

DRAFT

Note: These Minutes will remain DRAFT until approved at the next meeting of the Committee

EXTRAORDINARY COUNCIL MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD ON TUESDAY 4 NOVEMBER 2025

Councillors Tony Vickers (Chairman), Stephanie Steevenson (Vice-Chairman), Adrian Abbs, Antony Amirtharaj, Phil Barnett, Dominic Boeck, Jeff Brooks, Patrick Clark, Heather Codling, Martin Colston, Jeremy Cottam, Iain Cottingham, Paul Dick, Billy Drummond, Nigel Foot, Denise Gaines, Stuart Gourley, Clive Hooker, Owen Jeffery, Paul Kander, Jane Langford, Janine Lewis, Ross Mackinnon, Alan Macro, David Marsh, Tom McCann, Biyi Oloko, Erik Pattenden, Justin Pemberton, Christopher Read, Louise Sturgess, Clive Taylor, Martha Vickers, and Howard Woollaston

Also Present: Joseph Holmes (Chief Executive), Clare Lawrence (Executive Director - Place), Sarah Clarke (Executive Director - Resources), Nicola Thomas (Service Director – Legal and Democratic Services), Stephen Chard (Democratic Services Manager), Sam Chiverton (Zoom Host), Honorary Alderman Paul Bryant, Honorary Alderman Tony Linden, and Honorary Alderman Gordon Lundie

Apologies for inability to attend the meeting: Councillor Nick Carter, Councillor Laura Coyle, Councillor Carolyne Culver, Councillor Matt Shakespeare, Councillor Richard Somner, Councillor Joanne Stewart, Councillor Geoff Mayes (Attending Online), Councillor Vicky Poole (Attending Online), Honorary Alderman Graham Bridgman, Honorary Alderwoman Hilary Cole, Honorary Alderman Adrian Edwards, and Honorary Alderman Rick Jones

PART I

1. Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest received.

2. Local Government Reorganisation - Full Proposal for Oxfordshire and West Berkshire

The Council considered a report (Agenda Item 3) concerning the proposal for local government reorganisation covering the entirety of Oxfordshire and West Berkshire – termed Ridgeway Council (for West Berkshire, South Oxfordshire, and Vale of White Horse Councils) and the Oxford and Shires Council (for Oxford City, Cherwell, and West Oxfordshire Council).

MOTION: Proposed by Councillor Justin Pemberton and seconded by Councillor Ross Mackinnon:

That the Council:

- 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.

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- C) Recommends that the Executive approve 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 the working title of 'Oxford & Shires'.
- D) Is informed that two other proposals will be submitted, one proposed by Oxfordshire County Council covering the Oxfordshire area (excluding West Berkshire) and one from Oxford City Council covering the Oxfordshire and West Berkshire area.
- E) Is informed that should Executive agree to the submission of the full proposal for a two unitary model, Cherwell District Council, South Oxfordshire District Council, Vale of White Horse District Council and West Oxfordshire District Council will submit the full proposal directly to Government in line with the Oxfordshire invitation letter."

Council received a point of order about the report and noted that, at point 5.3, it was the Executive and not full Council that had agreed to submit the interim proposal on 19 March 2025.

Councillor Justin Pemberton introduced the report and highlighted that the proposal was a defining moment for the future of West Berkshire and the region as a whole. Local residents expected councils to deliver strong leadership and value for money, but the situation had become increasingly difficult for a Council of West Berkshire's size over recent years.

It was also stressed that this was not reorganisation for its own sake, rather, the proposal was about designing a Council of a shape and size that could meet regional challenges, be financially stable, whilst also remaining connected to the places that the Members served. The Ridgeway proposal could take a broader and strategic view of the area, ensuring that residents were sustainably connected and properly linked up to key services.

Financial sustainability was also emphasised. The creation of two larger unitary authorities – Ridgeway and Oxford and Shires – would unlock economies of scale and the ability to rationalise services, resulting in fewer duplications and more resources being directed to frontline services. In addition, Councillor Pemberton indicated that the more ambition the Council had for vesting day, the sooner the costs associated with reorganisation would be recouped.

The geography of the proposed Ridgeway Council would make sense locally, regionally, and nationally due to the complementary character of the areas involved and its crucial connecting placement in a potential new Mayoral Strategic Authority. As Councillor Pemberton believed that Ridgeway Council would provide local residents with a more financially resilient local council which was able to provide more responsive local services tailored to local needs, he encouraged Council to approve the recommendations.

Some Members expressed concerns about the proposal. As the Ridgeway and Oxford and Shires Councils could see a reduction in Members from a total of 331 to 160, a question about local accountability being eroded and the creation of a greater democratic deficit was raised. As some Members stressed that decisions should be taken as close to local residents as possible, this move to a much larger authority was not seen as being

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nearly local enough. In addition, the increased workload for those remaining Members was also highlighted as potentially causing issues. If the increased number of residents in each ward resulted in Members having to spend significantly more of their free time on casework, it was worried that only people from a certain socio-economic background would put themselves forward to become a Councillor. In addition, the lack of any mention of parish and town Councils in the Governments proposals about reorganisation and devolution was also noted as being a real oversight.

It was clarified that 96 Members were proposed to serve the Ridgeway Council, which would include 38 Members for the West Berkshire area (a reduction from the current number of 43). This reduction would be achieved by three Member wards becoming two Member wards.

Furthermore, questions were also raised about the time that it would take in order to realise the indicative savings. As similar reorganisations look much longer than expected, it was possible that the financial benefits would not be realised before 2033, and that therefore other arrangements would be much quicker at delivering cost savings, such as the sharing of services between existing councils.

Overall, however, Members believed that the Ridgeway proposal was the best option currently available to the Council. Specifically, it was noted that the predominately rural and market town character of South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse District Councils was complementary to that of West Berkshire, and so, as the areas shared a similar geography, they also shared similar opportunities and challenges. They were also very willing partners who reached out to West Berkshire to begin the process of putting together the Ridgeway proposal.

It was generally conceded that West Berkshire, and the other unitary authorities that emerged from the dissolution of Berkshire County Council, were simply too small to be able to cope with the increasing financial demands of areas such as adult social care and children's services. Therefore, reorganisation of West Berkshire into a larger unitary authority would be very beneficial as it would create a financially viable authority able to deliver the services that its residents needed. In terms of the other potential options, the only viable one the Members could envision would be merging with Reading and Wokingham Councils to the east. However, due to the difference in character and geography between these Councils and West Berkshire, and the similarities between West Berkshire and South and Vale, Council agreed that Ridgeway would be the best option for the residents of West Berkshire.

Members noted that Reading Borough Council had recently indicated that it wanted to submit a request to Government to take several of West Berkshire's eastern wards should Ridgeway Council be approved. In response, through conversations with residents and informal local polls, Ward Members for areas such as Theale, Tilehurst, Holybrook, and Purley indicated that there was strong local feeling for these areas to remain part of West Berkshire and not be taken over by Reading. As such, they stressed that these wards should also be included in the move towards a Ridgeway Council.

In response to a point about the lack of information around climate change and biodiversity in the proposal, Council noted that these were in the Council's Local Plans and would not be removed. Also, several Members spoke about their experience of the Berkshire County Council reorganisation and that the workload from larger wards was manageable and should not be a reason to reject the proposal.

Although questions were raised about if the Government would see through its local government reorganisation agenda, Council agreed that the Ridgeway proposal would

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provide the best value and resilience in a homogenous area, and if reorganisation was going to happen, that this option was the most preferable.

It was noted that many residents were not aware of the proposed changes, and that it was the Members duty to inform them about these proposals. Specifically, the reduction in duplication of services and Members could be a way of selling these changes. In addition, the timeline for the elections to the new authority should also be made clear.

Overall, as Council agreed that the Ridgeway proposal would be the best potential option for reorganisation for West Berkshire Council, they agreed to approve the recommendations and submit the proposal to Central Government.

The Motion was put to the meeting and duly **RESOLVED**.

(The meeting commenced at 7.00 pm and closed at 7.53 pm)

CHAIRMAN

Date of Signature