 1 position. For example, these include Fair Funding Review, settlement from government, inflation, political change nationally and locally. Note the following does not include any inflationary uplift for each component.

Component	Assumption	Baseline (£m)	Y5 (£m)	Differential (£m)
Council Tax	4.99% increase each year for five years based on the harmonisation.	394.6	532.3	137.6
Reorganisation Benefit	Transition Benefit (TPS, Democracy and Assets Operational Expenditure) - fully implemented	0	3.4	3.4
Transformation Benefit	Transformation Benefit (TPS, Income and Assets Operational Expenditure) - fully implemented	0	6.2	6.2
Staffing	Baseline does not reflect the cost of harmonisation. It reduces baseline FTE expenditure and incorporates anticipated transformation and reorganisation benefits.	171.8	159.0	12.8
Totals				**160.0**

Year 5 Changes (Ridgeway)

The following sets out the Year 5 changes based on the impact of Reorganisation, Transformation and Council Tax Harmonisation.The Year 5 position assumes that there are no changes in the baseline position from Year 1. A significant number of elements could impact the Year 1 position. For example, these include Fair Funding Review, settlement from government, inflation, political change nationally and locally. Note the following does not include any inflationary uplift for each component.

Component	Assumption	Baseline (£m)	Y5 (£m)	Differential (£m)
Council Tax	4.99% increase each year for five years based on the harmonisation.	469.0	653.3	184.3
Reorganisation Benefit	Reorganisation Benefit (TPS, Democracy and Income) - fully implemented	0	3.0	3.0
Transformation Benefit	Transformation Benefit (TPS and Income) - fully implemented	0	8.0	8.0
Staffing	Baseline does not reflect the cost of harmonisation. It reduces baseline FTE expenditure and incorporates anticipated transformation and reorganisation benefits.	164.5	153.7	10.8
Totals				**206.1**

7.0 Appendices

Staff Establishment Spend

Organisation	Spend on Establishment (£'000)	Source	Additional Notes
Cherwell District Council	22,883	Provided by Local Authority	Exact Figure
Oxford City Council*	30,424	Provided by Local Authority	Approximate Figure
West Oxfordshire	5,289	Provided by Local Authority	Exact figure, does not include Publica spend, which is assumed to be picked up through Third Party Spend.
South Oxfordshire	27,010	Provided by Local Authority	Exact Figure, the two Councils have a shared service agreement and establishment.
Vale of White Horse		Provided by Local Authority	
Oxfordshire County Council*	189,738	Provided by Local Authority	Approximate figure which has removed establishment spend related to Fire and Rescue and School
West Berkshire*	60,990	Provided by Local Authority	Approximate Figures

**Establishment spend is an approximate figure calculated from the midpoint salary bands and total FTE per salary band.*

2025

Planning for Devolution – A ‘Growth’ offer from the proposed 2 new Unitary councils.

FINAL – 14 OCTOBER 2025

ADRIAN COLWELL AND CATRIONA RIDDELL

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Developing a growth offer from the proposed 2 unitary councils.

1. Our unitary council proposals – Understanding the context, planning for growth

1.1 Introduction

The proposed two new unitary councils – '*Oxford & Shires'* and *'The Ridgeway Council'* – are based on a set of corridors which link the current districts and the existing unitary council together. The proposed new unitary councils are all located in the Oxford to Cambridge Growth Corridor and the proposed MSA for the Thames Valley.

These proposals consider the strategic context, national priorities and local ambitions to show how the new mayor and our proposed two new unitary councils could interact and makes proposals for areas of collaboration between the mayor and each unitary Council to deliver a significant growth package at pace.

This paper considers a series of proposals for the growth issues common to both new unitary councils.

The paper also offers views on the two proposed alternative reform options, a large countywide unitary council and a small Oxford City unitary council.

This paper also sets out the common features and ambitions for growth, accelerated economic growth, new housing, transport and other infrastructure priorities.

1.2 Local Government Reorganisation and Devolution – the strategic context

The Government is aiming to transform how local government operates in Oxfordshire within the next two to three years.

The current focus will involve both local government reorganisation (LGR) of the current two-tier systems of the County Council and the District and City Councils which will be replaced with a system of unitary authorities. It also involves an invitation for the establishment of new Strategic Authorities (SA) which will have powers and responsibilities across SA areas. The Berkshire and Oxfordshire local authorities have agreed to progress with the submission of a Mayoral Strategic Authority (MSA) for their geography, but this is still subject to formal agreement by the relevant councils. There remains a question about the inclusion of Buckinghamshire and Swindon within this MSA.

Although both processes of LGR and Devolution have their distinct remit and processes of reform, there is a significant amount of overlap, especially where existing and new functions and statutory responsibilities shift to the MSA in future as part of the devolution process. An important new role for local government will be statutory strategic planning powers. These will be established through the Planning and Infrastructure Bill (PIB) which is expected to receive Royal Assent this Autumn. All areas will then be required to prepare a new strategic plan– a Spatial Development Strategy (SDS)- with universal coverage expected by the end of the first Parliamentary term.

The new SDS will form part of the statutory development plan alongside local plans (and neighbourhood plans where relevant) and will have a number of key roles in relation to strategic infrastructure and determining the spatial distribution of growth (including housing allocations for each local plan). Those areas with MSAs now and in the future will also be able to access significant additional powers and funding opportunities to help deliver the SDS, including the ability to call in an application from the relevant local planning authority for Mayoral decision-making and the raising of Strategic Infrastructure Levy.

The SDS will also operate as a long term (30 year) spatial investment framework so will have a critical role in the integration of wider roles and responsibilities, especially for the environment, the economy and infrastructure. They will also be expected to reflect the Government's ambitions for 'health in all policies' and will therefore be important to both Public Health and the Health Authorities, especially in relation to addressing health disparities.

Although the Government's ambition is that all parts of England will eventually have an MSA with strategic planning responsibilities, work on the new system will have to start before the new MSA has been established in some places. The PIB therefore includes transitional arrangements where the strategic planning authority will initially sit with the upper tier authorities. If the working assumption is that there will be a Thames Valley SDS, all unitary councils (Berkshire, Bucks, Swindon) and Oxfordshire County Council will have responsibility for preparing the SDS. This will be managed through the establishment of a Strategic Planning Board (SPB) following enactment of the PIB.

The Government's expectation is that the SDS preparation process will take two to three years which means that the first version is likely to be prepared (or at least submitted for examination) before LGR becomes fully operative in May 2028 or a new MSA has been established.

We have considered a number of key issues as part of the LGR process, including:

- What role will the existing Councils play in the preparation of the SDS, especially as some local plans will be being prepared/updated on a similar timescale and there is an opportunity to share evidence? Note: Government's expectation is that local plan preparation should continue at pace even if this means they will have to be updated to reflect the emerging SDS at some point.

- What opportunities are there to reset the skills and resources through LGR with the potential to share some of these with the emerging strategic planning teams (and eventual MSA), especially some of the specialist skills that are often in scarce supply?

- The new unitary authorities will also be responsible for all local government functions (taking on a number of responsibilities from Oxfordshire County Council in the Oxfordshire area of the two new unitary councils) that will impact on how they manage their place-making functions (such as minerals and waste planning, Lead Flood Risk Authority etc). Local Government Reform and Devolution (with roles around spatial planning, transport,

regeneration and housing delivery) provide an opportunity to rethink how these resources are managed.

- What opportunities are there to establish new working arrangements with stakeholders (especially infrastructure providers) and communities that can be used to inform the individual authorities and to shape strategic policies managed through the future MSA?

1.3 Our proposed spatial growth strategy

We propose to base our proposed two unitary councils on an ambitious growth strategy that enables the two Councils to build on experience, to collaborate together and with the new Mayor.

- Our proposals consider residential housing, employment and commercial growth, based on adopted Local Plans and looking to the future.

- Our proposals focus on market towns and villages as well as the development needs of Oxford City and new settlements such as Salt Cross in West Oxfordshire.

- Our economic offer focuses on supporting commercial and business growth in key sectors, clusters and corridors.

- To build a network of business and science parks across Oxfordshire and West Berkshire, not just the locations around Oxford.

- Our proposals include an increase in social housing to accompany our current planned growth and to go further to meet needs of the community and growing the economy.

- We will work with the MSA at the regional level and education/business at Local authority level to drive skills development to meet the needs of key sectors and commerce.

- We are prioritising the reuse of brownfield land on former military bases and supporting the creation of a series of garden communities and new settlements.

- We are aligning our infrastructure priorities to support growth across Oxfordshire and the Thames Valley areas.

- We have identified infrastructure priorities to engage with the new mayor to address, maximising the potential of existing infrastructure and including an ambitious new transport investment package.

- Our infrastructure issues include the need for improvements to our energy, water connections and investment to assist nature recovery.

- Our proposals seek to avoid major ecological constraints and seek to support climate resilience, with minimal impact on the Green Belt and local communities.

- Our proposals aim to ensure our growth is sustainable and avoid major constraints, such as areas of flood risk.

1.4 Working in transition.

We recognise that there will be a period of transition between the current local government landscape and the establishment of 2 new unitary councils and the new mayor and Combined Authority.

We are committed to a smooth transition to create a stable environment in which services are delivered and our aspirations for Devolution can be secured by working with the mayor.

We recognise that the Planning and Infrastructure Bill, on adoption, will confer powers to the Upper Tier Authorities such as unitary councils, including West Berkshire Council, straight away and will require a transitional period of working between Oxfordshire County, West Berkshire Council and the existing Oxfordshire Districts, leading to the creation of Mayoral CA and the 2 new unitary councils by a set timetable.

In this transition period, a Spatial Planning Board will be established, ahead of the forming of our 2 new unitary councils. We will work with Oxfordshire the County Council and the six existing Berkshire Unitary Councils on the Spatial Planning Board to ensure it reflects our growth priorities.

The proposed two unitary council model will facilitate this joint working as West Berkshire Council will straddle the Oxfordshire and Berkshire areas. In planning for Ridgeway and Oxford & the Shires Councils, West Berkshire will provide glue to ensure that the plans for growth are aligned across the existing Berkshire and Oxfordshire areas.

The West Berkshire Council not only has an understanding and experience of delivering all unitary functions but, with a foot in both Oxfordshire and Berkshire, it will enable this experience and knowledge of the strategic plans for Berkshire to be coordinated with plans for Oxfordshire, working with the existing Oxfordshire Councils and Berkshire Councils too, especially given the significance of the current joint working within the Berkshire Prosperity Board.

2.The purpose of our 2 new unitary councils

2.1 Introduction and overview

Our proposals for the Government and our offer to the new mayor aims to show the ambition, intended culture and collaboration between the merged Councils to create the new unitary councils. With spirit of joint working and alignment we want to establish between the unitary councils and the new mayor over the long term:

- Creating and taking new opportunities.
- Securing environmentally sustainable housing standards of a high quality.
- New integrated unitary councils with shared services, which learn together.
- Working with others in the new Strategic Authority.

These proposals are shaped by our history and experience as Districts and a small unitary, close to the communities and responsible for shaping the future of each District. We are looking 30 years ahead and planning for the long term. This proposal follows in that spirit.

New arrangements will build collaboration and cooperation between the 6 current Districts and the unitary council of West Berkshire through the creation of 2 new complementary unitary councils. These proposals can be implemented at pace in both the northern and southern areas.

2.2 Our proposed two new unitary councils

Our proposed two new unitary councils are built around a series of corridors that link the two areas:

- A unitary council in the north of Oxfordshire to be called ‘Oxford & Shires’ which is linked by the A40 corridor from Carterton to Oxford, together with the A41, A4260 and the M40 and A34 corridors linking Banbury and Bicester with Oxford. This link is reinforced by the new East - West rail, the Banbury to Oxford Line and North Cotswolds line linking West Oxfordshire with Cherwell and Oxford City.
- A unitary council that brings together the south of Oxfordshire and West Berkshire to be called ‘The Ridgeway Council’, linked by the M4 corridor, the A34 and A420 corridors linking South Oxfordshire, the Vale of White Horse and West Berkshire.

2.3 Governance, building on existing relationships.

Our proposed ‘northern’ and ‘southern’ unitary councils are complementary and reinforcing.

They are intended to collaborate with each other and the mayor through a new Oxfordshire Forum to include the 2 unitary councils, the Berkshire Prosperity Board, business (Advanced Oxford and Chambers from the Thames Valley and Oxfordshire), Universities and others. This will enable joint learning between the 2 new Unitary councils and the exchange of best practice.

- With each new unitary council being of a broadly comparable size.

- The current councils all have a strong delivery record, our delivery of new housing, business parks and town centre regeneration and our two new unitary councils will take forward their innovation and dynamism. Each unitary will build on the track record of delivery and joint working that is already well developed in the area. For example, the long-standing joint working between South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse, Cherwell's previous collaboration with South Northamptonshire and the collaboration within the Berkshire Prosperity Board.

- West Berkshire Council will bring its experience as an established unitary council in the design of the 2 new unitary councils, leading to informed organisational design.

- The two proposed unitary councils will retain a close focus on the distinctive local areas they cover and will work to maintain communities that are resilient and cohesive with good health and high well-being.

We propose to establish area oversight boards within each new unitary, to work closely with and involve businesses and developers in shaping identified localities, the market towns and areas within the City and to consider delivery coordination, infrastructure challenges and to consider the cumulative impacts of development. The use of area panels will help ensure the distinctiveness of local areas is retained, taking account of Local Plans, Neighbourhood Plans, Transport Plans and Environmental Strategies and other local strategies:

- In Cherwell covering Banbury, Bicester, Heyford and Kidlington.

- In West Oxfordshire focus on Carterton, Witney and Eynsham.

- In Oxford City the current ward arrangements.

- In South Oxfordshire & Vale of White Horse focusing on Didcot, Henley, Thame, Wallingford, Faringdon and Wantage.

- In West Berkshire covering Newbury, Thatcham, Marlborough and Hungerford.

The new unitary councils will take account of the work and conclusions of the Oxford Growth Commission in shaping how the growth needs of Oxford city and the economic opportunities and infrastructure challenges both transport, power and water are addressed.

The new unitary councils will also engage closely within the MSA and other neighbouring councils to the facilitate the growth of the wider Thames Valley area and the success of our places within MSA.

2.4 Principles to guide our new unitary council's approach to growth.

The principles that should guide the new unitary council's approach to growth include:

- Meeting the growth aspirations from Government.
- Listening and engaging with our communities, businesses and service users to meet their needs.
- Deepening and leveraging the economic strength of areas, showing that we are '*investment ready'*.
- Placing climate action at the centre of all our future plans.
- Taking account of the corridors which bring the two new unitary councils together and the opportunities within the Oxford Cambridge Growth Corridor.
- Making sure that the city of Oxford can grow in a sustainable way, meeting identified needs.
- Establishing two outward looking new organisations that engage closely with neighbouring bodies on key matters.
- Align strategic plans for growth across the wider geography including transport and other infrastructure to enable growth across Oxfordshire and the Thames Valley.
- Aiming for more confidence and certainty in how planning will support growth by ensuring universal coverage of up-to-date local plans and speeding up decision-making on planning applications.

There is an important link between economic success, the delivery of housing growth and the increased provision of affordable housing in a relatively wealthy area. Our aims include:

- Securing affordable housing to support economic growth.
- Coordinating housing delivery of a range of types to meet community needs.
- Ensuring new housing is distinctive and is place related, not 'anywhere' development.
- Supporting high quality economic and residential growth across the two unitary council areas, meeting our ambitions for net zero carbon.

Planning will be one of the central roles of the new unitary councils but ,split with some aspects of planning undertaken by the new mayor. Coordination and alignment between the two bodies – unitary and mayor – will be essential to be accountable to community and business in planning for the long term, as well as ensuring development occurs in the right places.

One of the issues that will be critical for the 2 new unitary councils will be securing a quicker planning service.

Through the creation of two new planning teams, one for each new unitary council, we have considered what will be needed to build investor confidence through the planning system and address our customers' needs efficiently and effectively, providing certainty for our communities and for our applicants.

Two new unitary councils will be able to speed up decision-making on planning as this will be easier if a) the unitary is not a large county authority, with a poor delivery record on current development proposals, and b) because there is the opportunity, based on experience, to reset the skills and resources needed to focus on speed and efficiency. We intend drawing on existing experience to speed up planning approvals at business parks using LDOs (see section 2.8.1)

The two unitary councils will end two tier working and bring all teams within a single structure, bringing together planning, housing, transport and flooding etc. West Berkshire Council has the experience of this model of service coordination and stands ready to support the north unitary too. West Berkshire has developed and adopted its local plan in this context

The two new unitary councils will not be too big to lose sight of the needs of the community but big enough to drive efficiencies, meet community needs and deliver in this context.

The two new unitary councils will plan for the long-term needs of each area, by using Local Plans alongside our proposals for growth to:

- Meet housing growth and providing affordable housing.
- Build dynamic, sustainable communities.
- Build distinctive places, with high quality buildings reflecting the attractiveness of the area, its history and its urban and rural landscapes.
- Ensure we support dynamic, attractive places that people want to live in, work in and visit.
- Support economic growth and create an environment in which business wants to invest and grow.
- Provide a framework for relating infrastructure to planned growth and greater level of certainty for investment.

2.5 Working with the mayor in collaboration.

We plan to establish a collaborative relationship within the new mayor; challenging where appropriate but always engaged and responsive. We want to:

- Establish shared priorities.
- Work with common stakeholders, including business and skills providers for the long term success of the area's economy. This will include working with the major and business across the area to identify skills needs and development opportunities to deliver for the needs of business.
- Recognise that planning powers will be split but need to interact to be effective.
- Identify infrastructure needs and work together to establish a joint investment pipeline.
- Recognise that the Spatial Development Strategy set by the mayor, with input from the 2 new unitary councils, will create a 30-year strategic framework for new councils and drawing on the connecting corridors that underpin them will set a framework for the Local Plans of the future.
- Working with the mayor to ensure climate ambitions are a central consideration of their long term planning.
- Assist the mayor to use spatial planning powers to transform infrastructure planning, with housing and community development proposals from the new unitary councils complementing the mayor's economic focus.

2.6 Our ask of the new mayor.

Our proposals present a series of proposals to the new mayor to forge a shared approach and to help ensure that the new unitary councils and new mayor work in tandem.

Our proposals which follow for each new unitary include proposals for a package of investment in key road links and rail infrastructure to support economic and housing growth in key transport corridors. They also look to unblock network constraints and improve productivity. This will look across the Oxfordshire and Berkshire geographies to incorporate Councils that have a knowledge and experience of both.

Our proposals place an emphasis on investing in social housing, securing improved transport and digital connectivity, improving infrastructure and skills, recognising shared climate ambitions and working closely with business.

Our proposals establish an investment pipeline that will enhance nationally significant sectors located across Oxfordshire and West Berkshire within the areas to be covered by the two new Unitary councils.

2.7 Delivering the government's priorities.

Our proposals respond to the Government priorities as set out in the 'Programme for Change' and associated documents. The two new unitary councils are the right level to ensure national objectives support area delivery, considering community and business impacts. It is this local community and business focus that distinguishes our unitary council proposals from other options. In addition, West Berkshire has a foot in both Oxfordshire and Berkshire which will support the mayor to coordinate and navigate between the local authorities of the two areas to deliver ambitions. We are embracing:

- The Government's commitment to growth, through new housing and economic development, delivered at pace.

- The UK's Modern Industrial Strategy and 8 high growth sectors to ensure our approach to economic development and response to proposals that reflect these national objectives are supported. We will work with local partners to support clusters, key sectors and skills support.

- The prioritisation in the Spending Review of spending on critical infrastructure to accelerate growth and promote energy security.

- Engagement with Great British Energy as well as the National Energy Systems Operator (NESO) and communities, businesses, district network operators on the green energy transition to increase home-grown, local renewable energy generation and extend the grid supply and storage to meet the energy needs of our growth plans and to accelerate net zero.

- Planning for a green energy revolution, securing investment to enhance the power grid to support planned and sustainable economic and housing growth, and investment to upgrade our water and sewage infrastructure.

- Engagement with new Great British Railways and existing train operating companies GWR and Chiltern Railways to enhance transport connectivity.

- The need to work together with the mayor on the delivery of infrastructure needed to support the decisions of the New Town Commission about any new large new settlements in Oxfordshire and West Berkshire which will sit outside the Local Plans but will impact on the existing settlements and infrastructure.

- The commitment by the Government to secure '*health in all policies'* and that the application of these policies will help tackle health and inequalities.

- The enhanced role of Natural England resulting from the Planning and Infrastructure Bill to secure 'Environmental Delivery Plans' to protect the SACs in Oxfordshire and West Berkshire in support of Local Nature Recovery.

- The work of the Oxford Growth Commission on the growth needs of Oxford and to support the Oxford to Cambridge Growth Corridor and leverage support for our growth priorities.

The Oxfordshire Growth Corridor is one of the Government priorities which will impact on the work of the two new unitary councils and the new Mayor, by:

- Bringing new investment from Government in infrastructure and removing 'roadblocks' to growth.

- Securing new capital investment from the private sector from the UK and beyond to co-fund growth in all stages.

- Supporting our universities to locate business innovation on their campuses and working with our colleges and local businesses on skills provision.

- Ensuring sites are available to attract new investment.

- Ensuring that the skills needed to harness the innovation are available and by providing good and affordable housing.

- Ensuring Local Plans are up to date, and planning applications are determined quickly.

Alongside the Oxford to Cambridge Growth Corridor will be continuing to engage with the Berkshire Prosperity Board and delivery of the associated Berkshire Economic Strategy.

The Board has adopted a significant economic ambition –

'Our vision is that, by 2035, Berkshire will have the most productive and fastest growing local economy in the UK. Our strategic aim is to grow the Berkshire economy by 3% per annum in real terms from £52.5bn to £70.5bn and to increase employment by 6% from 601,000 to 637,000 between 2025 and 2035.'

2.8 Maintaining a strong economy.

We want to maintain the economic success of our area by building on our economic strengths and the distinctiveness of each area. The area plays a leading role in providing economic strength to the UK, with major business and science parks and the transfer of technology from research in Oxford's Universities & Colleges to new business applications, enabling accelerated economic growth in critical sectors such as advanced engineering, AI, robotics, biomedicine and new forms of mobility. This includes:

- We wish to build on our close relationship with Oxfordshire and West Berkshire businesses, meeting their aspirations, by providing decision-making certainty, involving business of all sizes and listening to them. At the heart of our closer relationship with business, we aim for planning to be an enabler and not a blocker, with a planning service in each unitary council that is built on the principles of efficiency, speed and effectiveness.

- In each unitary will be an opportunity to engage specialist skills and provide services across the new Unitary area and extend the existing high volume of business communications.

- We will work with sector and business groups, such as the local Chambers of Commerce and the Thames Valley Chamber, the Federation of Small Businesses and Advanced Oxford. This will include working with and within the Berkshire Prosperity Board. The experience West Berkshire has had from working with the Berkshire bodies will provide coordination and alignment to deliver economic growth within MSA area.

- We are determined to support business growth in science, innovation and technology, together with their critical supply chains, in line with the UK's Modern Industrial Strategy and 8 high growth sectors in our two unitary council areas. We will continue to work with our Enterprise Zones covering 'Science Vale' and the Didcot Growth Accelerator.

- Other key sectors include working with defence at AWE in West Berkshire, Brize Norton in West Oxfordshire, defence research at Shrivenham in the Vale of White Horse and Bicester in Cherwell; and working with the creative industries including digital media the film industry at Shinfield in West Berkshire and across Oxfordshire.

- We will also focus on rural diversification across both new unitary councils, working with SMEs and including green farm infrastructure and working with the racehorse industry in the Ridgeway Council area extending the current work of West Berkshire Council.

- We are looking to strengthen and extend, consolidate and connect the tourism offer and links within and between the destinations of the 2 proposed unitary areas, beyond the main attractions to increase dwell time and overnight stays. Also, tapping into the 32 million annual visitors to Oxford and at the same time addressing the overheating of Oxford City as a single visitor destination.

- Work with destination partnerships, promoting careers in leisure and business tourism and promoting retail destinations will help strengthen our high streets in the market towns, Oxford city, Blenheim Palace, the internationally known Bicester Village and our three National Landscapes.

- We want to secure business support and support the growth of business sites and to be able to respond positively to inward investment inquiries, making best use of strategic locations such as motorway junctions and the reuse of former military bases.

- Social economy and community interest companies are strongly represented in Cherwell and South and Vale. We want to spread the use of Community Employment Plans to improve access to skills and employment opportunities at new business locations.

- The experience of using Community Employment Plans has helped ensure inclusive growth and leverage the planned growth to meet needs of local community. There are closely related to skill providers in FE Colleges. The creation of 2 new unitary councils will help widen this economic activity in

conjunction with the work of West Berkshire unitary council in the Berkshire Prosperity Board .

- We are ready to deepen our partnership working with colleges and businesses across the two unitary areas to support the acquisition of the skills through apprenticeships and the training necessary for all residents to enter the workforce.

- We will build on the work of OCC and the Berkshire DIG to improve digital infrastructure across the region will extend our support for business opportunities.

- We want to use AI to provide clear pathways for skills and apprenticeships with local businesses, linked to local communities and their needs.

- We want to secure research & development funding from government via the mayor to accelerate science, innovation and technology development across Oxfordshire in the business centres of 'Oxford & Shires' and the 'Ridgeway Council' areas.

2.8.1 Our offer to business

Our two new Unitary Councils will draw on the approach of the existing Councils to enable work at scale, strengthening our ability to work with local business to understand their needs, to respond and coordinate with ensuring housing, infrastructure and workforce development meets these needs.

We plan to significantly increase the speed of our decision taking on planning applications to support business activities.

We propose to use Local Development Orders (LDOs) at all existing and any new business parks in each Unitary. Our approach will be based on the excellent example approved by Vale of White Horse Council, where an LDO covering Milton Park commits the Local Planning Authority to taking planning decisions within 10 days. Milton Park is a very high-quality development and the template we intend to follow.

There is also an LDO already in place for both the Didcot Technology Park and Greenham in West Berkshire and being prepared for the new Culham AI growth zone in South Oxfordshire.

We have a good record of developing and supporting new business and science parks to support the growth of key sectors, such as those at Bicester Motion, the Begbroke Science Park, the Oxford Technology Park, Greenham, Theale and Newbury, Culham, Harwell and Milton Park. We intend to expand business parks to support the growth of key sectors across each Unitary area.

We propose to establish an advisory panel in each unitary council to bring together all business parks in the unitary council area and consider common challenges and operational issues, especially as LDOs are used more extensively.

2.9 Growth and place shaping

As Oxfordshire economy grows, we want to maintain our quality of life and places to live and work. We want to create attractive new places and breathe life into old ones. We want to ensure we secure sustainable development and sustainable growth.

We will ensure we meet the Government's growth targets set for the area, develop Local Plans at pace and consider planning applications quickly.

We will seek to ensure new development provides new health services, education, leisure & other civic services to ensure they are great places to live, work and visit. We will continue to use place funding such as CIL and s106 contributions to engage with the community and deliver commitments entered into. We will also establish the use of S106 standard clauses to speed up agreement and delivery of approved developments.

We will continue our focus on the needs of the city of Oxford, our market towns and villages to ensure sustainable growth. We will also ensure coordination across wider Oxfordshire and Berkshire areas to meet the needs of the region. There is a significant advantage that incorporating West Berkshire brings and to be the conduit for this given its knowledge of Berkshire and inclusion with Oxfordshire Councils.

We will focus on our market towns and support new growth along corridors with good transport links, with limited new development to sustain our villages.

Our 2 unitary areas have undertaken a range of sustainable town centre regeneration schemes, including for Newbury, Thatcham and Hungerford, Didcot, Witney, Banbury and Bicester. We will emphasise the quality of development we support, and we will regenerate areas where necessary and support innovative design and building approaches. Our next priorities include Carterton, Thatcham, Berinsfield, Blackbird Leys and Kidlington.

In addition, the new unitary councils will work with GWR and Network Rail to regenerate stations and their localities as critical points of arrival into the market towns. For example, West Berkshire Councils experience with GWR on redeveloping Newbury Station and taking forward plans for Banbury station in Canalside.

We will explore creating new settlements and use of former military bases and quarry sites to limit the need for new green field or new green belt development. We will ensure that green and blue infrastructure such as river basins and lakes play a positive role in place shaping, where appropriate and where appropriate ensure that our active canals (the Kennet & Avon, the West Berkshire Canal project and the Oxford Canal) form the centre piece of new development.

We will look to maintain a 5-year housing land supply, addressing slow delivery and the delays to site delivery with the 2 new unitary councils learning from each other. We see a significant opportunity for speeding up the delivery of strategic housing sites with land transfer from Oxfordshire County Council to the 2 new unitary councils on allocated sites, to unblock development.

We plan for each unitary council to use specialist skills such as design and conservation advice and provide advice to help ensure our places retain their distinctiveness. We will also ensure we consider the health impacts of development and tackle climate change and promote net zero in our design advice and work with Great British Energy, NESO and local network providers to ensure the energy needs of new development are met.

Scale will enable us to intend to strengthen our community focus in our approach to growth by understanding their needs and aspiration. We plan to draw on the extensive experience of supporting and guiding Neighbourhood Plans and to use AI to involve community in the development of locally distinctive design codes that lock in quality from the outset. This was the approach used at Graven Hill in Bicester.

2.9.1 Our offer to residential developers

We want to speed up the planning process for residential sites. Through new approach to Development Management, we aim to maintain our 5-year housing land supply, through a proactive approach. To help achieve this:

- Agreed PPA will be stuck to by the Unitary Councils and agreed timetables will be met.
- The Unitary Council will not reopen the principle of development for an allocated site in an adopted Local Plan in the planning application.
- The Unitary Council will aim to secure consent as quickly as possible after a Local Plan is adopted and will work with applicant to shape their proposal as soon as the Local Plan has been submitted to PINs for Examination.

We will introduce new area based Local Development Orders (LDOs) to speed up planning of new development and area intensification at large sites in the way has been delivered at Graven Hill in Bicester.

Each Unitary Council will maintain a developers' forum to meet and discuss current delivery challenges.

We plan to offer a '*Mini-Homes England'* structure to accelerate the delivery of housing schemes. By working across the 2 new unitary councils, we wish to undertake a systematic review of all elements of a site/scheme and remove block to sites already allocated. As part of this approach we will explore forward funding infrastructure to help unlock and accelerate development. We recognise that communities do not want more greenbelt allocated for growth until current allocated sites are delivered.

The unitary councils will need to take account of the changes introduced by the Planning and Infrastructure Bill, especially the changes to the role of council planning committees and increased delegation to officers.

The new unitary councils will build on and extend the development plan strategies set out in adopted Local Plans. There is currently an adopted Local Plan for each district, with a new generation of Plans is in preparation and a number are in an advanced state (see Annex B for status) and the intention is to progressively reduce the number of Local Plans to one ambitious Local Plan for each unitary with area chapters within the new documents.

The two new unitary councils will input into the mayors new ‘Spatial Development Strategy’ based on our local priorities and aspirations. Each district currently has an adopted local plan, of varying ages and all are in the process of review and update. The local plans are comprehensive area development strategies.

The new unitary councils will have responsibility for minerals and waste planning drawing on the experience and expertise of West Berkshire Council which is a minerals and waste authority, with an adopted minerals and waste plan. The new unitary council will explore providing advice and support to Bucks unitary council to achieve economies of scale on minerals and waste planning.

All Councils have an adopted Local Plan in place, with updates in preparation (West and City), submission (Cherwell), examination (South and Vale) and recent adoption (West Berkshire). Move to 2 unitary councils is an opportunity to secure a streamlining, establishment of a common evidence base and secure savings in due course.

Transport planning is a key aspect of place shaping. West Berkshire Council has experience of aligning transport planning with community need and plans for growth. LTP4 was approved by the Councils Executive in July 2025. This unitary experience will support the new councils which are big enough to develop infrastructure plans strategically but small enough to align with local need of business and communities and to deliver planned growth

2.10 Improved digital connections.

By extending coverage of superfast broadband to secure 100% coverage across our rural areas we are looking to increase access for business, social enterprises and community uses across the whole of each new unitary council’s area.

Councils are already using AI to deepen our place engagement and want to take this approach further by promoting community access to council ‘place’ information in preparation of new Neighbourhood Plans and in preparing new Local Plans.

South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse received national recognition for their innovative approach to the consultation stages and plain English style of their Joint Local Plan. West Oxfordshire is also a well-established part of the Government's proptech/digital planning community. The Councils wish to widen this approach to ensure our Local Plans are data driven and to improve community and business engagement with our growth work.

The use of AI speeds up the time taken for preparing Local Plan stages including logging responses to Local Plan consultation and releasing time for more productive uses. We are looking to use AI more extensively through our growth work, to speed

up the completion of repetitive tasks and to improve community engagement and also roll out to development management in line with Government objectives.

Infrastructure does not stop at administrative boundaries and our two unitary council model will facilitate coordination across the whole MSA area. West Berkshire Council currently hosts the DIG and has the experience of delivering infrastructure across Berkshire and the new Ridgeway Council will facilitate this coordinated approach.

2.11 Meeting housing needs

Economically this is a relatively well-off area, with a strong housing market and with a mix of housing types, though relatively high-cost market housing.

There is a shortfall in the level of affordable housing across the area and a need for more genuinely affordable homes i.e. social rented and there is a need to increase the volume of affordable housing supported in each unitary area as part of the local housing mix. The new unitary councils will work closely with Registered Providers.

The area has supported significant housing innovation and delivery methods as well as investing in bold responses to the climate change emergency, for example the NW Bicester Eco Town in Cherwell, Salt Cross in West Oxfordshire and the Graven Hill custom build community at SE Bicester. At Thatcham, in West Berkshire, working closely with the community to shape this new development is an example of community working that would be lost at the large unitary scale. Our proposed two unitary councils aim to be small enough to understand local need but big enough to be effective.

The new unitary councils will draw on a number of important projects, including the South Oxfordshire use of climate action scorecards (which have been nationally acknowledged) and the West Oxfordshire Net Zero Carbon Toolkit to guide the design, development and delivery of new net-zero carbon, low-energy homes by small and medium-sized house builders, architects and self-builders. It also provides advice on how to implement energy efficiency measures in existing property and to begin to decarbonise in an affordable, phased way.

Our aspiration, reflected in our Local Plans, is to increase the volume of net zero ‘carbon positive’ housing and zero-bills housing we support across the area and in the growth corridors that underpin the two new unitary councils, ensuring that housing growth is supported by accessible transport for access to employment locations.

We intend to continue our support for housing innovation, while taking a more delivery focus, engaging closely with our housing providers as well as house builders to deliver the consents issued, to improve the quality of the housing built and to place an increased emphasis on securing the engagement of SME developers to drive increased local choice and innovation. The two unitary approach will build on local knowledge and be large enough to be effective, driven by a focus on delivery and quality outcomes.

We support the use of community-led housing such as has been achieved at Cumnor in Vale of White Horse and is being prepared for the Salt Cross new settlement in West Oxfordshire.

A number of the partner Councils, such as West Oxfordshire and West Berkshire are using digital planning and design tools. We are keen to see AI tools used with community engagement in place-related growth to helps maintain local distinctiveness to design codes for development, not just '*standard house types'*. This is the approach used in the custom and self-build development at Graven Hill, Bicester.

We intend to speed up our response times to housing enquiries.

We also recognise the role that garden communities and new settlements have a role to play in providing growth, as they can ensure that services and infrastructure are provided from the start. As we have seen through the development at Graven Hill and Elmbrook in Bicester and Dalton Barracks in Vale of White Horse, new settlements in appropriate locations can avoid adding more growth onto those locations that have already accommodated relatively high level of growth, putting pressure on existing public services and infrastructure.

2.12 Setting transport priorities.

The Thames Valley has significant opportunities for enhanced transport connections across the area and to elsewhere in the country and to ports and airports such as Heathrow.

There are existing transport links and corridors which link Oxford & Shires and the Ridgeway areas. There are good bus links into Oxford from Witney, Chipping Norton, Banbury and Bicester. Newbury is also connected to Oxford through South Oxfordshire.

The wider transport connections from the 2 new unitary council will be an important aspect of growth. Improved links to London, Hampshire, Heathrow with its major expansion plans, Swindon and Gloucestershire, as well as into Bucks and the West and East Midlands will be critical factors for consideration taking forwards existing transport plans. Working in partnership with other transport bodies such as Transport for the South East, England's Economic Heartland will be critical to improving links to the wider MSA. West Berkshire has a central role to play, being a member of Berkshire bodies and joining with partners in Oxfordshire will help align transport across the wider MSA area.

As an area that had witnessed high growth over the past 15-20 years Oxfordshire faces a transport network that is constrained with major points of congestion as well as a challenge of rural accessibility across both new unitary council areas.

New investment is needed to fund road and rail improvements to support both planned residential growth and commercial growth. Rail investment has a role to play in supporting improved connectivity and opening new areas for growth. The new unitary councils will work with GWR and Network rail as well as Great British Railways once it is operational, to secure rail service improvements as step towards a new Oxfordshire Metro system, which integrates rail and bus service provision in both new Unitary council areas, with both urban and rural connectivity. The proposed shift to electric trains by GWR and others is providing quicker services, with easier

access and a more sustainable, low carbon rail network across Oxfordshire and Berkshire.

The East-West rail route is a key infrastructure project in the Oxford to Cambridge Growth Corridor and will unlock areas for new growth together new transport links and residential and commercial growth.

Annex C provides an overview of the main transport priorities for the 2 new unitary councils which we wish to see the new mayor address. A particular priority is to improve the A34 which is severely constrained. Also to enhance the capacity of Oxford Station is important to unlocking a series of bus service improvements and new lines connecting Oxford to surrounding towns and to major settlements further away.

Oxford station has significant potential as a rail hub with unrivalled connectivity. We want to see the new East-West rail line extended to the Cowley Branch Line to open up development land to the east of Oxford. West Oxfordshire has an aspiration to secure new rail links through the A40 corridor to Witney and Carterton and is seeking to safeguard land for this purpose through its emerging local plan.

Railway station improvement have taken place at Newbury and Bicester, with plans for Theale. The market towns have the potential to be transport hubs linking bus and train services as well as new stations playing a major role in unlocking economic growth, such as Heyford Park and Grove.

West Berkshire has the right delivery experience to bring to the 2 unitary model. This will help ensure the 2 council model has the right skills and experience in each council. Its experience of infrastructure delivery including digital and transport will be a considerable resource for the MSA in which a series of corridors and growth partnerships exist and will require coordination.

The West Berkshire Ultra Low Environment Vehicle Strategy offers learning for the new unitary councils of approaches to tackling climate change in the transport sector, as does the Oxford zero emission zone.

There is an opportunity to extend cycle links between areas combining into the two new Unitary councils using the Strategic Active Travel Network (SATN) which is mapped and planning underway for delivery in Oxfordshire. Both the Oxford Greenways routes, Sustrans routes, improved connections to rail stations on commuting routes and in rural areas for tourism opportunities for example from Stow on the Wold to Kingham station; in the Cherwell Local Plan Partial Review to extend cycle connections between Yarnton/Kidlington to Oxford, around Botley and between Didcot - Newbury across the North Wessex Downs. The current Vale Local Plan and in the Joint Local Plan with South Oxfordshire land has been safeguarded land for the re-opening of the Wilts & Berks Canal, with a new active travel GI route alongside. West Berkshire is promoting green modes of transport, linked to the Berkshire wide connected travel plan and has linked the promotion of cycling to its Local Transport Plan and Environment strategies.

2.13 Closing infrastructure gaps

Our infrastructure priorities are to address power shortages in Oxfordshire and West Berkshire, where a power grid upgrade is needed to enable planned residential and commercial growth to commence. At the moment there are a number of stalled sites due to a lack of grid investment, despite the level of growth required being clear from the adopted Local Plans.

Investment in large solar schemes continues across Oxfordshire and West Berkshire, partly as a response to the current grid constraints and partly through the pressure to enable the green energy transition. The pressure for new renewable energy schemes can be expected to continue.

Managing National Infrastructure will be a need of the new unitary councils, for example in Oxford & Shires the Ardley Strategic Rail Freight Interchange and Botley West solar farm are challenging projects with wide spatial impacts on transport and the landscape of such a large solar scheme.

Water stress is becoming a challenge across Oxfordshire and West Berkshire and the need for sewage upgrades. The new investment package agreed at southeast Oxford enables the Grenoble Road residential development to proceed as well as other developments in South Oxfordshire and Cherwell too. West Oxfordshire faces challenges at many of its villages for improvements to the local sewage facilities.

2.14 Tackling Climate Change

The new unitary councils will continue to respond to the urgency of climate change by taking measures to promote climate resilience, such as tackling flood risks and will support innovative approaches to moving towards carbon zero development. A range of initiatives have been taken in Oxfordshire and West Berkshire that will form the basis of action by the two new unitary councils.

The Salt Cross development in West Oxfordshire will act as a trailblazer, with its 25% Biodiversity Net Gain requirement (15% above the 10% statutory requirement) as will other smaller residential and commercial schemes. These are central to our approach to the design of new development.

Other policy approaches developed in Oxfordshire include:

The new unitary councils will apply '*Project LEO' (Local Energy Oxfordshire*) to their place shaping, planning and housing work replicate the work that was undertaken on a detailed energy mapping for Bicester in the other market towns of each new unitary council area. Such maps aim to serve as tools for place-based planning. They show vulnerable areas and neighbourhoods that require tailored interventions for issues such as fuel poverty, off-grid heating, and tackling inefficient homes. Project LEO has also mapped areas suitable for renewable energy generation and electric vehicle charging points.

The '*Pathways to a Zero Carbon Oxfordshire'* (PAZCO) report is a useful guide for the new unitary councils that has outlined pathways to net-zero by 2050. It highlighted economic opportunities from innovation in energy, transport, land-use, and housing sectors supporting clean energy jobs and green industries.

The new unitary councils will continue to use the '*Net zero route map & action plan'* (NZRMAP), the route map of steps identified for Oxfordshire authorities to take to achieve net zero to meet their net zero target dates, which range from 2030 to 2050.

The two new unitary councils will build on existing work, such as PaZCO and the '*Zero Carbon Oxford Partnership'* (ZCOP), which details milestones, carbon budgets and KPIs to track progress including:

- Using the '*Local Area Energy Planning' (LAEP)* function
- Decarbonising buildings
- Accelerating the roll out of publicly accessible EV charge points
- Exploring opportunities to enhance carbon sequestration through land use change, including targeted habitat restoration and creation

The Eynsham CAPZero is the UK's first hyper local energy plan and is ready for rollout across the new unitary councils.

We also know sustainable development relies on public access to greenspace, tree planting and the provision of allotments, but it also includes the wider application of the concept of 'One Planet Living' (developed by Bicester based 'Bioregional') to ensure development is designed to have the least impact possible.

West Berkshire will bring its comprehensive, integrated cross-service approach to tackling climate change into the Ridgeway Council. The Council's approach is guided by its Environment Strategy 2020-2030 which sets out detailed practical measures and deliverable targets for reducing emissions and steps towards carbon neutrality. The Council supports local energy generation and carbon sequestration projects and aims to be a carbon neutral operation by 2030.

The approach taken by West Berkshire encourages responsible economic growth, supports healthy communities and works in closely with communities and local partners.

2.15 Major landscape and heritage constraints

There are important landscape designations to treat with considerable care, given their sensitivity and national importance, as the two unitary councils focus on growth. These are:

- Cherwell – has small coverage by the Cotswolds National Landscape.

- West Oxfordshire – has major coverage by the Cotswolds National Landscape, one third of the land total.

- South Oxfordshire & Vale of White Horse – has significant coverage by the Chilterns and North Wessex Downs National Landscape.

- West Berkshire – has significant coverage by the North Wessex Downs National Landscape.

There is a legal duty to take account of the Management Plans for the Chilterns, North Wessex Downs and Cotswolds National Landscapes in considering any growth proposals in those areas.

Green Belt covers part of the city of Oxford as well as part of the four surrounding Districts too. This coverage helps prevent urban sprawl and limit the coalescence with surrounding towns.

The area covered by the two new unitary councils has internationally important heritage assets too, including World Heritage Sites, registered parks and gardens, ancient monuments, battlefields, and a rich number of listed buildings and conservation areas and archaeological assets. Examples include the White Horse at Uffington, Blenheim Palace, much of the centre of Oxford city - features from all stages of the history of England.

2.16 Protecting our environment.

Oxfordshire and West Berkshire have an attractive high-quality environment, but it faces the challenge of nature recovery too. Central to future growth will be considerations of the requirements of Biodiversity Net Gain, enhancing our green and blue corridors and securing nature recovery using the Oxfordshire and West Berkshire Local Nature Recovery Strategies and working with the Berkshire Local Nature Partnership on 17 Biodiversity Opportunity Areas and the Berks, Bucks and Oxon Wildlife Trust (BBOWT).

We are committed to retaining our high-quality environment and therefore approach the issue of growth with sensitivity. There are a number of ecological constraints that have to be assessed as growth is proposed and to secure planning consents. We are particularly concerned to respect our National Landscapes, the Special Areas of Conservation (SACs) and SSSIs, as well as tackling nutrient neutrally with the use of grant funding to overcome issues to enable housing growth in West Berkshire.

Importantly, West Berkshire has three SAC including the River Lambourn, while Oxfordshire has 7 Special Areas of Conservation (SACs) which require Habitat Assessment of potential impacts of new growth to be assessed. They are especially vulnerable to potential NO2 impacts. For example, Natural England has expressed significant concerns about growth impact on the Oxford Meadows adjoining the A34 and the A40 from increased traffic growth.

Of the 7 SACs in Oxfordshire the 4 most sensitive due to their location adjoining major roads are:

- Oxford Meadows SAC, adjoining the A34.
- Aston Rowant Woods, adjoining the M40.
- Aston Rowant adjoining the M40.
- Aston Rowant Cutting adjoining the M40.

Vale of White Horse and West Berkshire are nutrient affected authorities because of the River Lambourn SAC. Parts of West Berkshire are also impacted by the SE Plan Natural Resources Management Policy - Thames Basin Heaths SPA. Water

neutrality is an emerging issue, West Berkshire has recently been awarded a grant for nutrient neutrality solutions to enable development to proceed.

The Planning and Infrastructure Bill before Parliament proposes to introduce ‘Environmental Delivery Plans’ (EDPs) which are likely to significantly change how the impact of development on SACs are mitigated in the future.

There are other designated Sites to avoid. Oxfordshire also has 111 Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs) and geological SSSIs too, with 39 Conservation Target Areas (CTAs) which will be replaced this year by the map in the LRNS once adopted, Ramsar sites and 472 Local Wildlife Sites. All feature in the Oxfordshire Nature Recovery Strategy. West Berkshire has 51 SSSIs, 7 local Geological sites and 500 Local Wildlife Sites.

3. Why 2 unitary councils are best for growth in Oxfordshire?

This section considers the 3 LGR options and their relationship to growth. The main assessment of the options is set out in the joint LGR report on proposals for 2 unitary councils.

3.1 Option A. A single county wide unitary council

The current 2 tier arrangement for local government in Oxfordshire is not effective or efficient. Moving to a unitary council for the whole of Oxfordshire would be a big council in terms of geography and population size. It would run the risk of being too remote from people, businesses and the communities it serves. Unlike the 2 unitary model which would be closer to its community to understand its needs.

One challenge that can be seen with the current structure is the relatively poor delivery by the County Council of transport schemes to support growth identified through Local Plans and the withdrawal of funding from transport services especially rural bus services which impacts on rural communities and the decline in road conditions. Enabling West Berkshire to be part of the proposal brings the experience of delivering transport to meet local community needs eg demand transport in rural areas. This experience can be shared between the 2 new unitary councils once established.

The transport needs of adopted Local Plans which shape growth over a 15 year period have not been met. This includes road investment in Banbury and Bicester to reduce congestion and on the A44 to manage the growth associated with the review of the Cherwell Local Plan that led to housing allocations to close to Kidlington and on the A40 to help manage the growth in West Oxfordshire. The County Council voted against the proposed new Thames crossing north of Didcot, an essential component of growth to support the delivery of the adopted Vale of White Horse and South Oxfordshire Local Plans.

The County Council still lacks a comprehensive county-wide transport model after many years of development, which means it is hard to assess the implications of new development on the transport network and on Habitat Regulation sites.

The delay and failure to deliver of the Oxfordshire Mobility Model (OMM) by the County Council has held up progress, including planning policy work, access for site promoters (eg Dalton Barracks in the Vale of White Horse) to a comprehensive model to test schemes, as well as creating complications for Habitat Regulations Assessments which need to consider cumulative impacts.

The County Council has the worst performance in England on the use of approved, paid s106 contributions for the purposes on which they have been secured from developers (House Builders Federation, October 2024). This undermines the delivery of approved schemes, and the honouring of commitments reached with the local community too.

Oxfordshire County Council has not been releasing their land in allocated sites in West Oxfordshire which has the effect of holding back approved development.

Oxfordshire County Council is not close to the communities served. The County Council bid continues this remoteness and distance. Being a commissioning body, it lacks intelligence on local needs and local issues which is essential for effective growth planning. Across Oxfordshire housing and economic growth has been secured and delivered by the district councils.

The creation of two new unitary councils would provide the right opportunities to secure economies of scale, building on growth planning and regeneration experience without becoming too remote.

3.2 Option B. A standalone unitary for the city & 2 accompanying unitary councils.

Oxford City council is ambitious, but the creation of a standalone unitary council for Oxford City would be of a relatively small unitary council, well below the recommended 500,000 population size.

Adopting the Oxford City unitary proposal would subsume a significant proportion of the current Oxford Green Belt. This is not the only way for Oxford to grow. It would be better for the city to consider alternative land uses within the current administrative area to use land more efficiently through regeneration schemes with higher housing densities and retain the integrity of the current Green Belt in both the city and its neighbouring areas (except for sites that have been released through the current adopted Local Plans in the neighbouring Districts). The Oxford City growth proposal will lead to new, additional green major Green Belt release in surrounding areas and runs the risk of creating ‘urban sprawl’ which is what the Green Belt is intended to avoid and should continue to do so.

Expanding the city further through urban extensions into the Green Belt at the edge of the city of Oxford runs the risk of compounding the existing constrained infrastructure on the edge of the city.

The housing need of Oxford should be met within the new unitary council areas in a coordinated, planned way. For example, part of the current unmet housing need of the city is planned for with housing growth at Kidlington through the Cherwell Local Plan Review, at Salt Cross and West Eynsham in West Oxfordshire and land north of Bayswater Brook, Northfield Farm and Grenoble Road in South Oxfordshire.

But future growth does not need to adjoin the city boundary. In the future, further housing growth from Oxford could be provided for at Heyford Park in Cherwell, on a significant brown field land location. For this to be delivered, improved transport connections will be needed, with rail links to Oxford. The key issue for supporting the growth of the City is for good public transport links by train and bus and improved walking and cycling links from identified areas of growth into the City.

Oxford growing as a standalone Council runs the risks of retaining the current tensions between the city and its neighbours over how best to grow. It’s now time to move to a new more positive relationship. The creation of two new unitary councils will ensure the recent challenges of the Duty to Cooperate, meeting the unmet housing needs of the city in the future can be dealt with more positively through a joint approach under Spatial Development Strategy to enable development in the right place to respect constraints and landscape quality. By including Oxford within

the new structure of the proposed ‘Oxford & Shires’ unitary council the needs of the city to grow will be addressed comprehensively. In the two new unitary councils there will be an on going to need to cooperate. This will be especially relevant to the wider Berkshire collaboration, with West Berkshire continuing working ties to Berkshire and infrastructure in place to ensure service coordination and cooperation across the wider MSA area

The Oxford economy has underperformed relative to other comparable areas in southern England. The economy of Oxford, with major business parks and the investment from the Universities and Colleges does not operate separately from the rest of Oxfordshire. It is all interconnected and integrated and plays a powerful economic role. Oxford is a part of and connected to the County as a whole, through investment, supply chains, economic networks, travel patterns and commuting.

The city proposal is inward looking, ignoring Oxford’s relationship to neighbouring districts and their economic potential. In contrast, our focus will be on building a network of science and business parks on the edge of City and across Oxfordshire, relating to the Universities and Colleges.

Our proposals seek to address these interconnections and the important economic relationships between the business parks of Oxfordshire, taking account of the importance of the wider economy and globally significant business parks such as Harwell and Culham located at distance from Oxford. We believe that Oxford’s challenges are best met on a collaborative basis between local authority partners within a joint structure and with the new Mayor too.

The two new unitary councils (and the mayor) will also embrace the recommendations from the recently established Oxford Growth Commission, in particular how the economy of the city might grow and how affordable housing should best be expanded.

3.3 Option C. Two new unitary councils – ‘Oxford & Shires’; ‘The Ridgeway’

Our proposed two new unitary councils are built around corridors that link the two areas:

- A Unitary council in the north of Oxfordshire to be called ‘*Oxford & Shires*’ which is linked by the A40 corridor from Carterton to Oxford, together with the A41, A44, A4260 and the M40 and A34 corridors linking Banbury and Bicester with Oxford. This link is reinforced by the new East - West rail, the Banbury to Oxford Line and North Cotswolds line linking West Oxfordshire with Cherwell and Oxford City.

- A Unitary council in the south of Oxfordshire with West Berkshire to be called ‘*The Ridgeway Council’*, liked by the M4 corridor, the A34 and A420 corridors linking South Oxfordshire, the Vale of White Horse and West Berkshire.

We propose to take a ‘corridor approach’ which ensures we keep a focus on the distinctiveness of our localities as well as opening up and supporting Oxford’s growth without decimating the Green Belt. Green Belt is a well established strategic planning tool for assisting with regeneration of brownfield land as well as other

planning objectives like protecting the setting of historic towns, which is very relevant in Oxford's case with its 'dreaming spires' set in a valued green landscape.

Our proposed two unitary councils have complimentary geographies, Cherwell and West Oxfordshire connect to Oxford along the A40, A44, A4260 and A41, while the Ridgeway connects well to the wider Thames Valley along the M4.The creation of two new Unitary councils would blend the best of each current component Council, building on a good record of collaboration and joint working.

There are deep historic ties too, as Berkshire included the parts of Oxfordshire south of the River Thames until the local government reorganisation in 1974 as well as the historic Ridgeway path, and the River Thames as a link joining the authorities but currently separately them (the River Thames is the district and county border for much of its length) but would enable effective catchment thinking if both banks were in same authority for more of it.

There are positive lessons to apply from working with West Berkshire Council, an established unitary council, in the design of the 2 new unitary councils. Their practical experience will lead to informed organisational design and an approach to service delivery of upper tier authorities but at a level that understand and delivers for local needs. This will bring experience of a *whole system approach* to growth and bring experience of people services, health, community safety (police & fire). Also, an understanding of wider MSA geography to create the glue between Oxfordshire and Berkshire councils working with the MSA.

The involvement of West Berkshire secures opportunities for scaling up, collaboration and joint learning in developing rural industries and common approaches to growth, as well as meeting the needs of market towns, renewal and rural transport connectivity.

The two new unitary councils will provide a balanced and proportionate approach to growth. Building on the development strategy set out in the adopted Local Plans and commits to an approach to future growth *that is expansive and ambitious*. Experience of working in a single tier brings experience of coordinating growth plans with infrastructure delivery at the strategic and local level

The population thresholds of 500,000 will be met with planned future development through the delivery of adopted Local Plans. The two new unitary councils will be big enough to drive efficiencies but small enough to understand community (business and residents) to deliver to meet their needs and aspirations.

The two new unitary councils are close to their local communities and will be closer to the people and businesses served than a countywide unitary can be. They will have an intimacy, a focus and a local connection that a county wide unitary cannot have.

One of the issues that differentiates the creation of 2 new unitary councils from a County wide unitary will be the approach taken to planning. Our approach will combine planning for growth through local plans and the coordination with infrastructure delivery. We intend to introduce a quicker planning service, that is not held up by two-tier working and has the ability to plan for and make decisions to deliver growth and development.

Through the creation of two new planning teams, one for each new unitary council, we have considered what will be needed to build investor confidence through the planning system and address our customers' needs efficiently and effectively, providing certainty for our communities and for our applicants.

Two new unitary councils will be able to speed up decision-making on planning as this will be easier if a) the unitary is not a large county authority, with a poor delivery record on current development proposals, b) because there is the opportunity, based on experience and detailed local knowledge, to reset the skills and resources needed to focus on speed and efficiency as noted in section 2.10 and c) to use standard s106 clauses. West Berkshire brings experience of single tier system working across transport, drainage, people services to deliver the needs of the communities and deliver on the ground. Bringing West Berkshire into the Oxfordshire model will help inform and shape the new local government model.

We propose two new unitary councils that are keen to work positively with the new mayoral combined authority, to secure sustainable growth and investment, not in opposition.

Our two new unitary councils have a close understanding of their patch and will bring that knowledge and understanding to a 'Team Thames Valley' approach, working with the mayor to secure the major economic potential of the area with accompanying housing growth and infrastructure planning.

Our emphasis is on market towns, and we have invested in regenerating and strengthening many of them. They are all different and are also distinct to our focus on meeting the needs of the city of Oxford. Our two new unitary councils will work together and share best practice.

Parts of the current districts have seen significant growth, with attractive town centre regeneration and the towns have remained 'local' in feel.

The constraints faced, such as National Landscape, areas of environmental and heritage sensitivity and areas of flooding made us focus development geographically which has generated locations with strong infrastructure such as Didcot and Newbury, Witney, Banbury and Bicester. Our two new unitary councils are an opportunity to both meet the needs of Oxford and Reading on a collaborative basis and to ensure that major growth avoids the National Landscape areas.

While the 2-tier split between County Council and the District Councils, as well as between the city and its 4 neighbours, has not helped the planning of Oxfordshire, a two unitary approach will help with this.

The 5 District Councils of Oxford City, Cherwell and West Oxfordshire, South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse have an established collaboration on planning matters, such as jointly unmet housing need through the Growth Deal and its associated MoU.

Collaboration in a larger Local Government unit, a new unitary council as 'Oxford & Shires' is the opportunity to address unmet housing need and assist Oxford City to expand, not necessarily on edge of the city which would compound the existing

infrastructure challenge, or through further Green Belt release, but further away and ensure rail and bus connections are put in place to enable quick links into the city. There is major brownfield land availability in Cherwell at Heyford Park and rail connections too.

The neighbouring Districts to Oxford City showed what could be done together in 2016/17 when the identified unmet housing need of the city of 14,300 housing was shown as capable of being accommodated in the surrounding districts and apportioned between Cherwell, West Oxfordshire, South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse in a jointly agreed package.

The proposed 2 new unitary councils, with the benefit that West Berkshire can bring of experience and links to the rest of Berkshire to address the wider MSA area, are best placed to tackle in an integrated way the infrastructure challenges of growth, with improved transport links and the provision of power and water connections of both Oxford and in the wider parts of each unitary area.

The new unitary councils will be outward looking new organisations. Both new unitary councils will look to engage closely with neighbours on strategic transport planning, school catchment planning, environmental management and river basin planning as they contribute to the success of the new Thames Valley Combined Authority.

4A. The ‘Oxford & Shires’ Council

The new ‘Oxfordshire and Shires’ Unitary Council will bring together the 3 current districts of West Oxfordshire, Cherwell and the City of Oxford. The new unitary council is based on a series of transport corridors which link the area together and also strong track record of working collaboratively.

The Oxford & Shires Council will embrace a collaborative approach to working together with the Ridgeway Council. In this the experience of the West Berkshire Unitary of coordination, the operating model and planning for growth and infrastructure delivery together will be powerful.

4A.1 History of the relationship

The Partial Review of the Local Plan undertaken by Cherwell of the area adjoining Oxford between Kidlington and Yarnton, was a response to unmet housing need in Oxford City in 2016/17, as was the focus by West Oxfordshire on the creation of Salt Cross new settlement and proposed development to the west of Eynsham. Oxford City has been given nomination rights to affordable housing created in this area. Oxford has not been treated as a separate area and its housing needs have not been ignored by its neighbours.

The new unitary council, bringing existing partners together in a joint structure, will take the existing relationship one stage further and enable service integration to be achieved as the growth is delivered.

The area is a significant part of Oxford to Cambridge Growth Corridor with the potential for new commercial and residential growth.

We are feeding into and engaging with the new Oxford Growth Commission and will take account of its conclusions.

4A.2 Our growth aspirations

We have a history of growth in each of the current districts and supporting innovation in delivery such as at Graven Hill, Salt Cross and at Garden Communities too.

By directing development teams to focus on development corridors, we will be structuring their work on key growth locations; for example, from Carterton, to Salt Cross, Kidlington/Yarnton ,south to Oxford – building on area strengths within the corridors and the links between different types of development. In contrast the proposal from Oxford for major growth into green belt locations is much less deliverable than growth along our corridors.

We see future residential growth taking place at our market towns and on a more limited basis at Oxford, given their limited land availability. We see new growth taking place in transport corridors where there is good rail and bus connectivity, as well as good links to the highway network, that are also capable of being made more sustainable through appropriate investment. For example the A40 corridor has the potential for rail or other mass transit that supports new growth.

We embrace the importance of the city of Oxford as a major economic area and want to strengthen its network role to the economy of the 2 new unitary council areas. The city is an important retail and cultural centre and its interdependence with its neighbours is an underpromoted asset. The future of Oxford is safe in the hands of the new Oxford & Shires Council, working closely its sister Council, the Ridgeway.

We anticipate intensification of land use within our market towns continuing, with a scaling up of the provision of affordable housing and with area regeneration such as at Carterton and in Oxford over the long term and the intensive use of brown field land such as is clearly possible at Heyford Park to support a major residential and commercial expansion. This includes working with the MoD/DIO on the regeneration of areas of existing service family accommodation.

We see new settlements as playing a role too and Heyford Park has a major role to play in supporting new growth (we anticipate it being supported by the New Town Commission, possibly with a new Urban Development Corporation to help take the expansion forward) along with likely rail freight terminal alongside and major changes to J10, M40 and a new rail station improving access. The expansion of the Salt Cross new settlement has the potential to secure strategic transport investment to improve its connectivity.

As recorded earlier we intend to use Local Development Orders (LDOs) for all business and science parks (see para 2.9.1) across the new Council area. We also intend to establish Local Development Orders (LDO) to speed up the planning of area development and reducing the time to secure consents for residential-led schemes. This would be based on the Graven Hill experience on the edge of Bicester where a new community with predominantly custom-build housing has been implemented within the parameters of an LDO.

We will continue our programme of regeneration, building on the success of those completed at Bicester and Witney, with a particular focus on Carterton, Kidlington, Canalside in Banbury and the station area in Oxford. The new unitary council will work with businesses to support Business Improvement Districts (BID) and secure economies of scale through working across the 3 districts.

We will continue to seek to ensure that growth at our villages is consistent with our development strategy as set out in our adopted Local Plans.

We intend to continue protecting the Cotswolds National Landscape from major development proposals and to promoting its objectives as an area of national significance.

4A.3 Maximising our economic and commercial potential.

We recognise that this new unitary council area has major economic assets across its geography, from the Cotswolds, RAF Brize Norton base and Blenheim Palace, to the City of Oxford, with its research strength and a range of business parks across the area which drawn on the expertise of the Universities and Colleges, to the Airport, Bicester Village, the emerging new town at Heyford Park and advanced manufacturing in Bicester and Banbury.

Forging closer ties with these assets and support for intensifying their outputs will ensure that the economic success of the unitary area is secured. Part of this will depend on securing improved rail connections and stations with an improved Oxford Station at the heart of the network and improved strategic highways, including the A40, A34 and A41 and the critical junctions on the M40 at Junction 9, 10 and 11 and Junction 13 on the M4, which are both network connections and areas for intensifying the economic opportunity that exists to secure significant economic development potential.

Of note is M40 J10 which is set to become a major growth zone, with the Heyford Park expansion, the rail freight NSIP development proposed at Ardley and a historical theme park being assessed. A Masterplan will be needed of the links between these major developments to ensure coherence and to secure developer gains.

We intend to build on our economic strengths such as the areas advanced engineering sector including Innovative Bicester Motion, with major developments close to the Motorway network at M40 Junctions 9 and 11. We want to see the new Vertiport at Bicester Motion develop in order to place the area at the forefront of the new electric air taxi industry, as part of emerging new national network.

There has been significant job creation in the distribution and manufacturing sector located at M40 junction 9 and 11 with more under consideration close to junction 10. Manufacturing and food processing is strong at Banbury and defence at Brize Norton, the area has a significant advanced engineering presence with advanced motor companies, motorsports and an extensive research and development base around Oxford linked to the research base of our two Universities and Colleges, with hi-tech spin outs and across the unitary area with growth locations to support.

Growth locations include support for the growth of key clusters, sectors and locations at ‘Science North’, a high tech zone linking the major new North Oxford development, The University of Oxford Begbroke Science Park, the Oxford Technology Park, London Oxford Airport into West Oxfordshire too, all with quick access to the Oxford Parkway and Long Hanborough stations. Carterton is highlighted in the Local Industrial Strategy and Local Investment Plan as a new 'technology hub'.

Many of these locations are closely aligned with the National Industrial Strategy and have the potential for significant expansion such as the Oxford Technology Park and the aero industries of Oxford Airport. A new Park and Ride to serve Oxford has potential in this location too.

The area has a very strong tourism offer that combines the major tourism assets of Blenheim Palace, the Cotswolds, Bicester Village (with the Puy du Fou historical park under consideration at M40, Junction 10) and the opportunity to harness overheated Oxford by linking together to forge a strong international tourism offer.

As noted earlier the use of a Local Development Order (LDO) to provide quick planning approvals in 10 days, based on the Vale of White Horse experience, would provide certainty for business. Extending this approach to cover all business parks would remove planning as a major development issue.

In Oxford the colocation of new residential and commercial and more affordable workplaces will help reduce an outwards commute to commercial development on the outer edge of the city.

4A.4 Meeting housing need

We intend to address the need across the area for significant levels of affordable housing. The Unitary area faces high housing costs, and a major affordability challenge in Oxford, neighbouring Districts and in rural West Oxfordshire.

Cherwell has had a strong record of housing delivery and housing innovation as its investment in the Graven Hill custom self-build community and support for the NW Bicester Ecotown show. Working with Greencore Homes at Shipton quarry to build a new settlement of ‘climate positive’ homes will recapture that leadership position.

Other high-quality developments that tackle climate change are planned at the Salt Cross new settlement in West Oxfordshire with its high building standards and with development planned to be net zero carbon in operation.

While the boundary of Oxford limits unchecked growth, in recent years some Green Belt release has been supported into the Cherwell, South and West Oxfordshire Districts and the Vale of White Horse that each sit on its edge. Within the City there is potential for urban renewal and site intensification through building higher and at high densities. But this will not meet the entirety of Oxford’s housing needs in the future.

We will continue to support the growth of Heyford Park in Cherwell and its conversion from a military base into a dynamic new town. It lies close to Junction 10 of the M40 and next to two rail lines with the potential for a new station next to the site to support new growth. A creative Masterplan has been prepared that proposes new residential and commercial growth at scale, plus leisure uses and major renewable energy generation to meet its own needs. Development on the brownfield land at Heyford Park avoids the need for new development on green fields around the more sensitive village locations.

Heyford Park has a major role to play in providing major housing growth and supporting the unmet housing needs of Oxford City, as it avoids further Green Belt incursion, as does the potential for future growth at the military base of Arncott and land at Weston on the Green.

Likewise expanding Carterton in West Oxfordshire provides a major opportunity to meet the housing needs of West Oxfordshire and to engage in an accompanying programme of regeneration of the town to help secure its role as an important service centre next to the RAF Brize Norton base, as well as capitalising on the economic spin-out opportunities.

4A.5 Our transport and infrastructure priorities

There are major transport challenges across the Oxford & Shires Area with major congestion on our roads and constraints on the rail network. There are opportunities to use transport investment to drive growth.

The new Council will work with GWR and Network Rail to regenerate stations and their locals as critical points of arrival in the market towns and to enhancement the rail network in the area, including:

- The opening of a passenger service on the Cowley Branch Line to extend the East-West rail link to unlock major development sites on the east side of Oxford.

- An enhanced Oxford Station to ensure the new services and rail links can all be accommodated and improve connectivity to locations beyond Oxford, especially London, Bristol and Reading.

- Enhancements to the North Cotswold line to double track the line between Oxford and Long Hanborough, improving the connections to Worcester and beyond and investing in major improvements to Hanborough Station including new bridge and additional platform.

- Improvements to the rail line between Banbury and Oxford with new stations at Begbroke and possibly at Shipton to help deliver significant plans for proposed residential and commercial growth.

- A new station at Ardley (on the footprint of a previous station) and an expanded Lower Heyford station to support the development of the Heyford Park new town and secure a close service connection into Oxford.

- West Oxfordshire are seeking to safeguard land to enable the future provision of a potential rail connection from Carterton to Oxford via Witney (known as the Carterton - Witney - Oxford Rail Corridor or CWORC for short).

Improving key roads with investment on strategic highways network aligned with Local Plan related growth, including:

- New Motorway junctions to support growth and manage transport flows at Banbury and Bicester.

- Tackling A34 congestion.

- A40 improvements to access growth of Carterton and Witney and access into the Cotswolds.

- A41 improved connection between Oxfordshire and Bucks, providing enhanced access to the M40 for Aylesbury Vale part of Buckinghamshire.

Improvements to the electricity grid are required. The area has major gaps to close in the power supply to Cherwell and Oxford to enable planned and new growth to proceed.

The area also has water needs to meet through an enhanced water network and improvements to the sewage provision of the area across West Oxfordshire and at Grenoble road on the southeast of Oxford.

4A.6 Conclusion on ‘Oxford & Shires’

There is a major opportunity to create a new unitary council that builds on the track record of delivery and innovation by the current Councils in housing approaches and responses to climate change

These Councils believe that the Oxford & Shires unitary council will strengthen the economy of the city of Oxford and the two neighbouring Districts and working closely with the new Ridgeway Council. Its ambition will expand its economic assets and expand local clusters in nationally significant sectors of science and technology industries and strengthened tourism too.

The Oxford & Shires unitary council aspires to respond to the future housing needs of Oxford through new and extended settlements with close transport links to the city.

The new unitary stands to be a significant actor and a willingness to collaborate with partners and help secure the proposed Thames Valley MSA and support the new Mayor.

4B. The ‘Ridgeway Council’

The new ‘Ridgeway Council’ is to bring together the 3 districts of South Oxfordshire, Vale of White Horse and West Berkshire as a Unitary council. The area is linked by the A34 and the extensive coverage of the chalk landscapes of the Chilterns and North Wessex Downs bringing common landscape, environment, heritage and tourism links.

There are deep historic ties, as Berkshire included the parts of Oxfordshire south of the River Thames until the local government reorganisation in 1974.

There are lessons for the new unitary council from working with West Berkshire Council, an established unitary council in the design of both of the 2 new unitary councils. Their practical experience of coordination, its operating model and planning for growth and infrastructure delivery will lead to informed organisational design.

The involvement of West Berkshire secures opportunities for scaling up, collaboration and joint learning in developing rural industries and common approaches to growth, as well as meeting the needs of market towns, renewal and rural transport connectivity.

4B.1 History of the relationship

South Oxfordshire and the Vale of White Horse Councils have worked jointly for many years with a shared management team and shared services between the two Councils. This has brought efficiency, cost saving and a shared policy agenda, whilst respecting the local differences between the 2 Councils and the communities within each District.

The new Ridgeway Council will add West Berkshire Council into the established two Council partnership. The 3 Council merger will bring depth to the current two council collaboration.

The 3 Districts share many common features, an internationally significant high tech business cluster centred on Harwell, Milton Park and Culham, two Enterprise zones, the ‘Science Vale’ initiative and collaboration with both the Universities of Oxford and Southampton. The area has a significant coverage of the North Wessex Downs National Landscape and the Chilterns National Landscape and market towns, conservation areas and villages.

4B.2 Our growth aspirations

The members of the proposed Ridgeway Council have a solid record of sustainable growth and a significant delivery record of housing and commercial growth. They have shared ambitions to maintain our economic success and aim to grow further in a sustainable way.

The new unitary will look to align its next series of local plan reviews with the aim of moving to one new local plan for the unitary council area, incorporating an area focus to the new plan. The new unitary will have the ability to coordinate traditional upper tier functions of infrastructure delivery (transport/drainage etc) with growth plans due to the knowledge and skills from the West Berkshire experience.

The aim is to continue to plan for major residential, employment and commercial growth at the market towns and garden communities while protecting the areas of greatest sensitivity including areas of greatest landscape quality, the National Landscape of the North Wessex Downs and the Chilterns. We will retain the character of our villages and work with the communities to ensure they remain viable.

The Ridgeway Council will seek to continue the participation of the West Berkshire Council in the Berkshire Prosperity Board and its significant ambitions and in the Berkshire economic strategy for collaboration and investment. This will strengthen the links between the new unitary council into Oxfordshire and Berkshire, helping to deepen collaboration and joint working within the Thames Valley.

The new council will continue the successful programme of regeneration at Didcot Garden Community and Berinsfield Garden Community, while also embracing the Newbury regeneration programme and masterplans to shape the renewal of Thatcham and Hungerford. The plans for major development at Thatcham have been developed with the local community.

There is an opportunity for shared learning from the applying the consideration by West Berkshire Council of the economic development consequences of planning approvals and of the implications of health from new development by the new unitary council.

The current Councils have a positive history of using community led Neighbourhood Plans to secure growth at villages of a more limited, proportionate scale, together with growth to support local infrastructure priorities, such as the Benson bypass. The new unitary council will continue community engagement in growth through a focus on support for Neighbourhood Plans to enable communities to take control to meet their aims.

The new Council will explore the potential for a new settlement at the A34/M4 junction 13 in West Berkshire.

As a Minerals and Waste Authority, with a plan adopted in December 2022, West Berkshire Council brings the experience and skills to work across the new unitary area on these key issues.

4B.3 Maximising our economic and commercial potential.

The area already has a strong record of support for economic growth at the business parks with their science and innovation strengths at Newbury, Greenham, Theale, Harwell, Culham and Milton Park.

One current challenge is to meet the energy and water needs of proposed data centres at Didcot and the new AI growth zone at Culham.

The science cluster between Harwell, Culham and Milton Park is an area known as ‘Science Vale’ which has significant international partners and collaborators such as MIT in the USA, not just links within the UK and to Oxford University. The nuclear

research at Aldermaston & Burghfield in West Berkshire, also forms part of the high-tech cluster between the 3 current Districts that have the potential to grow further.

The area also has close links via the A34 to the Solent Freeport at Southampton and the ports of Portsmouth, together with the life sciences connection between the University of Southampton and Harwell.

In addition to the links between West Berkshire and South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse, in Oxfordshire, West Berkshire has close involvement within the wider Thames Valley and the Berkshire Prosperity Board. This involvement is a source of economic strength and the Berkshire economic strategy a successful approach from which the two new unitary councils will draw learning benefits.

'Assisted Area' status has helped to establish successful Enterprise Zones that have helped to secure new investment into South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse. Culham recently secured an AI zone designation to support its future development. We intend to continue our outward looking approach with continued support for the science, innovation and technology sector in the area.

The area has already introduced a significant innovation with the use of Local Development Orders (LDO) at Milton Park in the Vale of White Horse and Greenham in West Berkshire (and also the Dtech LDO) which has introduced a 10-working day turn around for planning approvals by businesses. This approach provides planning certainty for business with quick consents. We plan to extend this innovative approach to cover all business parks.

The area has an opportunity to create more incubator space to meet the needs of SMEs as well as an existing commitment to servicing inward investment enquiries.

The new unitary can learn from the West Berkshire experience of using regulatory services as business enablers, the use of business rate reviews, support for supplier firms and securing social value policy in procurement.

Working with local colleges such as Abingdon and Witney College and Newbury College will remain a priority for securing new skills and apprenticeships related to local sector needs. Of note is the net zero hub at Abingdon and Witney College which is upskilling people in net zero installations (heat pumps, solar panels, insulation etc) to help deliver sustainable growth and retrofit.

Diversification of the rural economy will be strengthened by the 3 Councils engaging together, bringing a focus on green farm infrastructure from working with companies such as Dev Agritech and Dyson and the significant racehorse industry.

The Ridgeway Council area has a strong tourism offer with extensive attractions across the Chilterns and North Wessex Downs such as the famous Ridgeway Path, vibrant market towns such as Henley, Faringdon, Wallingford, Marlborough and Newbury etc and the West Berkshire Canal project.

The involvement of the two unitary councils in Local Visitor Economy Partnerships (the Berkshire LVEP and Experience Oxfordshire) will coordinate and developing the tourism industry at the local level, working with national bodies like Visit England.

4B.4 Meeting housing needs

The Ridgeway Council we will take the opportunity to expand social housing and address the need for affordable housing in an area of high-cost housing. And build on the innovative policies and successes such as the policy of 50% affordable housing in adopted local plan for the unmet need (of Oxford) sites in South Oxfordshire and the work lead by West Berkshire Council to focus on securing affordable housing that meets the needs of young professionals.

There are opportunities for affordable housing, both new development opportunities and also but also increased scale to deliver innovative solutions such as a housing company and increased influence over RSLs. Sovereign are the main RSL provider in South Oxfordshire, Vale of White Horse and West Berkshire but are small enough for local connection and to understand local housing needs.

The new Ridgeway Council will build on West Berkshire successful working as a unitary to deliver specialist housing to meet local needs.

4B.5 Our transport and infrastructure priorities

The West Berkshire Local Transport Plan (LTP) is driving the transport approach of West Berkshire Council. In contrast, the Oxfordshire LTCP will need further consideration to ensure it meets the transport needs of South and Vale within the Ridgeway Council area and is capable of delivery and more effective implementation than has been evident to date. As a unitary council West Berkshire has valuable expertise in the delivery of strategic infrastructure. Page 46 provides more detail of policy themes and infrastructure priorities.

Transport planning concerns improving connectivity within the Ridgeway Council area, but also connectivity beyond the Council area; to the wider Oxfordshire and Berkshire, working across the MSA area and importantly close links to London and Heathrow.

The A34 is a key connection that runs north and south through the area to the Solent Freeport at Southampton, a major focus for HGV movements, the M4 is a major east-west strategic route together with the A420 to Swindon.

The Great Western line runs through the Unitary area and provides excellent connections to London, Reading, Bristol and Oxford.

However there is a gap with no stations between Didcot and Swindon. So Science Vale, a major area of growth of national significance, has inadequate access to the rail network and relies on bus services. A new reopened station at Grove on the Great Western Line would act a driver of new growth and at Milton Park would strengthen sustainable access to a major business park.

The new Council will work with GWR to regenerate stations and their localities as critical points of arrival in the market towns.

The involvement of West Berkshire will bring the promotion of green modes of transport, linked to the Berkshire wide connected travel plan as well as an applying

the Ultra Low Environment Vehicle Strategy and the promotion of cycling links across the unitary area.

There is a need to invest in improvements to the water infrastructure across the area to tackle water stress, which is emerging as a challenge.

There is potential to work jointly with the mayor on securing leisure and employment and business opportunities from the creation of the new reservoir close to Abingdon (the current County Council is opposed to the development).

4B.6 Conclusion to 'the Ridgeway Council'

There is a significant opportunity to create a new unitary council that builds on the track record of significant delivery by the current three Councils.

These three Councils have a significant ambition to go further. To strengthen its economic assets and expand local clusters in nationally significant sectors.

The Ridgeway Council stands to be a significant actor, with valuable aspirations and a willingness to collaborate with partners, to help secure the proposed Thames Valley MSA and support the new Mayor too.

Annex A: Local Plan status.

Each District has an adopted Local Plan in place, with new Plans at various stages of preparation.

	Local Plan adopted	Staged reached in Local Plan review.	Examination
Cherwell	(2011-2031) July 2015	Reg 19 Nov 2024 July 2025 (Submission)	Not yet set
City of Oxford	(2016-2036) June 2020	Submitted, but subsequently withdrawn	Exam completed - Plan rejected & new plan is in preparation having recently consulted at Reg 18 stage.
South Oxfordshire	To 2035 December 2020	Submitted December 2024	June 2025
Vale of White Horse	To 2031 December 2016	Submitted December 2024	June 2025
West Oxfordshire	(2011-2031) September 2018	Completed its Reg 18 stage in August 2025	-
West Berkshire	Core Strategy (2006-2026) 2012	Submitted	Adopted at Council June 2025

Annex B: Housing numbers and the 5-year housing land supply.

The changes to the standard method for housing requires a significant level of new growth to be considered in each District.

	Pre Standard Method	New Standard Method	Increase	Average houses built 2020/21 to 2022/23.	5-year housing land supply position – as reported in Annual Monitoring Reports
Cherwell	706 pa	1095 pa	0.9x	1242	2.3 yrs (at Feb 25)
City of Oxford	762 pa	1051 pa	2.4x	437	5.93 yrs (at Feb 25)
South Oxfordshire	579 pa	1179 pa	1.2X	1010	4.5 yrs (at Jan 25)
Vale of White Horse	633 pa	937 pa	0.8 x	1162	5.81 yrs (at Jan 25)
West Oxfordshire	549 pa	905 pa	1x	865	Less than 5 years (at 18/12/24)
West Berkshire	495 pa	1057 pa	1.6X	660	2.6 yrs (at Feb 2025)

Annex C: Initial infrastructure priorities.

Infrastructure investment has been sought through Local Plans to enable growth to be supported. There are rail improvements that are sought and improvements to utilities infrastructure as well as improvements to the power grid and to address areas of water stress.

Our initial infrastructure priorities include:

Cherwell

- Road improvements at Banbury (Henneth Way) and the proposed A41 Bicester SE relief road for which land is safeguarded. Improvements to the A44 are needed to support the delivery of the Local Plan Partial review sites in Yarnton.

- Challenge of capacity on M40 J10 to J9 and J9. And A34 southwards from J9 which faces significant constraints.

- Major changes proposed at M40 J10 to enable further growth at Heyford Park, the former USAF base, which can accommodate significant new growth and proposed NSIP rail freight terminal.

- East to West rail completed to Oxford and Bletchley, near Milton Keynes.

- New station at Begbroke associate with expansion of Begbroke Science Park and housing delivery associated with Partial Review of the Cherwell Local Plan.

- Expanded grid connections to support new growth.

City of Oxford

- Rail improvements to City Station, aspiration to secure Cowley line as extension to East-West rail.

- Double tracking to rail line to Didcot and to Long Hanborough on North Cotswolds line.

- Expanded grid to support new growth.

South Oxfordshire & Vale of White Horse

- The A34 faces significant constraint at Botley, to the west of Oxford.

- Double tracking rail line to Oxford.

- Aspiration to reopening the station at Grove and a new station at Milton Park on the Great Western rail line.

- Meeting the water and energy needs of the growing data centre sector in South and Vale with the government identifying the nation's first AI growth zone at Culham.

- Challenge from water stress and sewage in both Districts.

- Leisure and business opportunities from the proposed new reservoir.

West Oxfordshire

- Improvements to A40 to enable further growth at Witney and Carterton to improve modal shift and reduce congestion at peak times.

- West Oxfordshire has an aspiration to extend rail links through the A40 corridor from Carterton to Oxford via Witney with a corridor of land proposed to be safeguarded through the new local plan.

- Double tracking the North Cotswold line from Oxford to Long Hanborough and major station improvements to turn Hanborough Station into a super mobility hub.

- Challenge of need to improve sewage facilities in the rural parts of West Oxfordshire.

West Berkshire

From the Transport Infrastructure Plan for Berkshire and Local Transport Plan 4:

The West Berkshire Local Transport Plan 2025–2040 (LTP4) sets out a long-term strategy to deliver a sustainable, inclusive, and economically resilient transport system across the district. It adopts a place-based and vision-led approach, aligning with the Council’s Local Plan and Environment Strategy.

Four Key Policies Supporting Economic Growth:

1) Strategic Connectivity Enhancements

Investment in key road and rail corridors (e.g. M4, A34, Great Western Main Line) to improve access for businesses, freight, and commuters, supporting productivity and regional competitiveness

2) Public Transport Improvements

Expansion of bus services, demand-responsive transport, and upgrades to railway stations (e.g. Newbury and Theale), making travel more reliable and accessible for workers and customers

3) Infrastructure for New Development

Transport planning is integrated with housing and employment growth areas (e.g. south of Newbury, north-east Thatcham), ensuring new developments are well-connected and economically viable

4) Digital and Electric Mobility Investment

Support for electric vehicle infrastructure and digital connectivity (e.g. EV charge points, smart mobility), enabling modern business operations and reducing transport costs

Annex D: The authors of this report.

Adrian Colwell

Adrian is a consultant specialising in strategic land use planning and growth strategies. He works for both public and private sector clients. He is currently advising on new settlement proposals, urban extensions and major business park investments. He has led Local Plan preparation including the Cherwell, South Northants and West Northants Plans. He has also overseen economic development strategies, infrastructure programmes and led the Oxfordshire 2050 Plan.

He was 'Executive Director for Place and Growth' across Cherwell and South Northants Council. He was also Special Adviser to the First Minister of Scotland (2001-2007) where he led a series of reforms of transport and the planning system introducing the Scottish National Planning Framework in 2006. He worked at COSLA, the local government association for Scotland as Head of Policy, Central Regional Council and Wakefield Council on EU regional programmes.

He has also worked in the European Parliament, House of Commons and US House of Representatives. Adrian has published extensively and presented evidence to Parliamentary enquiries by the Scottish & European Parliaments, Select Committees of the House of Commons & House of Lords on regional development.

Catriona Riddell

Catriona is an independent consultant providing support on a wide range of spatial planning issues but specialises in strategic planning, working with a large number of local authorities across England, helping them develop their approaches to strategic planning and establishing new governance arrangements.

She has authored several reports on the subject of strategic planning, most recently, as part of a small team researching strategic planning practice, published by the Royal Town Planning Institute in September 2025. She is currently chairing a national Strategic Planning Group which is helping to develop the approach to a new generation of strategic plans. In 2025 Catriona was voted as one of The Planner's Women of Influence for her work in strategic planning.

Catriona is the Planning Officers Society's Strategic Planning Specialist and Vice Chair of the Town and Country Planning Association. In 2022 she was elected as a Fellow of the Royal Town Planning Institute and awarded an Honorary Doctorate from Oxford Brookes University for her contribution to planning.

She is a regular columnist for Planning Magazine, a Judge for both the Planning Magazine Awards and is a Commissioner on the Radix Big Tent Housing Commission. Catriona is also a presenter on the new podcast Planning After Dark.

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Oxford Shires and Ridgeway LGR Support

Adult Social Care and Children's Services Analyses to inform LGR Business Case

September 2025

Contents - to be edited

1. Executive Summary
2. Adult Social Care
3. Children's Services
4. Risks
5. Peopletoo Key Indicator Benchmarking

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1. Executive Summary

Oxfordshire and West Berkshire Local Government Reorganisation (LGR) Context

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Local government across Oxfordshire County Council (CC) and West Berkshire Council faces profound challenges over the next two decades. Population growth, an ageing demographic, rising demand in Adult Social Care (ASC) and Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND), volatile placement costs, and tightening financial sustainability all place increasing pressure on councils' ability to deliver high-quality, affordable services. At the same time, residents and communities expect more visible leadership, stronger local accountability, and services designed around their distinct needs.

The Government has been clear that LGR should deliver:

- Simpler, single-tier governance that removes duplication.
- Councils of the "right size" – resilient enough to withstand financial shocks but local enough to respond to place-based needs.
- High-quality, sustainable public services.
- Stronger local voice and accountability, supporting devolution and community empowerment.

This report considers the future shape of local government across Oxfordshire CC and West Berkshire Council from an ASC and Children's Services lens against these tests. It assesses **Option 1** (two unitary authorities split according to the current boundaries of Oxfordshire CC [c.750,000] and West Berkshire Council [c.165,000]) and **Option 2** (two balanced unitaries of c.450,000 residents each: Oxford & Shires and Ridgeway).

Our analysis demonstrates that Option 2 offers the strongest alignment with the six LGR criteria. It achieves the right balance between scale and local focus:

- Large enough to commission strategically, secure financial resilience, and deliver efficiencies.
- Small enough to strengthen local accountability, empower communities, and tailor services to distinct local pressures – from urban deprivation in Oxford, to ageing populations and rural access in Ridgeway.

The following sections set out the evidence against each of the six criteria, provide a RAG assessment of Options 1 and 2, and present a theory of change for how Option 2 can deliver improved outcomes and sustainability for residents.

Please note the analysis within the report does not offer a comparison with Option 3 given this Option requires revision to boundaries for which the data was not available.

LGR Criteria RAG Overview

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Criteria	Option 1a: Oxfordshire UA	Option 1b: West Berkshire UA	Option 2a: Oxford & Shires UA	Option 2b: Ridgeway UA
1. Single Tier	Delivers a single-tier model, but risks being overly centralised.	Delivers single-tier locally but scale risks longer term sustainability	Delivers a single-tier structure, simplified governance.	Delivers a single-tier structure, clear accountability.
2. Right Size	Too large (750k+); efficiency/inspection outcomes weaker at this scale.	c.170k population significantly below MHCLG original recommendation.	In the 450k ideal size, resilient and efficient.	In the 430–450k range, resilient with capacity.
3. Service Quality & Sustainability	Risks masking urban deprivation vs rural ageing pressures; entrenched high-cost baseline.	More efficient cost base but fragile scale and workforce dependency.	Can specialise in complex/urban demand; sustainable model.	Focus on older populations, rural pressures; more tailored and sustainable.
4. Local Working & Views	Larger, centralised model makes local engagement harder.	Strong community engagement due to small scale but lacks strategic capacity.	Smaller footprint strengthens leadership visibility; builds on local forums.	Builds on Ridgeway Forum, strong localised engagement.
5. Devolution	Scale supports regional deals	Too small to influence regional devolution agendas.	Strong fit with BOB ICS and Ox–Cam corridor; balances local and regional needs.	Strong fit with ICS footprint and localised partnerships.
6. Community Empowerment	Large UA risks remoteness, weaker neighbourhood identity.	Very strong local identity, close engagement	Smaller UA strengthens local identity, co-production, and accountability.	Strengthens neighbourhood empowerment and community voice.

Options Matrix (1)

Criteria	Option 1a	Rationale	Option 1b	Rationale	Option 2a	Rationale	Option 2b	Rationale
1a. Establish single tier	5	Delivers single tier, but too large to flex.	5	Also delivers single tier, but sustainability risks due to size	5	Balanced unitary, single tier achieved.	5	Single tier achieved at Ridgeway scale.
1b. Ease of transition	2	Complex transition, entrenched systems, high DSG deficit.	3	Easier to implement, but fragile workforce/market.	4	Transition manageable, draws on scale and balance.	4	Moderate transition risk, but WB volatility absorbed by Ridgeway.
2a. Right size – short-term efficiencies (0–3 yrs)	2	High costs locked in, efficiencies unlikely.	3	Already efficient, but no headroom for short-term gains.	4	Short-term efficiencies via recalibration and fostering sufficiency.	4	Sustainability and market development gains from absorbing WB
2b. Right size – long-term sustainability (10 yrs)	1	£100m+ DSG deficit, £187m OA costs by 2032, unsustainable.	2	Too small to withstand shocks long term.	5	Falls in ideal size (450–460k), long-term resilience.	4	Strong base, but rural ageing pressures add long-term risk.
Total	10		13		18		17	

Scoring guide summary (full guide in Appendix A):
Score 1: Highly challenging to implement without a clear delivery plan
Score 2: Highly challenging to implement with a framework for delivery
Score 3: Challenging to implement with an outline plan for delivery and benefits realisation
Score 4: Manageable to implement with a clear plan for delivery and benefits realisation
Score 5: Manageable to implement with a tried and tested approach and plan for implementation

Options Matrix (2)

Criteria	Option 1a	Rationale	Option 1b	Rationale	Option 2a	Rationale	Option 2b	Rationale
3. High quality & sustainable services	2	High unit costs, fragile fostering/ASC market.	3	Good efficiency but lacks resilience.	5	Scalable prevention/reablement, Safety Valve alignment.	4	Stable base, but rural access challenges.
4. Meets local needs & local views	2	Risks masking divergent needs (urban deprivation vs rural).	3	More locally visible, but too small.	5	Balances city & county challenges.	4	Rural-focused, addresses access issues.
5. Supports devolution	3	Scale works for regional deals, but weak NHS/ICS alignment.	3	Small scale limits devolution pull.	5	Aligns with BOB ICS & Ox–Cam growth corridor.	4	Supports devolution but more rural scope.
6. Community engagement & empowerment	2	Large structure risks remoteness.	3	Local but limited capacity.	5	Place-based units, strong co-production.	4	Smaller footprint supports engagement, rural reach.
Total	9		12		20		16	

Scoring guide summary (full guide in Appendix F):
Score 1: Highly challenging to implement without a clear delivery plan
Score 2: Highly challenging to implement with a framework for delivery
Score 3: Challenging to implement with an outline plan for delivery and benefits realisation
Score 4: Manageable to implement with a clear plan for delivery and benefits realisation
Score 5: Manageable to implement with a tried and tested approach and plan for implementation

Opportunities for the new UAs under Option 2

The following summarises opportunities are per Option 2.

Oxford & Shires

- ✓ Reduced population size (c.450k) gives a more manageable scale than a single county unitary.
- ✓ Balanced demographic trends mean steadier cost growth (+3.9% vs +5.1% under Option 1).
- ✓ Diversified footprint spreads demand, reduces volatility, and increases resilience to demographic shocks.
- ✓ Gains scale in provider markets (residential and nursing) with stronger quality ratings, allowing for market shaping to tackle high unit costs.
- ✓ Opportunities to recalibrate above-benchmark costs down to peer averages (WAA: £48.7k → £44.1k; OA: £35k → £31.5k).
- ✓ Stronger platform for strategic commissioning and sufficiency strategies at the 350–500k "sweet spot" for performance and Ofsted/SEND outcomes.

Ridgeway

- ✓ Larger market exposure creates new opportunities for West Berkshire, which as a small authority (163k) currently faces volatility risks.
- ✓ Balanced cost growth profile (+3.9% to 2032), with West Berkshire's flat/declining demand offset by modest Vale/South Oxfordshire growth.
- ✓ Gains commissioning scale to address WB's fragile market (small, variable quality, high reliance on "Require Improvement/Blank" CQC ratings).
- ✓ Improves resilience in Children's Services, pooling Oxfordshire's prevention model with West Berkshire's strong dispute resolution and family engagement approaches.
- ✓ Risk-sharing across a population of 450k enables more sustainable sufficiency and workforce planning.

Transformation Elements Required to Deliver Savings

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- Opportunities (reduced size = control for Oxford & Shires, expanded market access = resilience for WB in Ridgeway).
- Transformation enablers (commissioning reform, prevention, workforce, digital, partnerships, financial controls).

1	Commissioning & Market Reform	• Strategic market shaping to stabilise fragile residential/nursing markets. • Block contracts, fostering hubs, and IFA conversion to reduce volatility. • Outcomes-based commissioning to contain costs and improve sufficiency.
2	Prevention & Reablement	• Home First and reablement-first approaches to reduce long-term admissions. • Family hubs and early intervention in children's services to reduce demand escalation.
3	Workforce Transformation	• Joint recruitment pipelines, retention incentives, and standardised practice models. • Reduction in reliance on agency staff, with shared training and workforce strategies across both UAs.
4	Digital & Data-Driven Services	• Digital-first models: resident care accounts, AI-enabled triage, predictive analytics. • Improved transparency and quality monitoring (particularly in Ridgeway markets).
5	Partnership & Integration	• Align with NHS/ICS footprints for joint commissioning in ASC, SEND and public health. • Embed stronger VCSE and community partnerships for place-based delivery.
6	Financial Management & Risk Pooling	• Recalibration of unit costs to national benchmarks. • Pooling risks across balanced UAs to absorb demand shocks and sustain long-term financial viability.

Conditions for Success in Delivering Option 2

Success depends on execution: Option 2 creates the right structural opportunity, but without commissioning reform, prevention, workforce stabilisation, digital innovation, and careful transition management, the savings and resilience benefits won't materialise.

1. Effective Commissioning Reform
    - Recalibrate unit costs to the 350–500k benchmark (e.g., WAA £44k vs current £48.7k, OA £31.5k vs £35k).
    - Secure block contracts and diversify providers to reduce reliance on fragile nursing/residential markets, especially in Ridgeway.
    - Build joint commissioning hubs across the two UAs for ASC and Children's placements.
2. Prevention & Early Intervention Must Be Scaled
    - Embed Home First and reablement-first models in ASC to reduce long-term admissions.
    - Expand family hubs and early help in children's services to prevent escalation into statutory care.
    - Invest in SEND inclusion and mainstream capacity to contain demand and rebuild parental confidence.
3. Workforce Sustainability
    - Joint recruitment campaigns, career pathways, and retention incentives to tackle shortages.
    - Reduce reliance on agency staff through workforce pooling, standardised practice, and shared training.
    - Align pay and conditions across the two new UAs to avoid destabilisation.
4. Digital Transformation & Data Use
    - Deploy digital-first services: online assessments, predictive analytics, resident care accounts.
    - Use data to improve sufficiency planning and quality monitoring (especially in Ridgeway's weaker markets).

Conditions for Success in Delivering Option 2

Success depends on execution: Option 2 creates the right structural opportunity, but without commissioning reform, prevention, workforce stabilisation, digital innovation, and careful transition management, the savings and resilience benefits won't materialise.

5. Robust Transition Planning
    - Phased implementation to avoid service disruption.
    - Protect frontline delivery during reorganisation.
    - Early alignment of commissioning functions to capture economies of scale.
6. Strong Partnerships & Integration
    - Work closely with NHS and ICS footprints to integrate ASC, SEND, and public health commissioning.
    - Strengthen collaboration with voluntary/community sector for place-based delivery.
    - Maintain local accountability and co-production with communities to build legitimacy.
7. Financial Challenges
    - Actively manage volatility by pooling risks across balanced UAs (WB's fragility offset by Ridgeway's broader base).
    - Deliver savings by sustaining recalibrated cost trajectories in ASC and Children's CLA placements.
    - Continuous monitoring against Medium-Term Financial Plan (MTFP) to ensure benefits are realised.

2. Adults Social Care

The 2-unitary model in Option 2 provides a better service delivery platform to:

- manage future demand by driving locally driven preventative approaches across all ASC service activities and reducing long-term care costs.
- fully embed place-based and local community delivery models (working closely with the voluntary sector and the NHS), thereby improving our ability to tailor services to local needs, local capacity and, in turn, deliver a more sustainable workforce model.
- It also allows for further development and enhancement of the strategic commissioning model and approach to market management in order to deliver more efficient and effective local care and support services.

Oxfordshire CC and West Berkshire Adult Social Care Overview

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Strategic Context

- Adult Social Care (ASC) represents the largest single element of local authority spend, accounting for more than 50% of net budgets. Across Oxfordshire CC and West Berkshire Council, ASC services deliver strong prevention outcomes — fewer older people enter long-term care compared with national averages and working age adults (WAA) are more likely to live independently. However, the financial trajectory **may not be sustainable** as detailed below.

Oxfordshire CC

- Demand is relatively low, but costs per person are significantly above benchmark. WAA costs average **£48.7k per client (+19% vs England)**, while OA costs are **£35k (+23% vs England)**. This reflects a "low demand, high cost" system, driven by market fragility, provider inflation, and reliance on nursing and residential placements.

West Berkshire Council

- Prevention performance is strong (only **8% of OA requests progress to long-term care vs 11% nationally**), but costs are inflated (**£37.7k per OA client, +32% vs England**). A small base (1,000 OA clients) makes the system volatile, a handful of high-cost cases can skew the budget.

By 2032, ASC costs across the area are forecast to exceed **£398m** (OA £236m, WAA £162m). Without reform, both authorities face escalating budget gaps, increased market risk, and workforce unsustainability.

The ASC system across Oxfordshire CC and West Berkshire Council faces significant long-term challenges. Option 2 provides the most balanced and sustainable solution:

- ✓ Large enough to commission strategically and withstand financial shocks.
- ✓ Small enough to embed place-based delivery, prevent need earlier, and strengthen community engagement.
- ✓ Tailored to address the distinct ASC pressures of urban Oxfordshire and rural Ridgeway.
- ✓ Consistent with LGR criteria, CQC's assurance framework, and the government's long-term vision for care.
- ✓ This model delivers better outcomes for residents, greater resilience for providers and the workforce, and financial sustainability for the councils.

Key ASC Challenges under Option 1

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1	Rising Demand and Cost Pressures	• The population aged 65+ will rise by 24–27% by 2035; WAA with complex needs are also increasing due to longevity and medical advances. • Oxfordshire CC shows a "low demand, high cost" profile; West Berkshire shows smaller base, higher volatility. Both are above comparator benchmarks (ASCFR). • Forecast: Without reform, ASC costs across the footprint will exceed £398m by 2032 (+20%).
2	Managing Short-Term versus Long-Term	• Current spend is heavily weighted towards long-term care, with limited use of reablement, step-down support, and direct payments. • Annual long-term care costs in Oxfordshire CC are rising >5% per year, above inflation. • Need to rebalance towards prevention: stronger triage, rehabilitation, and community support models.
3	Market Fragility and High Unit Costs	• Unit costs exceed national comparators: WAA costs +19% vs England; OA costs +23%. • Residential/nursing reliance remains high, with 42% cost spikes in one year (West Berkshire) demonstrating volatility. • Current commissioning lacks scale leverage to stabilise the market.
4	Inequalities and Variable Outcomes	• Rural communities (e.g., Vale of White Horse) face access challenges and digital exclusion. • Outcomes vary as service users report postcode variation in the type and speed of support available.
5	Digital and Innovation Gap	• Opportunity to scale innovation: assistive tech, predictive analytics, robotics in care.

Risks and Mitigations

Market Fragility

Provider collapse or inflationary costs could offset savings. Mitigation: block contracts, sufficiency planning, and market diversification.

Transition Risks

Reorganisation may destabilise services. Mitigation: phased implementation, protect frontline staff, early alignment of commissioning functions.

Workforce shortages

Recruitment and retention remain challenges nationally. Mitigation: joint recruitment campaigns, career development pathways, workforce pooling across UAs.

Theory of Change ASC Oxford and Shires

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Current Challenges	Impact of Oxfordshire Unitary	Solutions delivered by 2 UA model (by similar size Las)	Intermediate Outcomes delivered by 2 UA model	Long-term outcomes delivered by 2 UA model
High unit costs: £48.7k WAA, £35k OA (19–23% above England).	Oxfordshire's high-cost baseline entrenched, growing to £132m WAA + £187m OA by 2032.	Commissioning reform: recalibrate to 350–500k benchmark costs (£44.1k WAA, £31.5k OA).	Flattened cost trajectory: £70m WAA, £98m OA by 2032 (vs £319m under Option 1).	£90m+ savings unlocked, supporting MTFP resilience.
Limited use of reablement, reliance on costly nursing placements.	Over-centralisation dilutes ability to respond to urban deprivation in Oxford vs rural challenges.	Multi-disciplinary triage & Home First: ensuring people are supported at the "front door" and defaulting to reablement over long-term care.	Reduced admissions to long-term care; shorter lengths of stay when required.	Improved resident experience – person-centred, preventative, digitally-enabled care.
Provider market fragile; high workforce churn.		Workforce transformation: standardised strength-based practice, local recruitment pipelines, improved retention.	More resilient and competitive local provider markets.	Financial sustainability – lower unit costs, reduced escalation of ASC spend, resilience against financial shocks.
Current fragmented system limits reablement, early intervention, and local responsiveness.		Carer support & co-production: structured engagement with carers and service users; peer support networks.	Greater integration with NHS and system partners, reducing duplication and improving joint outcomes.	Better outcomes for residents – more people remain independent for longer; carers supported.
Risks of over-centralisation (1 Unitary).		Digital-first services: resident care accounts, AI-enabled triage, predictive analytics, online assessment/review.	Local services tailored to distinct pressures (urban Oxfordshire vs rural Ridgeway).	System sustainability – resilient workforce, stronger local partnerships, secondary NHS savings.
		Market shaping to reduce reliance on nursing placements and attract mid-cost provision.		Democratic and community empowerment – stronger accountability and co-production with communities.

Theory of Change ASC Ridgeway

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Current Challenges	Impact of West Berkshire Unitary	Solutions delivered by 2 UA model (by similar size Las)	Intermediate Outcomes delivered by 2 UA model	Long-term Outcomes delivered by 2 UA model
West Berkshire OA unit costs £37.7k (32% above England), small fragile nursing markets.	WB remains too small (1,000 OA clients, 790 WAA) to absorb volatility.	Commissioning reform: recalibrate to 350–500k benchmark costs (£44.1k WAA, £31.5k OA).	Ridgeway ASC spend contained at £80m WAA + £119m OA by 2032.	Stabilised finances, avoiding unsustainable OA growth.
Higher admissions to care homes (650 per 100k vs 540 regional).	Rural needs (access, transport, digital exclusion) under-served in a large countywide model.	Multi-disciplinary triage & Home First: ensuring people are supported at the "front door" and defaulting to reablement over long-term care.	Reduced admissions to long-term care; shorter lengths of stay when required.	Improved resident experience – person-centred, preventative, digitally-enabled care.
Limited use of reablement, reliance on costly nursing placements.	Costs rise to £48m OA + £30m WAA by 2032, with high exposure to market fragility.	Workforce transformation: standardised strength-based practice, local recruitment pipelines, improved retention.	More resilient and competitive local provider markets.	Financial sustainability – lower unit costs, reduced escalation of ASC spend, resilience against financial shocks.
Sufficiency of residential beds.		Carer support & co-production: structured engagement with carers and service users; peer support networks.	Greater integration with NHS and system partners, reducing duplication and improving joint outcomes.	Better outcomes for residents – more people remain independent for longer; carers supported.
Working Age Adults more balanced but still above benchmark.		Digital-first services: resident care accounts, AI-enabled triage, predictive analytics, online assessment/review.	Local services tailored to distinct pressures (urban Oxfordshire vs rural Ridgeway).	System sustainability – resilient workforce, stronger local partnerships, secondary NHS savings.
Risks of over-centralisation (1 Unitary).		Market resilience: joint commissioning across Ridgeway, embedding prevention in contracts.		Democratic and community empowerment – stronger accountability and co-production with communities.

Adult Social Care Demand

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ASC services across England are facing huge pressure with demand expected to rise considerably over the next 15 years. This is largely due to expected population increases (particularly in older adults), growth complexity of care need in working age adults, transitions and increases in the costs of care.

This trends are already causing budgetary challenges for the ASC services in the LA and this will continue at pace if not fully addressed.

Option 2 creates financially viable unitaries at the right scale, each with distinct ASC challenges.

- Oxford & Shires must address low demand but high-cost users.
- Ridgeway must tackle unit cost inflation in older adult care despite stronger demand management.
- Both benefit from population sizes proven to achieve lower ASC unit costs and stronger prevention outcomes compared with counties, providing a robust platform for long-term sustainability.

Overview of Oxfordshire CC

Working Age Adults:

- Oxfordshire CC is strong at resolving demand at the front door without formal services.
- But very limited use of reablement reduces opportunities to reduce future cost/demand.
- The balance of demand is not skewed toward long-term care, which avoids cost escalation.

Older Adults:

- Fewer older people managed without services – more requests flow into funded care.
- Good reablement usage, but still above-average movement into costly long-term care.
- This profile reinforces Oxfordshire CC's "low demand, high cost" challenge: the system prevents some demand, but once in the system, older adults are more likely to become long-term clients.

Overview of West Berkshire

Working Age Adults:

- Fewer older people managed without services – more requests flow into funded care.
- West Berkshire has better use of reablement than Oxfordshire CC, but still above-average movement into costly long-term care.
- This profile reinforces Oxfordshire CC's "low demand, high cost" challenge: the system prevents some demand, but once in the system, older adults are more likely to become long-term clients.

Older Adults:

- West Berkshire is better at holding older adults outside funded services and limiting long-term care.
- Its prevention and diversion appear stronger than Oxfordshire CC's, but unit costs remain high, so savings aren't being fully realised.

Adult Social Care Demand

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Overview of Oxfordshire CC

Working Age Adults:

Requests for support outcomes:

- 77% end in no service/universal offer – higher than NHS nearest neighbours (NN) (74%) and England (71%)
- 13–14% lead to short-term/equipment support – below England (17%)
- 2–3% go into reablement – half the NN/England average (5%)
- 7% lead to long-term care – in line with England
- Oxfordshire CC is strong at resolving demand at the front door without formal services
- But very limited use of reablement reduces opportunities to reduce future cost/demand
- The long-term care is in line with comparators, which avoids cost escalation

Older Adults:

Requests for support outcomes:

- 50% universal/no services – lower than NN (57%) and England (53%)
- 19% short-term/equipment – higher than NN (14%) and equal to England
- 18% reablement – stronger than NN (16%) and England (17%)
- 13% long-term care – above NN (12%) and England (11%)
- Fewer older people managed without services – more requests flow into funded care
- Good reablement usage, but still above-average movement into costly long-term care
- This profile reinforces Oxfordshire CC's "low demand, high cost" challenge: the system prevents some demand, but once in the system, older adults are more likely to become long-term clients.

Overview of West Berkshire

Working Age Adults:

Requests for support outcomes:

- 77% universal/no services (same as Oxfordshire CC)
- 13% short-term/equipment – slightly above NN, below England.
- 3% reablement – again below benchmarks
- 7% long-term care – in line with England
- Very similar to Oxfordshire CC: strong at deflecting demand, weak on reablement
- Lower reliance on long-term care compared to neighbours

Older Adults:

Requests for support outcomes:

- 58% universal/no services – higher than Oxfordshire CC and England
- 18% short-term/equipment – above NN (13%) and close to England
- 15% reablement – in line with NN, below England
- 8% long-term care – well below NN (13%) and England (11%)
- West Berkshire is better at holding older adults outside funded services and limiting long-term care
- Its prevention and diversion appear stronger than Oxfordshire CC's, but unit costs remain high, so savings aren't being fully realised.

Adult Social Care Outcomes

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Oxfordshire CC Outcomes

Younger Adults (18–64) – Admissions to Residential/Nursing

- Oxfordshire CC admission rates remain well below 10 per 100,000, compared to 14–16 nationally/regionally
- That's 52–57% lower than comparators
- Stable/slight decline trend 2021–24, while other areas remained flat at higher levels

Emerging Analysis: Strong community-based alternatives and preventative practice are avoiding institutionalisation for working-age adults.

Older Adults (65+) – Admissions to Residential/Nursing

- Oxfordshire CC admissions: 350 per 100,000, compared to 550–600 per 100,000 elsewhere
- 40% lower than NHS Nearest Neighbours, 37% lower than South East, 38% lower than England
- Stable lower trajectory over three years

Emerging Analysis: Effective support helps older adults stay at home longer, avoiding premature admissions.

Adults with Learning Disabilities – Living at Home

- Oxfordshire CC: 89–90%, significantly higher than comparators (England: 78–82%)
- 9–13 percentage points ahead of benchmarks, steady upward trend

Emerging Analysis: Oxfordshire CC is achieving stronger independence outcomes, embedding inclusion and family/community support.

West Berkshire Outcomes

Younger Adults (18–64) – Admissions to Residential/Nursing

- West Berkshire admissions: 9–12 per 100,000, compared with 14–16 nationally.
- 38–39% lower than comparators
- Declining from 12 (2021–22) to 9 (2023–24), diverging positively from flat national trends

Emerging Analysis: Strong prevention and demand management for working-age adults, limiting unnecessary residential care

Older Adults (65+) – Admissions to Residential/Nursing

- West Berkshire admissions: 650 per 100,000, compared with 540–580 regionally
- 11–17% higher than neighbours and South East; 15% lower than England
- Trend: rising since 2021–22, widening gap with regional peers

Emerging Analysis: Greater reliance on care home placements for older adults, suggesting pressure on reablement/home care capacity

Adults with Learning Disabilities – Living at Home

- West Berkshire: 81% in 2023–24, up from 79% in 2021–22
- Above South East (76–79%) and NHS neighbours (77–80%), but just below England (82%)

Emerging Analysis: Performing well locally, but with a small gap to national standards.

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3. Children's Services

Overview Children's Services

- Children's services in Oxfordshire CC and West Berkshire Council perform well overall, with both councils rated "Good" by Ofsted and strong prevention models in place. However, there are distinct challenges – high-cost complexity and SEND in Oxfordshire CC and workforce pressures in West Berkshire, that could be addressed through a new delivery model.
- The implementation model for Option 2 (two unitaries: Oxford & Shires, Ridgeway) provides the right balance of scale, local focus and strategic commissioning capacity to look to address the current challenges identified.

Option 2 represents a credible and sustainable reform. It provides the balanced scale to deliver financially resilient, high-quality children's services aligned with national reforms (Keeping Children Safe, Families First). By splitting into the proposed 2 unitaries, it:

- Tackles Oxfordshire CC's increasing costs and SEND demand/ cost.
- Shields West Berkshire from small-scale volatility.
- Creates a commissioning platform capable of reshaping sufficiency, stabilising markets, and achieving long-term savings.

In short, Option 2 does not simply reorganise governance; it transforms sustainability, resilience, and outcomes in one of the most high-risk areas of local government.

Why This Model Works

- Population size: At 450k each, both unitaries fall within the national "sweet spot" (270–540k) where Ofsted and SEND inspection outcomes are strongest.
- National alignment: Directly supports reforms in Keeping Children Safe, Helping Families Thrive and Families First, with a rebalanced system focused on prevention.
- Integration: Aligns with NHS place footprints and the ICS agenda, enabling joint commissioning for children's health, SEND and public health priorities.
- Sustainability: Tackles demand escalation and market fragility at their root, creating financially resilient children's services capable of delivering improved outcomes.

Oxfordshire CC

- A "low demand, high cost" system — CLA rates are 29% below the national average, but unit costs are 34% above, driven by fragile sufficiency and volatile residential markets (+42% in one year). SEND presents the largest systemic risk, with a projected DSG deficit exceeding £100m by 2026 and tribunal rates (5%) well above the national average (3%).

West Berkshire

- A more efficient system — CLA unit costs 14% below statistical neighbours and SEND tribunal rates low (3.5%). However, as a small authority (population 163k), it will struggle to absorb demand shocks. Workforce costs are 30% above the national average, and residential costs rose 42% in one year, highlighting market fragility. Together, these dynamics create a fragile baseline.

Overview: Areas for Focus

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Dimension	Option 1a: Oxfordshire UA	Option 1b: West Berkshire UA	Option 2: Oxford & Shires UA	Option 2: Ridgeway UA
CLA demand	Low CLA rates (47 per 10k) but volatile	Slightly above SN, trending down	Balanced demand profile	Efficient base, demand absorbed by Ridgeway scale
CLA costs	£2,500 per child (+34% vs England)	£1,820 per child (14% below SN)	Recalibrated to £1,946 (benchmark)	Retains WB efficiency but eliminates small scale risk
Residential costs	7% below England but +31% annual rise	42% rise in one year. Weekly cost remains below benchmarks	Risk diluted across larger commissioning base	Risk diluted across larger commissioning base
Fostering	62% (well below national 67–70%)	63% (closer to average but fragile)	Balanced hubs & IFA conversion	WB fostering base offsets South/Vale
SEND	DSG deficit £100m+, tribunal 5% (vs 3% nat.)	Deficit 30m by 2026 (6.4% of Council's budget); tribunals 3.5%.	Rebalanced approach, shared best practice	Stronger than Oxfordshire CC, but exposed to growth
Workforce	Low costs however increasing dependency on agency usage.	High unit costs, agency reliance falling but fragile	Shared workforce plan at scale	WB pressures but mitigated by Ridgeway
Sustainability	No savings identified. Key risks with residential costs.	Efficient but future sustainability is a risk	Balanced, credible reform path	Balanced, credible reform path

Theory of Change Children's Services Oxford and Shires

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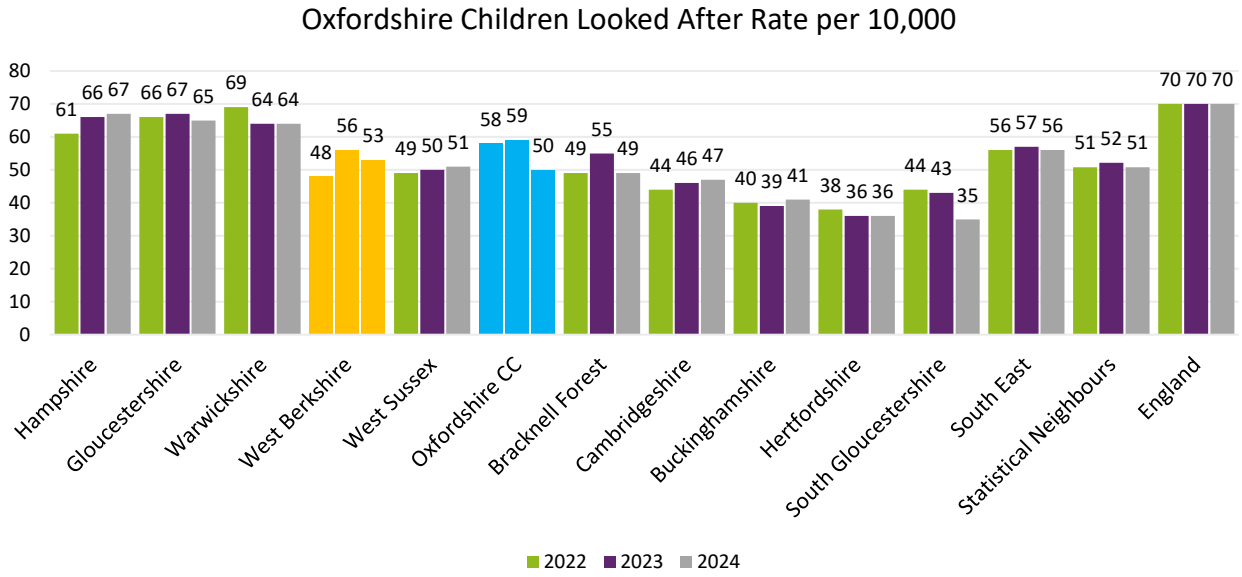
Current Challenges	Impact of Oxfordshire and WB 'As-Is'	Solutions delivered by 2 UA model (by similar size LAs)	Intermediate Outcomes delivered by 2 UA model	Long-term Outcomes delivered by 2 UA model
CLA rate 29% below England but unit costs 34% above national; residential costs volatile (+31% in one year)	Oxfordshire = high-cost system (£2,500 per child, +34% vs England); West Berkshire efficient (£1,820) but sub-scale (163k)	Community-centred early help: Embed family hubs, peer support, and Family Group Conferencing to increase kinship placements	Recalibration of unit costs to benchmark (£1,946 vs £2,500 baseline)	Financial sustainability: 18% lower CLA costs vs "As Is."
Over-reliance on high-cost IFA/residential	CLA forecasting: By 2032, combined CLA costs rise to £2.50m ("As Is"), with Oxfordshire volatility dominating	SEND transformation: Investment in mainstream inclusion, parental engagement panels, tribunal case review hub	Fewer children entering statutory care due to strong early help and kinship support	Children and families experience better outcomes: more supported to stay together, higher wellbeing
SEND systemic failings (2023 inspection), high tribunal rate (5% vs 3% national), low parental confidence	SEND pressures: Oxfordshire CC DSG deficit forecast to exceed £100m by 2026; systemic SEND failings and high tribunal rate (5% vs 3% national)	Fostering & placements: Dedicated recruitment hubs, joint IFA conversion programmes, wraparound support for complex placements	Reduced reliance on residential placements, with better sufficiency and lower costs	Financial sustainability: reduced CLA and SEND cost volatility; savings from prevention and local commissioning
Workforce efficiency (costs below peers) but increasing reliance on agency staff; risks in safeguarding continuity	Workforce pressures: WB staffing costs 30% above peers; Oxfordshire reliant on agency staff	Commissioning reform: Outcomes-based contracts; block arrangements to stabilise residential market costs	Improved parental confidence in SEND system (lower tribunal rates, more inclusive schools)	Improved inspection readiness: higher quality outcomes, reduced risk of deterioration under reorganisation
Inspection themes: Both rated "Good" by Ofsted, but weaknesses in transitions, multi-agency working, and SEND parental confidence	Inspection risks: Both currently "Good", but Oxfordshire CC's SEND inspection highlights systemic weaknesses	Integrated workforce strategy: Shared training, strengthened Principal Social Worker oversight, reduced agency reliance	More stable and resilient workforce with improved retention and capacity	Inclusive education system: more children with SEND supported locally, reduced reliance on out-of-area schools
		Partnerships: Urban focus – Oxford City deprivation, health/housing integration, university-led workforce pipelines	Stronger local partnerships (schools, NHS, VCSE, housing) enabling more joined-up support	Community empowerment: local services that reflect distinct needs of Oxford & Shires (urban deprivation, tribunal risks) and Ridgeway (rural access)

Theory of Change Children's Services Ridgeway

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Current Challenges	Impact of Oxfordshire and WB 'As-Is'	Solutions delivered by 2 UA model (by similar size LAs)	Intermediate Outcomes delivered by 2 UA model	Long-term Outcomes delivered by 2 UA model
CLA demand rising (WB: 187 to 281 by 2032), but costs efficient (£1,820 vs £1,946 benchmark).	Oxfordshire = high-cost system (£2,500 per child, +34% vs England); West Berkshire efficient (£1,820) but sub-scale (163k).	Community-centred early help: Embed family hubs, peer support, and Family Group Conferencing to increase kinship placements.	WB demand growth absorbed safely across Ridgeway's wider scale.	Sustainable CLA cost trajectory despite WB demand growth.
Residential costs volatile (+42% in one year). Small base amplifies impact.	CLA forecasting: By 2032, combined CLA costs rise to £2.50m ("As Is"), with Oxfordshire volatility dominating.	SEND resilience: Invest in local special school capacity and inclusion support; keep tribunal rates below peers.	Fewer children entering statutory care due to strong early help and kinship support.	Children and families experience better outcomes: more supported to stay together, higher wellbeing.
SEND system stronger than Oxfordshire CC but exposed to growth; tribunal rate 3.5%.	SEND pressures: Oxfordshire CC DSG deficit forecast to exceed £100m by 2026; systemic SEND failings and high tribunal rate (5% vs 3% national).	Fostering sufficiency: Expand WB's fostering base across South/Vale footprint; build retention incentives.	Residential cost shocks diluted by broader commissioning footprint.	Financial sustainability: reduced CLA and SEND cost volatility; savings from prevention and local commissioning.
Workforce costs 30% above England in WB; retention and safeguarding pressures.	Workforce pressures: WB staffing costs 30% above peers; Oxfordshire CC reliant on agency staff.	Commissioning collaboration: Leverage Ridgeway scale to stabilise residential market and reduce volatility.	Reduced reliance on residential placements, with better sufficiency and lower costs.	Improved inspection readiness: higher quality outcomes, reduced risk of deterioration under reorganisation.
Inspection themes: Oxfordshire CC and WB rated "Good" by Ofsted, but weaknesses in transitions, multi-agency working, and SEND parental confidence.	Inspection risks: Both currently "Good", but Oxfordshire CC's SEND inspection highlights systemic weaknesses.	Workforce sustainability: Regional recruitment campaigns, targeted retention in WB, scale-sharing of specialist staff.	Improved parental confidence in SEND system (lower tribunal rates, more inclusive schools).	Inclusive education system with stronger local capacity.
Fostering share stronger than Oxfordshire CC (63%) but still declining; needs sustained recruitment.		Partnerships: Rural focus – integrated health, VCSE, housing for access and inclusion; sustain WB's family safeguarding strengths.	More stable and resilient workforce with improved retention and capacity.	Families in rural and market town communities supported by accessible, joined-up services.
			Stronger local partnerships (schools, NHS, VCSE, housing) enabling more joined-up support.	

Oxfordshire CC Children's Social Care - Children Looked After



CLA Number	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
Oxfordshire	767	782	855	882	770
SN Average	655	685	692	709	715
South East	10430	10480	10840	11260	11180
England	80,000	80,780	82,090	83,760	83,630

What does the data tell us?

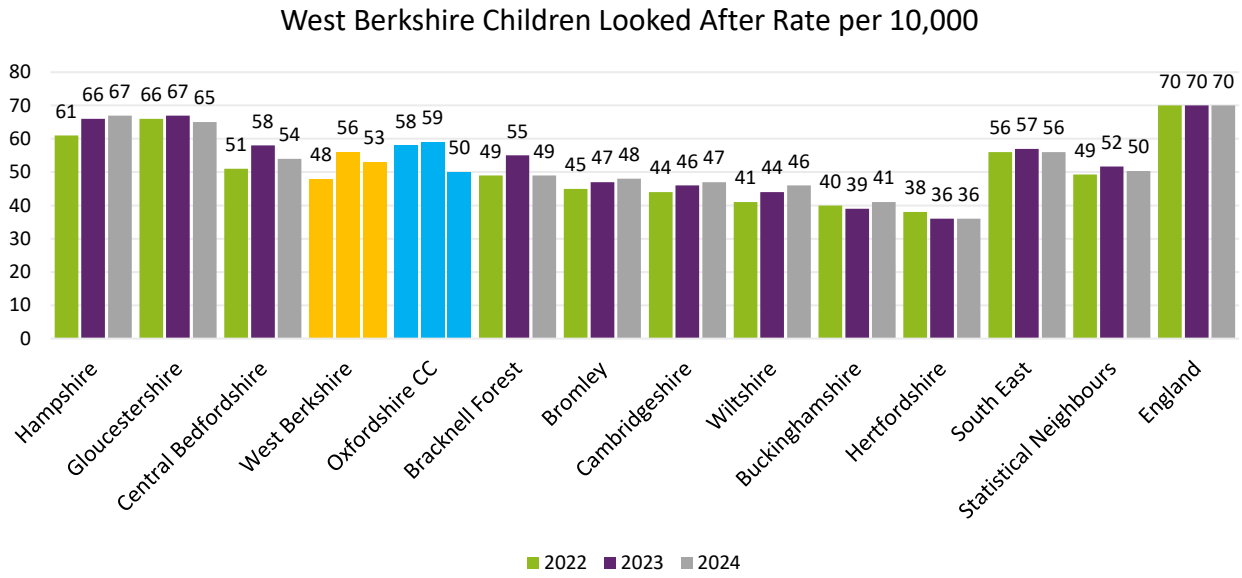
Children Looked After (CLA) rate per 10,000 in Oxfordshire CC:

- 2% lower than the Statistical Neighbour (SN) average.
- 29% lower than the England average.
- Trend: Between 2022 and 2024, the CLA rate in Oxfordshire CC has fallen by 15%, while rates across many comparator areas and nationally have remained broadly stable or higher.

Analysis:

- The 2022–2023 rise appears to be an anomaly, pushing Oxfordshire out of alignment with its long-term trend and above SN comparators.
- The 2024 data suggests a reset, with CLA numbers and rates now back to expected levels, confirming Oxfordshire's usual position as a low CLA demand area relative to its peers and national averages.
- Looking at a 5-year view is crucial, as it prevents over-interpreting the 2022–23 spike as a sustained increase.

West Berkshire Children's Social Care - Children Looked After



CLA Number	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
West Berkshire	156	146	166	197	187
SN Average	649	660	675	704	700
South East	10430	10480	10840	11260	11180
England	80,000	80,780	82,090	83,760	83,630

What does the data tell us?

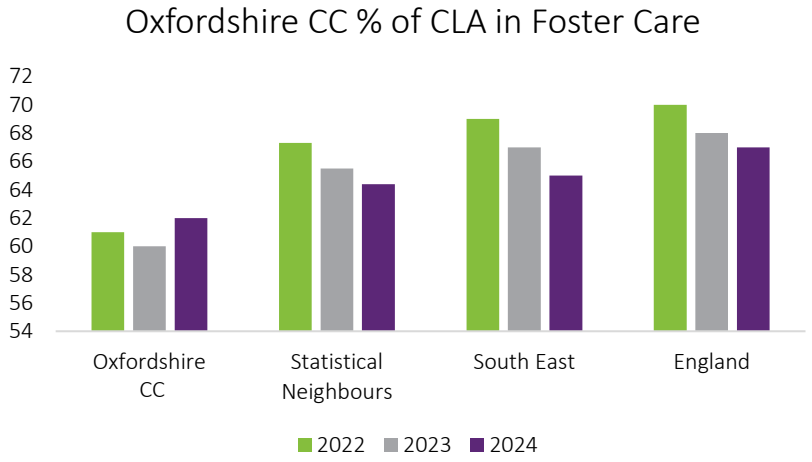
West Berkshire's Looked After Children (CLA) rate per 10,000 is:

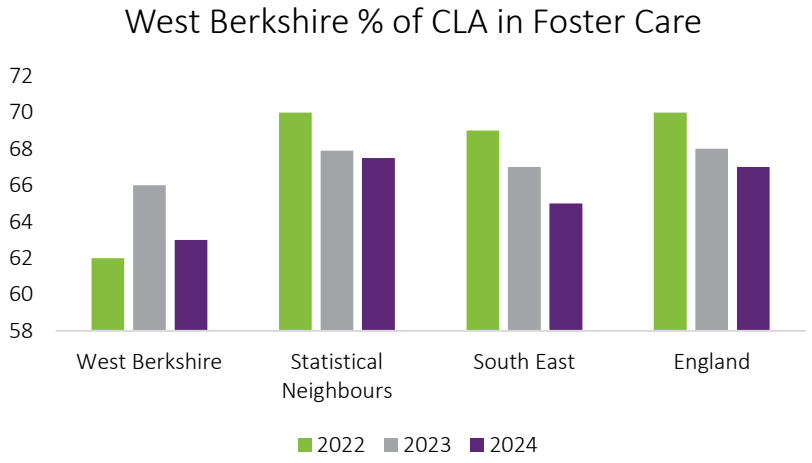
- 5% higher than the Statistical Neighbour (SN) average
- 24% lower than the England average

Numbers vs Rates

- The absolute number of CLA has risen over the 5 years (from 156 in 2020 to 187 in 2024, (a 20% increase).
- Yet the rate per 10,000 has declined slightly (56 to 51 between 2022 and 2024).

Oxfordshire CC & West Berkshire CLA in Foster Care





Percentage of CLA in Foster Care

Oxfordshire CC

% of CLA in foster care is lower than comparators and is declining:

- 2022: 61%
- 2023: 60%
- 2024: 62%

This contrasts with statistical neighbours, South East, and England, where proportions are higher (64–67%) though also trending down slightly.

West Berkshire

Starts closer to regional/national averages but also declining:

- 2022: 62%
- 2023: 66%
- 2024: 63%

Despite fluctuations, it still sits below statistical neighbours and England overall, both of which remain around 65–67%.

Comparison

- Both authorities have a smaller share of CLA in foster care than national/regional averages.
- Oxfordshire CC in particular is notably lower, suggesting heavier reliance on residential or alternative provision.

Oxfordshire CC & West Berkshire Fostering Analysis

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Overall Positioning

- Oxfordshire CC: High fostering costs and low proportion of CLA in foster care = financial pressure and sufficiency challenges
- West Berkshire: Costs increasing but still relatively controlled; % of CLA in foster care closer to national averages, but still below optimal levels

Key Insights & Analysis

- Rising Costs: Both Oxfordshire CC and West Berkshire face steeply rising fostering costs, exceeding national averages. Oxfordshire CC's costs are notably higher, which may indicate:
- Market pressures (agency reliance, placement shortages).
- Higher needs/complexity within the CLA population.
- Lower Foster Care Utilisation: Both councils have fewer CLA in foster care compared to peers, particularly Oxfordshire CC. This has:
  - Financial implications (residential placements are significantly more expensive).
  - Practice/placement sufficiency implications (suggesting recruitment/retention challenges for foster carers).
  - Trend Divergence: While national/regional averages show some decline in foster care usage, Oxfordshire CC's gap is widening, signalling a structural issue in sufficiency strategy.

Recruitment & Retention Strategies

- In West Berkshire Council, there is a focus on recruiting a wide range of carers (emergency, short/long-term, sibling groups, teenagers, parent & child, additional needs, supported lodgings). Support includes training, supervision, buddy/mentor schemes, and partnership with the Foster Care Association. A dedicated recruitment role is planned to strengthen promotion and activity.
- In Oxfordshire CC, the strategy is centred on reducing reliance on IFAs by growing in-house fostering. Recruitment is aligned with retention through training and supervision. Progress is tracked using a monthly Sufficiency Action Plan overseen by the Placement and Sufficiency Board. Expansion of children's homes also forms part of the wider sufficiency approach.

Ofsted Registered Children Homes

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Oxfordshire CC

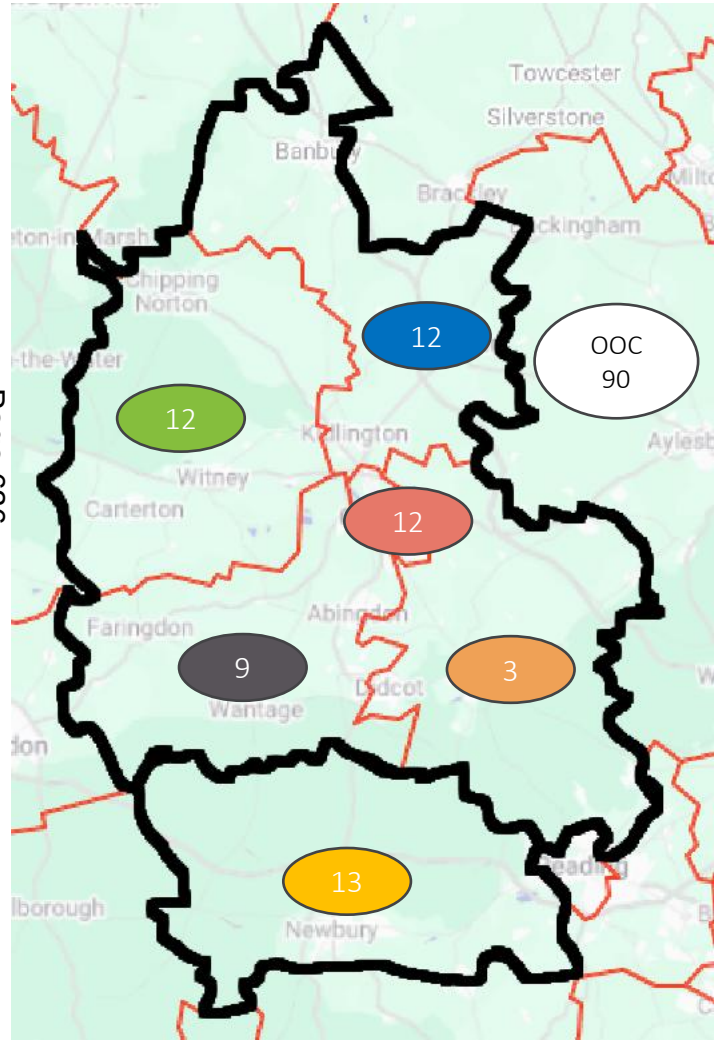
- Within Oxfordshire CC, there are 23 children's homes registered by Ofsted provided by the local authority and private/voluntary organisations.
- This number includes 2 residential special schools (with registration as children's homes), one of which is registered for 31 places, and the other is registered as short break only provider with 12 places available.
- Oxfordshire CC operate 4 children's homes with a total of 22 places (14% of all places), of these 1 is outstanding, 1 good, 1 requires improvement, a one was inspected as inadequate.

West Berkshire Council

- Within West Berkshire there are a total of 11 children's homes registered under Ofsted, offering a total of 116 places.
- This includes 1 residential special school that has 67 places registered.
- The only LA ran children's home is registered as a short break only home offering 6 places, which was inspected as outstanding.

Type of Home	Count of Homes/Places	Oxfordshire CC	West Berkshire Council
LA-Run Children's Homes	Number of Homes	4 (1 provides short-term care)	1 (short break only)
	Placements	22	6
Other Operated Children's Homes	Number of Homes	19	10
	Placements	133	110
TOTAL	**Number of Homes**	**23**	**11**
	Placements	**155**	**116**

Residential Placements by Originating and Placement Address



Number of children in residential placements by authority with council boundaries for Oxfordshire CC and West Berkshire – Option Overlayed

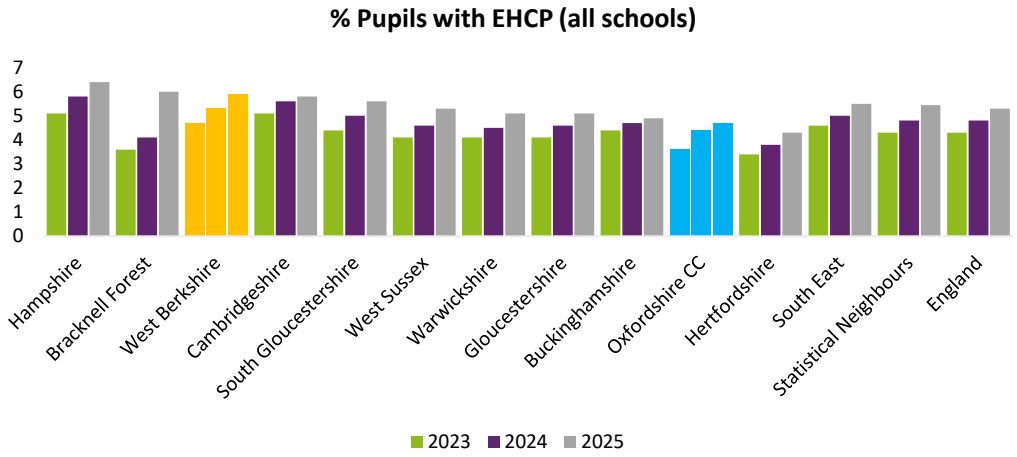
	District/ Area	Originating Area	Originating Area (%)	Placement Area at end of year	Placement Area at end of year (%)
	Cherwell	30	19.9%	12	7.9%
	West Oxfordshire	22	14.6%	12	7.9%
	Oxford	37	24.5%	12	7.9%
	Vale of White Horse	24	15.9%	9	2.0%
	South Oxfordshire	22	14.6%	3	6.0%
	West Berkshire*	11	7.3%	13	8.6%
	Out of County	5	3.3%	90	59.6%

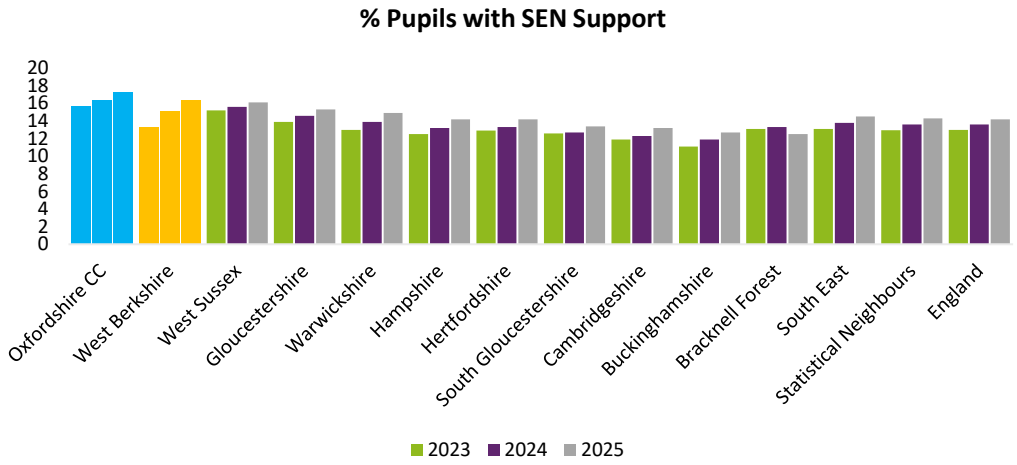
**West Berkshire relies on publicly available data of overall residential placements in the authority.*

- There is a large proportion of children placed in placements out of county with 59.6% of residential placements, while a proportion are in neighbouring areas such as Buckinghamshire & West Northamptonshire many are further away. This suggests there is a challenge with sufficiency for children's residential placements in the area.
- The areas with the greatest proportion of the originating addresses of children in residential placements were Oxford, Vale of White Horse, and Cherwell, which combined accounted for 60% of the overall children in residential care cohort.

Oxfordshire CC EHCP and SEN

Oxfordshire CC and West Berkshire present contrasting SEND profiles: Oxfordshire CC contains EHCP growth through higher SEN Support but faces elevated tribunal challenge, while West Berkshire aligns with national EHCP levels but demonstrates strong parental confidence. The Option 2 model allows each new authority to tailor responses to these distinct pressures, while sharing best practice across the system to strengthen outcomes and financial sustainability.





What does the data tell us? % Pupils with EHCP

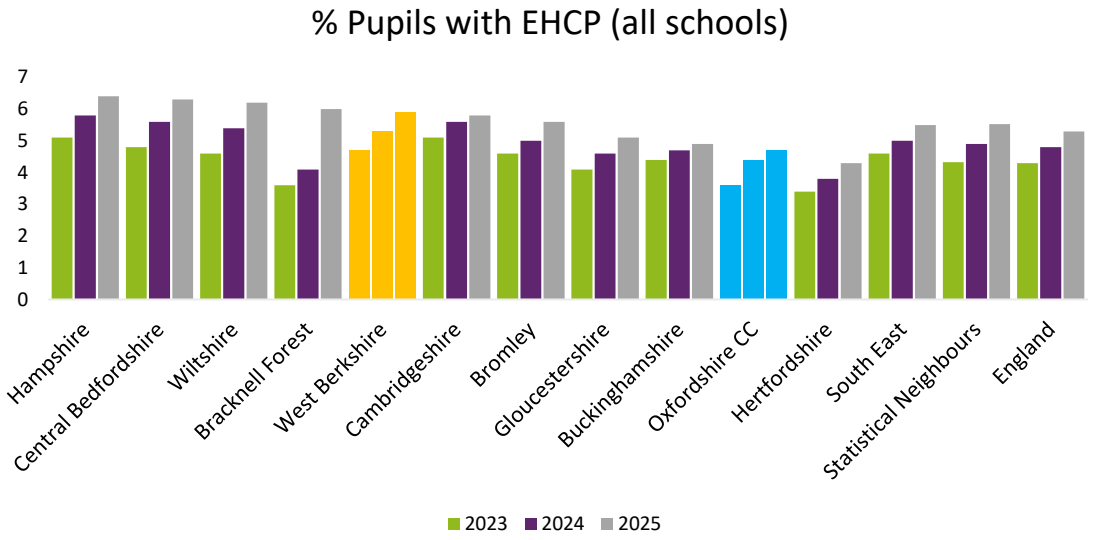
- Oxfordshire CC has a lower proportion of pupils with an EHCP (Education, Health & Care Plan) compared with statistical neighbours and the England average.
  - Oxfordshire: 4–4.5% of pupils.
  - England: 5.5–6%.
  - Statistical Neighbours: 5–6%.
- West Berkshire is slightly higher (5.5%) and closer to national averages.
- Trend: All areas show gradual growth in EHCPs between 2023–2025, reflecting national trends, but Oxfordshire remains consistently below average.
- Possible Analysis: Oxfordshire CC may have tighter thresholds or stronger use of SEN Support (rather than EHCPs). Risk that families perceive difficulty in accessing statutory plans.

What does the data tell us? % Pupils with SEN Support

- Oxfordshire CC has a higher-than-average proportion of pupils receiving SEN Support (17%).
  - England / SN averages: 14%.
  - West Berkshire is broadly in line with national levels (16%).
- This suggests Oxfordshire CC is managing needs earlier/lower down the system rather than progressing to statutory EHCPs.
- Possible Analysis: Oxfordshire CC appears to be front-loading SEN through SEN Support, reducing pressure on EHCPs. This is consistent with its relatively low EHCP rates.

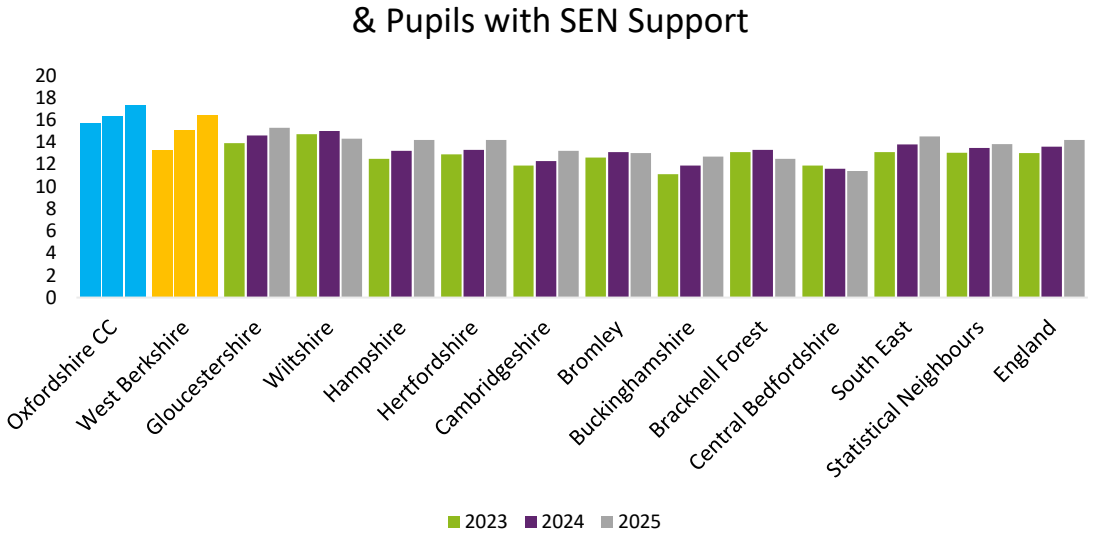
Note: Graphs ordered in descending order based on 2025 figures

West Berkshire EHCP and SEN



What does the data tell us? % Pupils with EHCP

- West Berkshire: Around 5–5.5% of pupils with an EHCP, broadly in line with the England average (5.5–6%) and Statistical Neighbours.
- Trend (2023–2025): Both areas see gradual increases in EHCP prevalence, reflecting national growth, but Oxfordshire CC continues to track below average.
- Analysis: Oxfordshire CC's lower EHCP rate suggests stronger use of SEN Support, but could also indicate higher thresholds for statutory plans, which risks driving parental dissatisfaction.

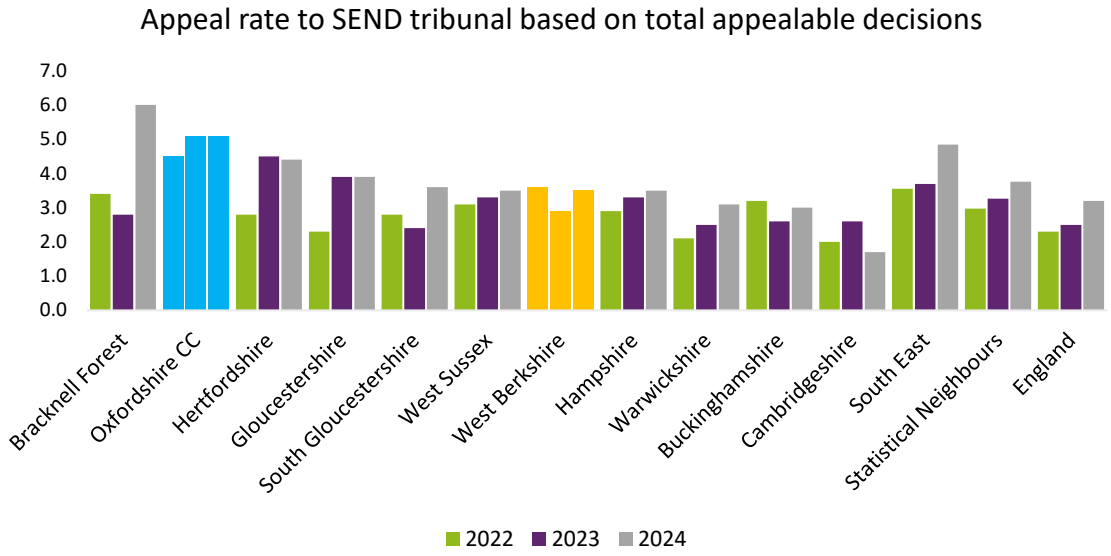


What does the data tell us? % Pupils with SEN Support

- West Berkshire: Lower, closer to 12–13%, slightly below both England and SN averages.
- Trend: Both remain broadly stable across the period, with Oxfordshire CC consistently above and West Berkshire consistently below.
- Analysis: Oxfordshire CC manages a larger proportion of need through SEN Support rather than statutory EHCPs, while West Berkshire leans more towards formal plans relative to SEN Support.

Note: Graphs ordered in descending order based on 2025 figures

EHCP and SEN



Note: Graph ordered in descending order based on 2024 figures

What does the data tell us? SEND Tribunal Appeals

- Oxfordshire CC's appeal rate to SEND Tribunal is relatively high, consistently around 5% of total appealable decisions.
- England average is closer to 3%.
- West Berkshire is lower (3.5%), indicating fewer disputes escalate to tribunal.
- Trend: Oxfordshire CC's appeal rate has remained stable, not reducing despite system reforms.

Possible Analysis: While Oxfordshire CC resolves more needs at SEN Support level, the higher tribunal rate suggests parental dissatisfaction with EHCP decision-making. This could point to perceived barriers in securing statutory plans.

Key Strengths

Oxfordshire CC:

- Strong reliance on SEN Support, reducing demand for EHCPs
- Overall EHCP rates below national levels, containing growth pressures

West Berkshire:

- Closer alignment to national averages
- Lower tribunal rates, indicating better parental confidence in decisions

Risks / Challenges

Oxfordshire CC:

- High tribunal rates could undermine parental trust and create financial/legal pressures.
- Risk of unmet need if thresholds for EHCPs are perceived as too restrictive.

West Berkshire:

- While tribunal performance is strong, EHCP demand is in line with national growth, which could escalate costs.
- Both areas: Rising EHCP prevalence nationally suggests continued budget pressures, especially for high needs block funding.

EHCP and SEN LGR Implications

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“So What” for LGR?

Oxfordshire CC:

- Oxfordshire CC’s low EHCP/high SEN Support model is efficient but risks parent challenge and tribunal pressure
- West Berkshire’s lower tribunal rate and more balanced profile reflects stronger parental confidence but carries future growth risk
- Under Option 2 (two unitaries):
  - Oxford & Shires UA can focus on managing tribunal risk, improving parental confidence while sustaining early support
  - Ridgeway UA (inc. West Berkshire) can focus on containing EHCP growth while maintaining strong family engagement
  - Together, the two authorities can share best practice, Oxfordshire’s prevention model and West Berkshire’s dispute resolution strengths to create a more resilient, balanced SEND system

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4. Risks

Risk Matrix (1)

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Risk Description	Category	Likelihood (L)	Impact (I)	Overall Rating	Potential Consequences	Mitigation Actions
Escalation of **SEND DSG deficit** beyond £100m by 2026	Financial / Education	High (5)	High (4)	20	Budget unsustainability, potential Section 114, reduced flexibility in ASC	Stronger DfE engagement, Safety Valve–style deal, inclusion reform, invest in early years/SEND sufficiency
Adult Social Care cost growth exceeds MTFP assumptions	ASC Sustainability	High (4)	High (4)	16	ASC spend crowds out investment in prevention, loss of financial resilience	Expand reablement, strengthen market-shaping, invest in digital care and triage, regional commissioning alliances
Over-reliance on **agency workforce** in Children's Services	Workforce	Medium (3)	High (4)	12	Higher costs, instability in frontline services, poor outcomes for children	Workforce strategy: local training pipelines, retention incentives, regional staff pooling
Fragmentation of **health and care integration** (BOB ICS partnerships) during reorganisation	Partnership & Integration	Medium (3)	High (4)	12	Loss of joint commissioning benefits, poorer system outcomes, reputational damage	Align governance with ICS, formal MoUs, protect joint commissioning teams through transition
High-cost placements (residential and nursing) continue to rise	ASC Market	High (4)	Medium (3)	12	Budget overspends, market fragility, greater out-of-county placements	Block contracts, invest in local provision (extra care, supported living), risk-sharing with providers

Risk Matrix (2)

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Risk Description	Category	Likelihood (L)	Impact (I)	Overall Rating	Potential Consequences	Mitigation Actions
Political and public **resistance to reform** (e.g. loss of local identity in rural areas)	Governance & Engagement	Medium (3)	Medium (3)	9	Slower implementation, reputational risks, community disengagement	Enhanced comms and engagement, local boards, democratic safeguards
Digital and innovation lag limits efficiency gains	Transformation	Medium (3)	Medium (3)	9	Slower benefits realisation, missed cost reductions	Investment in AI triage, predictive analytics, resident accounts, digital workforce tools
Inequalities in outcomes (urban deprivation vs rural Ridgeway) persist	Equity & Outcomes	Medium (3)	High (4)	12	Entrenched disparities, Ofsted/CQC risks, poorer life outcomes	Targeted investment in urban Oxford and rural access; equity monitoring framework
Transition disruption delays savings delivery	Finance / Delivery	Medium (3)	Medium (3)	9	Benefits not realised in MTFP period, criticism from DLUHC	Phased implementation, benefits tracker, external validation

5. Peopletoo Key Indicator Benchmarking

Key Expenditure Indicators for Children's and Adults Services

The summary table below compares county councils to unitary and metropolitan authorities for all key expenditure indicators from 2023/24 published national data. This identifies that all average unit costs across ASC and Children's are lower in unitaries and metropolitans, except for S251 Children's Residential unit cost which are 11% higher than the county council's average, (this could be linked to in house provision more prominent in county councils).

Average unit cost comparison	S251 LAC unit cost	S251 Residential unit cost	S251 SEN unit cost	Nursing unit cost	Residential unit cost	Residential & Nursing unit cost
County average	£2,076	£6,466	£128	£1,104	£1,186	£1,163
Unitary & Met average	£1,786	£7,252	£105	£1,049	£1,079	£1,064

**Data source 2023/24 LAIT (Local Authority Interactive Tool) and ASCFR (Adult Social Care Financial Return)*

The evidence shows that county councils are not achieving lower unit costs as a result of greater buying power except for S251 Residential unit costs. Unitary councils, which on average tend to serve populations less than half that of county councils, achieve the lowest unit costs across all other cost elements.

This could be linked to a number of things, but most likely would be the development of local markets to meet local needs, with local providers also having less travel time.

With regards to lower long term care costs, this links to lower rates but also lower numbers in residential care. Analysis would indicate that whilst counties perform strongly in terms of diversion to universal services, once in statutory social care, higher numbers are in residential with lower numbers supported in the communities. This could be a result of more capacity in the domiciliary care market, and more focus on community assets in support of prevention and early intervention activity.

Our approach is consistent in starting with the national evidence and then creating a detailed analysis and evidence base 'locally'. It is not a standard answer for all and recognises the differences in many factors and performance within each footprint. It is based on our practical/practitioner experience and use of local data and has not relied on national statistics only.

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Appendix F - Glossary

Term	Definition
Back office functions	Administrative and support services that do not directly interact with the public, such as HR, IT, and finance.
Benefit	A benefit is what our customers, communities and colleagues can actually see and feel as a result of what we do. They should show measurable, quantifiable improvements from outcomes, capabilities, products.
BOB ICB	The Buckinghamshire, Oxfordshire and Berkshire West Integrated Care Board.
Business Rates	A tax on non-domestic properties used to help fund local services.
Capability	Something (service, function, operation) that enables the new council and its workforce to deliver services or improve them.
Capital Receipts	Income received from the sale of capital assets, such as land or buildings.
CIPFA	The Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy
Committee / Committee Structure	A governance model where decisions are made collectively by committees of elected councillors.
Communication	Communication is giving, receiving or exchanging ideas, information, signals or messages through appropriate media, so people or groups can learn about something, understand it, share or ask for information or to express their views.
Council Tax	A local tax on residential properties used to fund local services.
County Council	A top-tier local authority in a two-tier system responsible for services like education, transport, and social care.
Devolution	The government's ambitions to transfer powers and funding to Mayoral Strategic Authorities

Devolution Framework	The set of functions and governance arrangements for different levels of strategic authority, as outlined in legislation or policy.
District Council	A lower-tier authority in a two-tier system responsible for services like housing, planning, and waste collection.
Engagement	Opportunities and activities that open-up dialogue to listen, seek feedback and promote collaboration and sharing of learning.
Exceptional Financial Support	Emergency financial assistance provided by central government to councils facing severe financial difficulties.
Financial Resilience Index	A tool used to assess the financial sustainability of local authorities.
Frontline Services	Public-facing services such as social care, waste collection, and housing support.
GLL / Greenwich Leisure Limited	A charitable social enterprise that manages leisure centres and libraries across the UK. They deliver leisure services in West Oxfordshire, South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse.
Growth Officer	A role potentially responsible for driving economic development and regeneration initiatives.
Integrated Care Board (ICB)	A statutory NHS organisation responsible for planning and commissioning health services in a local area.
Leader and Cabinet Model	A governance model where the council leader appoints a cabinet to make executive decisions.
Local Development Order (LDO)	A planning tool that grants permission for certain types of development without the need for a full planning application.
Local Government Reorganisation (LGR)	The process of restructuring local authorities, typically replacing two-tier systems (county and district councils) with single-tier unitary authorities.
Local Neighbourhood Area (LPA)	The local authority responsible for planning decisions in a designated area.
Local Plan	A document setting out a local authority's policies and proposals for land use and development.
LVEP	Local Visitor Economy Partnership

Mayoral Strategic Authority (MSA)	A local authority or combined authority designated to have strategic powers over areas such as transport, housing, and economic development. Usually over an area of around 1.5m people. This differs to a Strategic Authority as it is led by a directly elected mayor.
Medium Term Financial Plan (MTPF)	A financial strategy outlining a council's expected income and expenditure over a 3–5 year period.
Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG)	Former name of the UK government department now known as the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC).
Net Zero	A target to reduce greenhouse gas emissions to as close to zero as possible, with any remaining emissions offset.
ODS / Oxford Direct Services	Oxford Direct Services – a company wholly owned by Oxford City Council delivering public services.
One Public Estate (OPE)	A government programme encouraging public sector organisations to share property assets to improve efficiency and service delivery.
Options Appraisal	A structured evaluation of different reorganisation models, assessing their feasibility, benefits, and risks.
Parish Council	The lowest tier of local government, responsible for representing small communities and delivering local services.
PeopleToo	PeopleToo is a consultancy referenced for technical analysis.
Primary Care Network (PCN)	Groups of GP practices working together to provide integrated health services to local communities.
PwC / PricewaterhouseCoopers	A global professional services firm often engaged to provide consultancy and financial advice to public sector organisations.
Risk	The effect of uncertainty on what we are trying to achieve. The purpose of risk management is to identify and manage the barriers to achieving our objectives. Managing risk well is critical to success of the LGR programme.
Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND)	Special Educational Needs and Disabilities

Shadow Authority	A temporary governing body elected to prepare for the transition to a new unitary authority, operating before the formal launch.
Shadow Elections	Elections held to form a shadow authority prior to the official establishment of a new council.
Single-tier authorities / structure	Local government models where one authority is responsible for all services, replacing the two-tier system.
Spatial Development Strategy (SDS)	A strategic planning document outlining long-term development and infrastructure priorities across a region.
Statutory Services	Services that local authorities are legally required to provide, such as education and social care.
Strategic Authority	A local authority or combined authority designated to have strategic powers over areas such as transport, housing, and economic development. Usually over an area of around 1.5m people.
Target Operating Model	A Target Operating Model clearly states how an organisation will deliver its vision and corporate plans. It explains how the council and staff will work with residents and partners to deliver what the Council has decided it wants to achieve.
Town Council	A type of parish council serving a town, responsible for local services and community representation.
Transformation	Activity which aims to change and develop authorities to create savings or improve performance.
Transport corridors	Key routes used for the movement of people and goods, often targeted for infrastructure investment.
Two-tier authorities / structure	A local government model with separate county and district councils sharing responsibilities.
Unitary Authority (UA) / Unitary Council	A single-tier local government structure responsible for all local services in its area, replacing the functions of both county and district councils.
Vesting Day	The official date on which a new unitary authority assumes its powers and responsibilities.

Appendix G - Government criteria checklist

	Criteria set	Section location for 2UA response
1	**A single tier and sensible geography to improve housing supply and outcomes avoiding creating (dis/)advantaged areas**	3.3 Making the case for creating unitary councils through LGR 4.2 Options under consideration 4.3 Socio-Economic and Demographics 4.4 Analysis against the MHCLG criteria 6.1 The importance of devolution 8.5 Localities working and community empowerment 9.5 Detailed financial case
2	**Unitary local government must be the right size to achieve efficiencies, improve capacity and withstand financial shocks**	4.2 Options under consideration 4.3 Socio-Economic and Demographics 4.4 Analysis against the MHCLG criteria 4.5 Financial comparison of the options 7. Service Delivery and Transformation 8.5 Localities working and community empowerment 9. The Financial Case 9.7 Funding and Financial Sustainability
3	**Prioritises the delivery of high quality and sustainable public services to citizens**	4.4 Analysis against the MHCLG criteria 5.2 How we will help secure better outcomes 7. Service Delivery and Transformation 8.2 Target Operating Model 8.5 Localities working and community empowerment 10.2 Our phased approach
4	**Councils work together in coming to a view that meets local needs and is informed by local views**	1.1 Joint letter from the Leaders of Cherwell District, South Oxfordshire District, Vale of White Horse District, West Berkshire Unitary and West Oxfordshire District Councils 3.4 Working in partnership 4.4 Analysis against the MHCLG criteria 11. Engagement summary
5	**New unitary structures must support devolution arrangement**	4.4 Analysis against the MHCLG criteria 6. Planning for Devolution – Our Growth Offer
6	**Enable stronger community engagement and deliver genuine opportunity for neighbourhood empowerment**	3.4 Working in partnership 4.4 Analysis against the MHCLG criteria 5.1 Our Proposed Visions 8.2 Target Operating Model 8.4 Future Engagement Model 8.5 Localities working and community empowerment

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