A new 'Ridgeway Council'

for West Berkshire, South Oxfordshire and the Vale of White Horse

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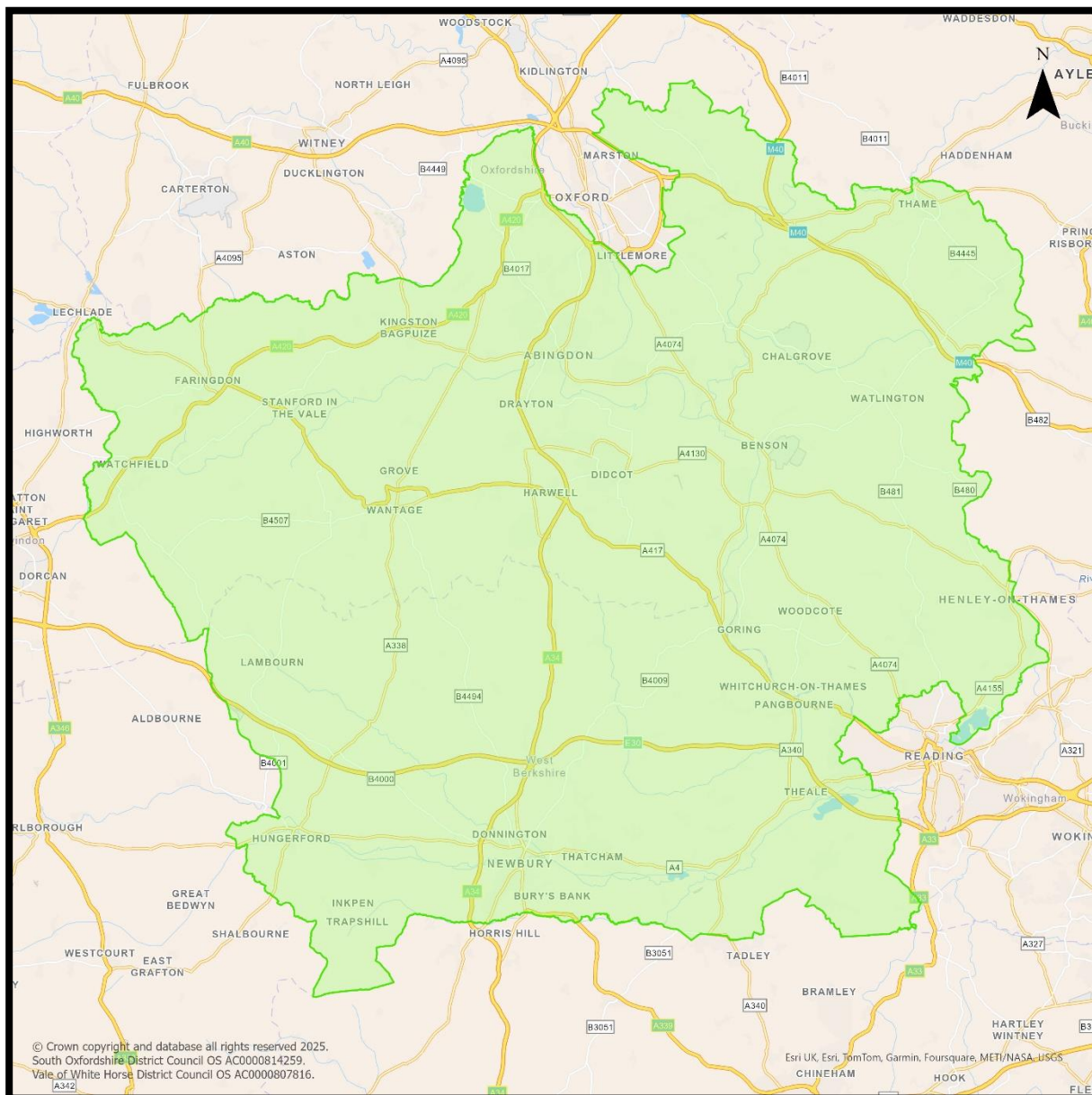
Interim proposal for a new unitary council

March 2025

WestBerkshire COUNCIL

South Oxfordshire District Council — Listening Learning Leading

Vale of White Horse District Council

CONTENTS

Foreword

We are presented with a once-in-a-generation opportunity to shape and strengthen the future of the public services we provide to our communities. It is the chance to design a new model of local government that delivers high-quality services, improves financial resilience and value-for-money, and ensures we are able to maintain truly local representation.

At the heart of the Government's White Paper for English Devolution is the principle of empowering local communities – and our proposal will ensure decisions remain close to the communities they affect.

West Berkshire, South Oxfordshire, and the Vale of White Horse already share deep historical, economic, and geographic ties, symbolised by the working title of our proposed new council, named after the famous 5,000-year-old footpath that travels through the heart of our council areas. By building on these shared connections, 'Ridgeway Council' will provide a strong and effective foundation for the future. Bringing our areas together into a single council offers an opportunity to enhance financial sustainability, bring real economic growth, and support future housing and infrastructure needs. The new council will be well-placed to do all of this while maintaining and enhancing the unique character of our market towns and rural areas – a key driver for our local economy.

With a strong track record of collaboration – particularly between South Oxfordshire and the Vale – we already have the experience of working together to deliver highly successful and cost-effective shared services. West Berkshire also has a long history of collaborative partnership work with neighbouring councils. Expanding this approach across our region will allow us to super-power that successful partnership working on a scale that ensures continuity, efficiency and financial resilience, while making the best use of resources.

Vital to our ambitions, we recognise the importance of local identity and strong engagement with our communities, businesses and local public service providers. We will work closely with those most affected by these changes to hear their thoughts, ideas, and aspirations to shape a future that reflects what's important to them priorities.

Our combined strengths will create a modern and effective local authority 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.

This is an exciting opportunity to establish a council that is ready for the future – one that works smarter, delivers better outcomes, and strengthens local democracy. By working together, we can build a council that not only meets the challenges ahead but ensures lasting benefits for all those who call our area home.

Cllr Jeff Brooks
Leader, West Berkshire
Council

**Cllr David Rouane**
Leader, South Oxfordshire
District Council

Cllr Bethia Thomas
Leader, Vale of White Horse
District Council

Introduction

West Berkshire Council, South Oxfordshire District Council and the Vale of White Horse District Council (the Councils) welcome the opportunity to respond to the Minister of State for Local Government and English Devolution's invitation of 5 February 2025, in exercise of his powers under Part 1 of the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007, to submit an Interim Proposal for a single tier of local government. We support the vision for simpler and more sustainable local government structures, where we are empowered to respond to the needs of our communities and deliver value for money, efficient and high-quality services.

The Councils have been working collaboratively together at pace, and we are pleased to submit a joint Interim Proposal for a new 'Ridgeway Council', bringing together the current geographies of West Berkshire, South Oxfordshire and the Vale of White Horse, with a working title reflecting that the ancient Ridgeway footpath runs through the heart of our proposed geography.
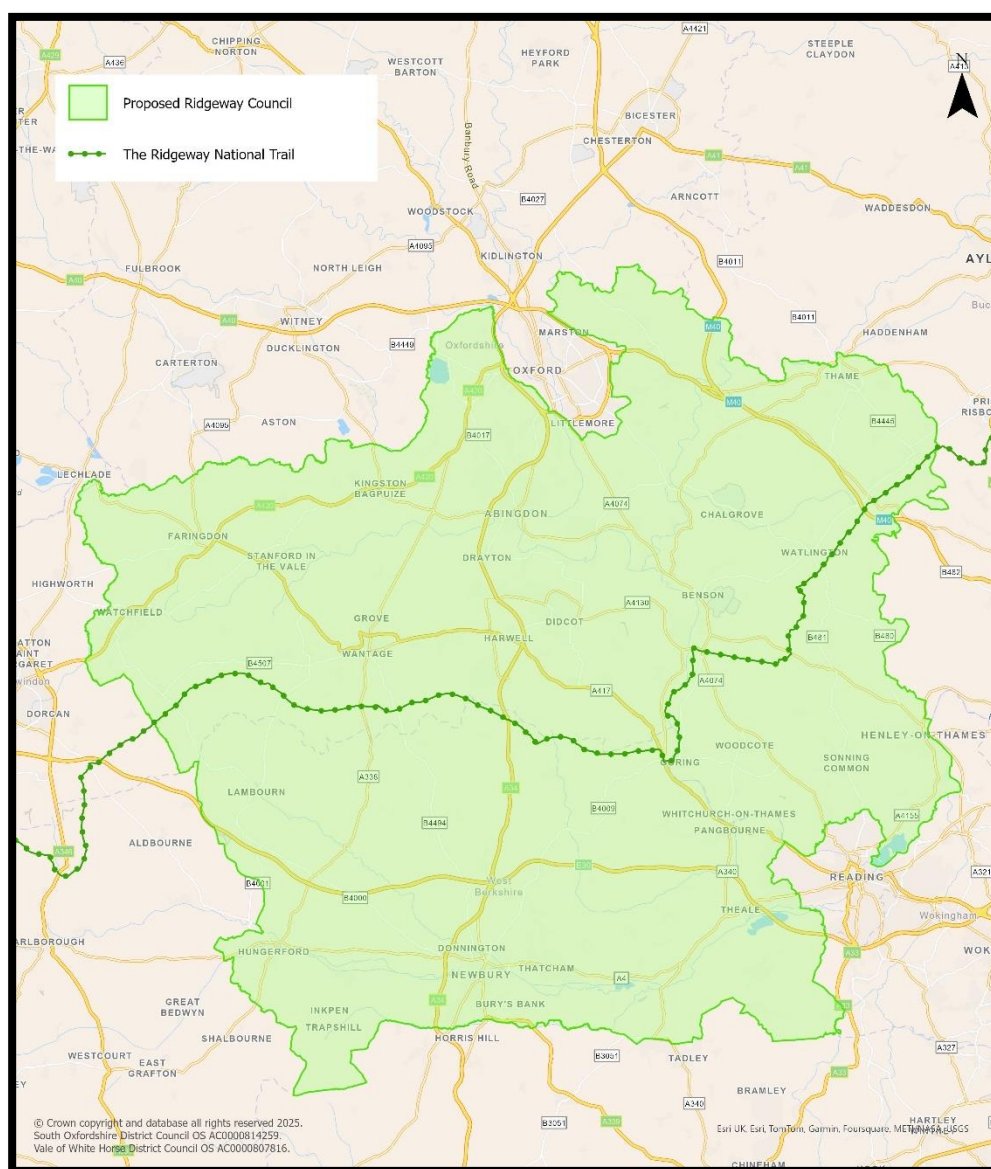
Map 1

We will outline in this Interim Proposal our view that bringing together the Councils, and the remaining Oxfordshire authorities of West Oxfordshire District Council, Cherwell District Council and Oxford City Council (the 'Oxfordshire Council') joining together separately, meets all the criteria and guidance set out in the invitation letter. Our proposal for a 'Ridgeway Council' will create a council that is ably sized to drive forward sustainability, improvements, accountability through political leadership, and support the health and wellbeing of residents across this area, whilst also reflecting the unique character of our rural area and understands and fulfils the needs of local people.

The closely aligned demographic, economic and geographical ties of the area have an opportunity to be harnessed through aligned services, which will enable us to prioritise people's needs and deliver effectively. We will be able to align our policy framework for residents and use greater procurement power in areas such as waste, highways and leisure, enabling us to drive efficiencies and improvements. This will bring together our workforce, ensuring our communities are supported by organisational structures that have the simplicity, skills and knowledge required.

The document is split into five sections:

Section 1 sets out our Interim Proposal and explains our early views on how it meets the criteria and guidance set by the Minister of State for Local Government and English Devolution.

Section 2 provides context and background information on the proposed 'Ridgeway Council' and the proposed 'Oxfordshire Council'.

Section 3 set outs our approach to submit a Full Proposal by the 28 November 2025.

Section 4 sets out our initial thoughts for the transition from existing arrangements to a new council.

Section 5 brings together background documents to support our Interim Proposal as appendices.

We look forward to receiving your feedback on our Interim Proposal and welcome your support as we develop our Full Proposal by 28 November 2025.

Section 1: The Interim Proposal

A new 'Ridgeway Council' unitary area covering the current geographies of West Berkshire, South Oxfordshire and the Vale of White Horse, and a proposed new unitary 'Oxfordshire Council' for the remaining area of Oxfordshire incorporating the existing geographies of West Oxfordshire, Cherwell and Oxford City, aligns with the criteria set by the Secretary of State. Both proposed geographies create sensible economic areas, geographies with populations of circa. 500,000 to enable local needs to be served and unitary structures able to achieve efficiencies and sustainable service delivery whilst avoiding unnecessary fragmentation of services. Outlined in this section is our initial assessment of how this proposal meets the criteria set and the engagement locally that has been undertaken to date, and we look forward to developing this further in our Full Proposal.
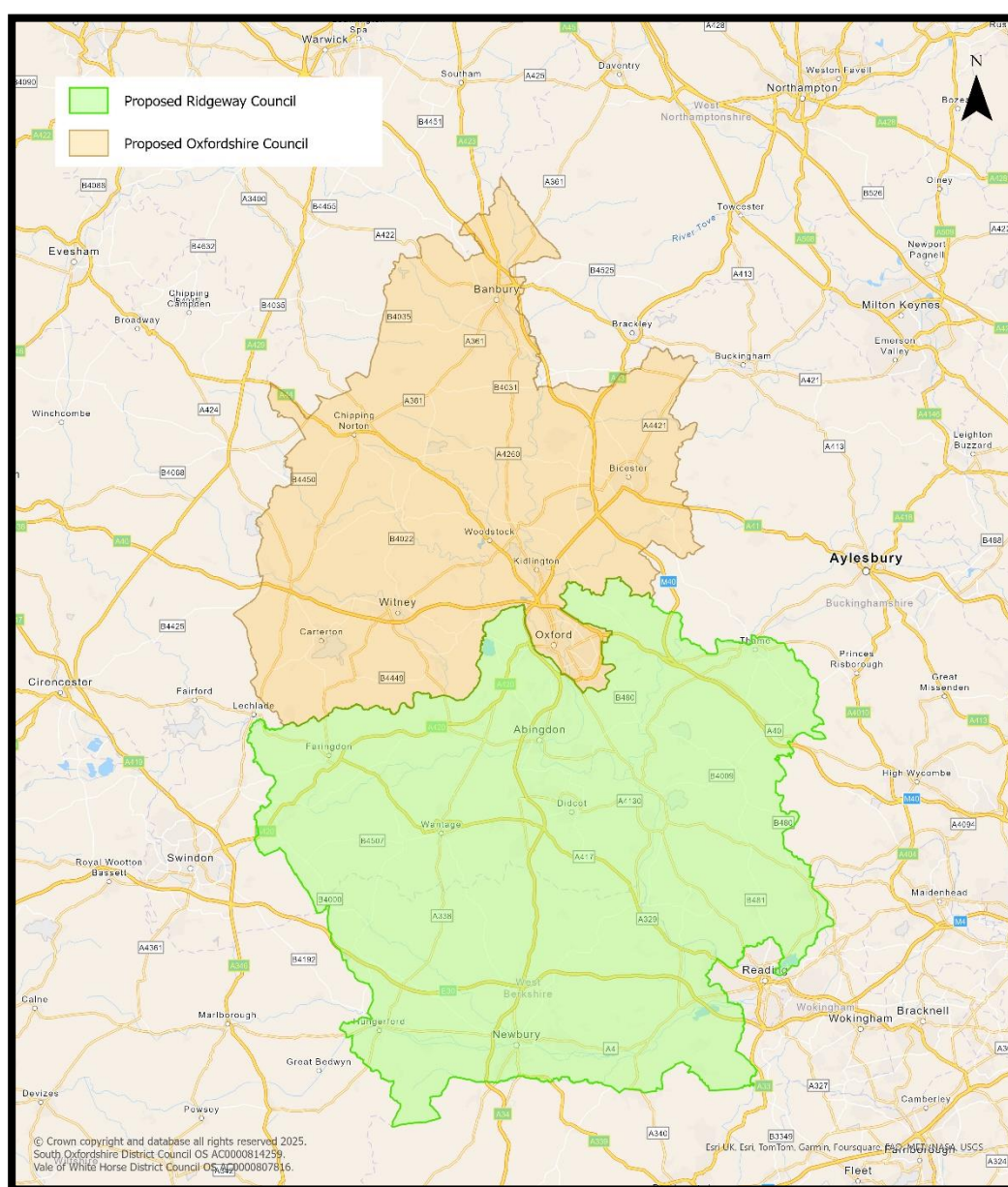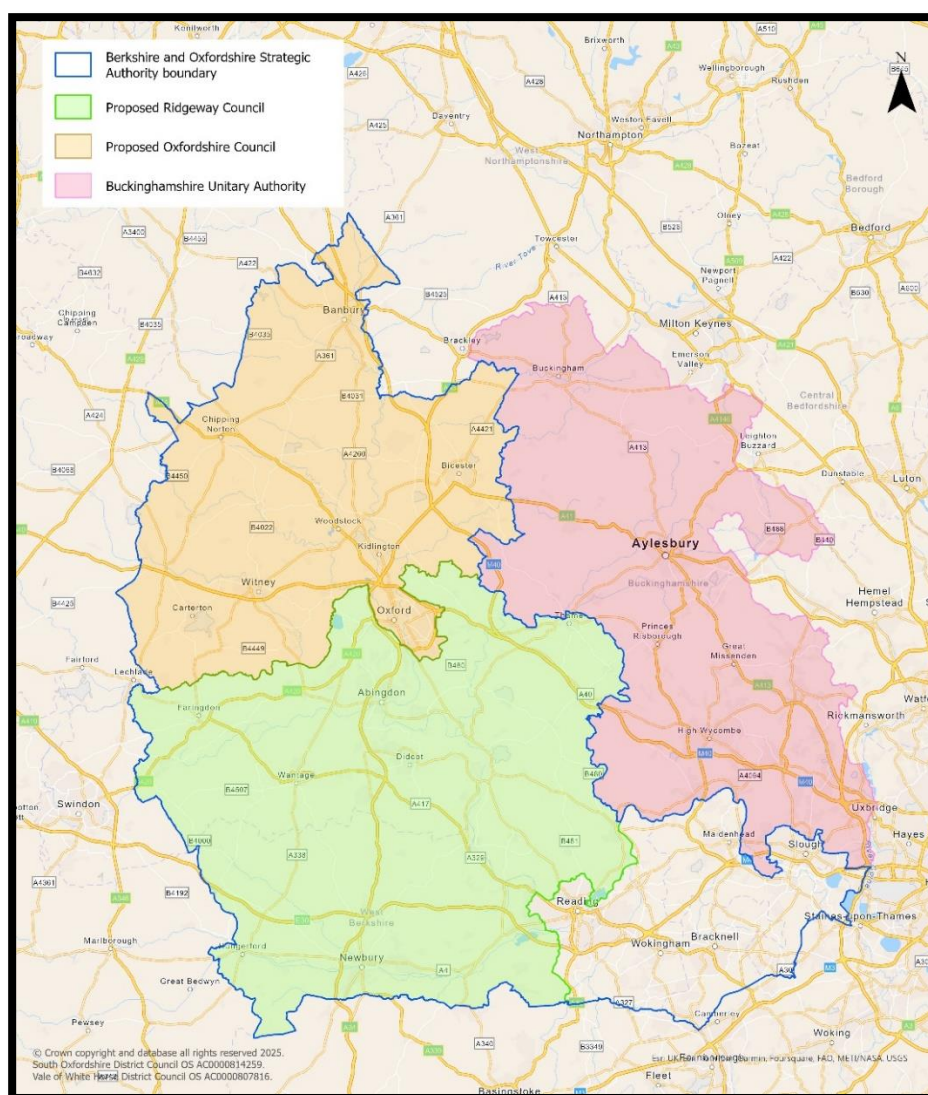

Map 2

Supports initial strategic authority discussions

All the Oxfordshire Leaders have already written to the Deputy Prime Minister, and formal decisions are anticipated in March across Berkshire, to demonstrate commitment and confirm belief that the new ambitious devolution framework can help unlock productivity and progress, and all are actively engaged in discussions to establish the most impactful geography and work with Government to agree clear and accountable governance arrangements. For details on this correspondence and the engagement activities, please see *Appendix 1 and 1a.*

We believe our proposed new unitary structure, which sits within the core of a Berkshire and Oxfordshire devolution structure currently being discussed for the Thames Valley, will work effectively with neighbouring unitaries to deliver the Government's devolution agenda. We believe that a Thames Valley devolution structure made up of a core of Berkshire and Oxfordshire, of which 'Ridgeway Council' will be a part of, will be able to offer leadership on inclusivity and inequality, environmental recovery and climate change, skills and employment, the delivery of infrastructure and a long-term prevention agenda.

Map 3

Progress on developing our proposal

	Criteria set	Response
1	**Identify any barriers or challenges where further clarity or support would be helpful.**	All local authorities currently face significant challenges, including financial and health inequality, enormous pressure on housing affordability, public services, infrastructure and the nature environment, and the pace of climate change. We are committed, through this Initial Proposal and our developing Full Proposal, to look for better, smarter and more cost effective ways to deliver our services to local people in the future. By working together, we will identify in our Full Proposal where savings and efficiencies could be achieved, where current transformation programmes can be integrated to drive service improvements across the proposed geography, and we will outline our community engagement approach to ensure local needs are heard and actively shape the future of their public services. As we develop our Full Proposal, we would like to engage with officials on a regular basis as an active partner. As part of that process, areas where it would help to achieve greater clarity are: • Whether Government will indicate which proposals they are not minded to approve following a review of the Interim Proposals? • How will Government assess final proposals, particularly if there is more than one potential option which means the criteria for LGR within a geographical area? • How will the fair funding review expected in the summer account for those councils that are subject to LGR in the current timeframe? • In order to ensure the maximum benefits can be achieved through LGR, we would invite the government to consider legislating at the earliest opportunity to enable the extension of existing contracts and avoid the unnecessary duplication of contracts, and commitment of public funds. (In this regard, we note the powers of the Secretary of State under section 24 of the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007.)
2	**Identify the likely options for the size and**	As outlined in *Map 1* on *Page 4*, we are proposing that the current geographies of West Berkshire, South

	boundaries of new councils that will offer the best structures for delivery of high-quality and sustainable public services across the area, along with indicative efficiency saving opportunities.	Oxfordshire and the Vale of White Horse District Council, come together to form a new unitary area. Based on mid-July 2023 ONS sources outlined in *Table 1* on *Page 14*, the proposed new 'Ridgeway Council' would serve a population of 462,761. The remaining area of Oxfordshire would incorporate the existing geographies of West Oxfordshire, Cherwell and Oxford City, as outlined in *Map 2* on *Page 6*, creating an 'Oxfordshire Council' which would serve a population of 450,836. It is our view that these two unitary areas would be appropriately sized to drive forward sustainability, improvements and accountability, whilst also reflecting and being able to respond to local needs and local people. The new unitary areas would bring together services such as housing, education, social care and public health, which will enable effective prioritisation and joined-up delivery mechanisms. Being a greater footprint, the two new unitary areas will be able to procure services in a strategic manner, enabling efficiencies and improvements across all procurement activity through economies of scale. Bringing together existing workforces and systems, will ensure communities are supported by the most appropriate organisational structures to delivery both statutory services and the strategic ambition of 'Ridgeway Council'. A further area of opportunity will be the potential for councillor numbers to be reviewed along with any resultant savings that process may create. The new governance arrangements will also be likely to deliver efficiencies resulting from a reduction in the total number of special responsibility allowances paid to councillors. As part of the Full Proposal, the Councils will outline our view on the best structures for delivering high-quality and sustainable public services across the area, along with indicative efficiency saving opportunities.
3	Include indicative costs and arrangements in relation to any options including planning for	Detailed financial analysis has not been possible at this stage. However, high-level analysis of the 2025/26 revenue budgets and resulting council tax requirements of the existing authorities confirms the

future service transformation opportunities.	similarities between the councils and is in line with the requirements for new unitary councils as expressed by the government.

At this stage no analysis has been undertaken regarding the authorities' potential long term financial standing post-reorganisation. Funding for councils is subject to a fair funding review by Government, the impact of which will not be known until later this year. This may have a significant impact on the financial sustainability of all councils, before and after reorganisation.

Significant work will follow on from this Interim Proposal, including considering:

- The appropriate allocation of Oxfordshire County Council's current costs,
- The potential savings arising from LGR,
- The likely one-off costs associated with LGR,
- The financial stability of the two resultant 'Ridgeway' and 'Oxfordshire' unitary councils (subject to clarity being provided on the outcome of the fair funding review and likely funding for the new councils).

This will include further analysis of the following:

- Existing workforce at all councils to identify duplicate posts and other streamlining opportunities,
- Non-staffing addressable spend to identify efficiency opportunities,
- Assets, liabilities and reserves of the constituent councils,
- Capital programmes, including external funding and borrowing requirements.

At a time of increasing pressure on public sector budgets, identifying and obtaining savings and efficiencies from transformation work is vital to long term sustainability.

West Berkshire Council approved a transformation programme in 2023, which has since been extended. This has included a review of the Council's estate, Care Homes, Home to School Transport, Business Support and the Employee value Proposition. To date, this programme has delivered nearly £1m in cost avoidance, and a £1m in savings. The Council has |

| | | also been working with external consultants to review further opportunities through digital transformation, which is due to deliver at least an additional £1m over the coming year. The Council has also taken steps to control agency spend, which has resulted in reductions in this spend in the sum of circa £4m.

South Oxfordshire and the Vale of White House District Councils are also progressing an ambitious transformation programme, with workstreams across ICT infrastructure, customer services, provision of waste services, provision of leisure services, implementation of a corporate landlord model and asset management.

Work will continue as part of developing the Full Proposal, to identify how the existing programmes of transformation work and potential new areas can be identified and mapped to achieve a shared transformation vision and saving objectives.

Each existing authority is also undertaking arrangements to review their contract registers, to assess how to match termination / break clauses of ongoing contracts so that contractual arrangements can be brought into parallel. This will enable future contracting arrangements for the new proposed unitary area to be undertaken with the strongest possible negotiation position going forward, allowing the realisation of economies of scale. In parallel, the Councils will work together to ensure effective novation arrangements, and where available will take steps to combine contracts where the authorities use the same existing suppliers, which will support a smooth and quick transition in all areas possible. This process will be supported by the ability to extend significant high value contracts on a temporary basis whilst options for LGR are being developed. |
|---|---|---|
| 4 | **Include early views as to the councillor numbers that will ensure both effective democratic representation for all parts of the area, and also effective governance and decision-making arrangements which** | As outlined in *Map 5* and *Table 13* on *page 24* on existing Councillor numbers, the proposed 'Ridgeway Council' would service a population of 462,761. Councillors serving the three existing authorities including existing Oxfordshire County Councillors for the South and Vale authorities is currently 142. Based on benchmarking data of other unitarisation processes collated in *Table 15* on *Page 25* the likely range for councillors in a new Ridgeway authority would be between 80 and 90 councillors (being around 60% of the existing total). |

	will balance the unique needs of your cities, towns, rural and coastal areas, in line with the Local Government Boundary Commission for England guidance.	We will not be proposing a boundary review as part of the Full Proposal, however it is possible that the new council would consider whether it would be beneficial to undertake a boundary review of wards within the new district as part of the longer term transition plan for a new unitary authority.
5	Include early views on how new structures will support devolution ambitions.	As outlined on *Page* 7 above, and evidenced in *Map 3*, it is our view that the two proposed new unitary structures for Ridgeway and Oxfordshire, both sit within the generally agreed core of a Berkshire and Oxfordshire devolution structure currently being discussed for the Thames Valley. The Councils will continue to work constructively with neighbouring councils to propose a sensible Strategic Authority geography that delivers the Government's devolution agenda.
6	Include a summary of local engagement that has been undertaken and any views expressed, along with your further plans for wide local engagement to help shape your developing proposals	Please see a full engagement plan and a summary of engagement to date in *Appendix 1 and 1a.*
7	Set out indicative costs of preparing proposals and standing up an implementation team as well as any arrangements proposed to coordinate potential capacity funding across the area.	Currently officers from the Councils have worked collaboratively to submit this joint Interim Proposal. The Councils have together assessed approximately £300,000 of costs to support the development of a Full Proposal, including existing internal resource. As part of the Full Proposal, an in-depth analysis will be undertaken to identify possible costs to stand up an implementation team to support the transition and harmonisation to a new unitary authority.
8	Set out any voluntary arrangements that have been agreed to keep all councils involved in discussions as this work moves forward and to help balance the decisions needed now to maintain service delivery and ensure	The Councils' officers and members will continue to work together collaboratively to develop the Full Proposal for submission by no later than 28 November 2025. Both internal and partnership structures have been established, as outlined in the structure chart on *Page 27,* and meetings have commenced to facilitate joint working and also ensure continued service delivery during this proposal phase. Strong governance arrangements will be established to

value for money for council taxpayers, with those key decisions that will affect the future success of any new councils in the area.	support implementation of the transition and harmonisation phases as outlined in *Section Five*. All Berkshire and Oxfordshire authorities continue to engage in devolution discussions as indicated in *Appendix 1 and 1a*, and have committed to co-ordinated approaches to LGR and devolution considerations.

Section 2: Context

Outlined below is some key contextual data about the geographies of West Berkshire, South Oxfordshire and the Vale of White Horse, our proposed new 'Ridgeway Council' unitary area, and the proposed new unitary Council for the remaining area of Oxfordshire incorporating the existing geographies of West Oxfordshire, Cherwell and Oxford City.

Geography and Demographics

Table 1: Population – by age group

	Total Population	0-19	20-64	65+
South Oxfordshire	153,424	34,564 (22.5%)	86,578 (56.4%)	32,282 (21.0%)
Vale of White Horse	145,970	34,738 (23.8%)	82,110 (56.3%)	29,122 (20.0%)
West Berkshire	163,367	38,511 (23.6%)	91,999 (56.3%)	32,857 (20.1%)
South Oxfordshire, Vale of White Horse and West Berkshire	**462,761**	**107,813 (23.3%)**	**260,687 (56.3%)**	**94,261 (20.4%)**
Cherwell	166,321	38,876 (23.4%)	97,896 (58.9%)	29,549 (17.8%)
Oxford City	165,184	37,445 (22.7%)	107,920 (65.3%)	19,819 (12.0%)
West Oxfordshire	119,331	26,032 (21.8%)	67,004 (56.1%)	26,295 (22.0%)
Cherwell, Oxford City and West Oxfordshire	**450,836**	**102,353 (22.7%)**	**272,820 (60.5%)**	**75,663 (16.8%)**

Sources
ONS: Mid-Year Population Estimates, England and Wales, mid-2023 (July 2024)

Table 2: Population – Male and Female

	Total Population	Male	Female
South Oxfordshire	153,424	75,529 (49.2%)	77,895 (50.8%)
Vale of White Horse	145,970	72,530 (49.7%)	73,440 (50.3%)
West Berkshire	163,367	80,354 (49.2%)	83,013 (50.8%)
South Oxfordshire, Vale of White Horse and West Berkshire	**462,761**	**228,413 (49.4%)**	**234,348 (50.6%)**
Cherwell	166,321	82,308 (49.5%)	84,013 (50.5%)
Oxford City	165,184	81,313 (49.2%)	83,871 (50.8%)
West Oxfordshire	119,331	58,773 (49.3%)	60,558 (50.7%)
Cherwell, Oxford City and West Oxfordshire	**450,836**	**222,394 (49.3%)**	**228,442 (50.7%)**

Sources
ONS: Mid-Year Population Estimates, England and Wales, mid-2023 (July 2024)

Table 3: Major Towns and Urban Areas

	Major Towns and Urban Areas
South Oxfordshire	Didcot
	Henley-on-Thames
	Thame
	Wallingford

Vale of White Horse	Abingdon-on-Thames
	Faringdon
	Grove
	Wantage
West Berkshire	Hungerford
	Newbury
	Thatcham
	Theale
	Tilehurst and Purley
Oxfordshire (Oxford, West Oxfordshire, Cherwell)	Oxford City
	Witney
	Carterton
	Chipping Norton
	Woodstock
	Banbury
	Bicester
	Kidlington (large village)

Table 4: Gross Value Added (GVA) - 2022

	Gross value added (balanced) at current basic prices, pounds million
South Oxfordshire	5,030
Vale of White Horse	5,751
West Berkshire	9,196
South Oxfordshire, Vale of White Horse and West Berkshire	**19,977**
Cherwell	5,680
Oxford City	8,400
West Oxfordshire	3,356
Cherwell, Oxford City and West Oxfordshire	**17,436**

Sources
ONS: Regional gross domestic product: local authorities (April 2024)

Table 5: Gross Domestic Product (GDP) - 2022

	Gross domestic product (GDP) at current market prices, pounds million
South Oxfordshire	5,587
Vale of White Horse	6,348
West Berkshire	9,948
South Oxfordshire, Vale of White Horse and West Berkshire	**21,883**
Cherwell	6,356
Oxford City	9,009
West Oxfordshire	3,772
Cherwell, Oxford City and West Oxfordshire	**19,137**

Sources
ONS: Regional gross domestic product: local authorities (April 2024)

Identity

Historic connections

For around a thousand years, Berkshire's northern boundary was defined by the River Thames, which flows through the heart of both the Vale of White Horse and South Oxfordshire, taking the historic county as far north as the edges of the city of Oxford.

Abingdon-on-Thames was regarded as the county town of Berkshire from the sixteenth to the nineteenth century. It wasn't just Abingdon – market towns and the rural communities they serve across South Oxfordshire and the Vale of White Horse were removed from Berkshire and added to Oxfordshire when the lines of local government were redrawn in the '70s.

This wasn't an entirely popular decision. On 1 April 1974 – the day the reorganisation came into effect – members of the local community staged a protest on the site of the White Horse at Uffington to signal their opposition to the change in the boundaries.

Campaigners organised a petition that received over 10,000 signatures requesting that the Queen restored the boundaries of the county of Berkshire. There was an article in the Times entitled *Whose White Horse*?

In 1981, Berkshire County Council proposed changing the county boundary to run along the Ridgeway – thereby, returning the White Horse to what many believed was its natural and rightful home of Berkshire.

To this day there are those who still campaign for a reversal of the boundary changes in the 70s including many who continue to add Berkshire to their postal address instead of Oxfordshire as set out in this BBC News article from 2024: Berkshire and Oxfordshire boundary debate still rages 50 years on.
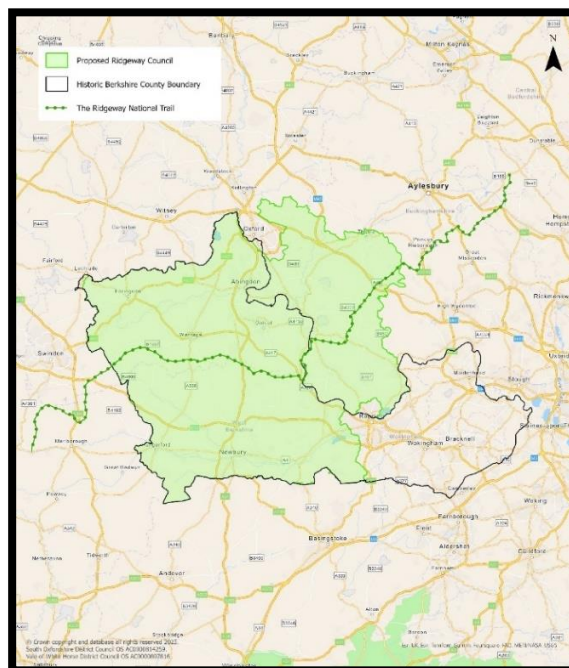
Map 4

Key economic sectors

- **Atomic Weapons Establishment (AWE) Sites** - nuclear security technology and innovation
- **Business Parks: Arlington Business Park**, Theale – 81 active occupiers, 83,000 sq. ft. Greenham Business Park – 180 active occupiers, 150-acre site. Newbury Business Park - 18 Active occupiers, 28,000 sq. Ft.
- **Colthrop Industrial Estate** – large logistics and distribution park, home to a range of warehousing and light industrial and office units.
- **Racehorse industry Lambourn/Newbury** - known as the 'Valley of the Racehorse', Lambourn has over 30 training establishments for training purposes. Newbury Racecourse holds race days and is an events venue
- **Thatcham Research Automotive Risk Intelligence** – a not-for-profit automotive risk intelligence organisation, focused on safety, security and sustainable repair.
- **Vodafone Newbury** - Mobile and fixed networks, 5G network, Artificial Intelligence, Internet of Things (IoT), Quantum computing, Satellite, digital tv platform, mobile and broadband services, Fintech and mobile payments and M-PESA fin-tech platform.
- **Culham Science Park** - Fusion Energy, Robotics & Autonomous Systems
- **Milton Park** - Life Sciences, Creative Industries; Deep Tech
- **Harwell Campus** - Health Sciences (med tech, life sciences, digital health), Energy, Quantum, Europe's largest space cluster, critical UK strategic assets include Diamond Light Synchrotron, Medical Research Council, Public Health England, the Rosalind Franklin Institute, Faraday Institution and National Quantum Computing Centre
- **HR Wallingford/UK Centre for Hydrology and Ecology/Howbery Park; Grove Business Park; Abingdon Science Park**

Table 6: Total Jobs by Industry

Industry	South and Vale Total Jobs	South and Vale Rate	West Berkshire Total Jobs	West Berkshire Rate	Proposed Ridgeway Total Jobs	Proposed Ridgeway Rate	Cherwell, Oxford and West Oxon Jobs	Cherwell, Oxford and West Oxon Rate
A: Agriculture, Forestry and Fishing	718	0.5%	500	0.5%	1,218	0.5%	1638	0.6%
B: Mining and Quarrying	101	0.1%	1,000	1.0%	1,101	0.4%	199	0.1%
C: Manufacturing	8,849	6.2%	13,000	12.6%	21,849	8.9%	19,098	7.2%
D: Electricity, Gas, Steam and Air Conditioning Supply	216	0.2%	5,000	4.8%	5,216	2.1%	276	0.1%
E: Water Supply; Sewerage, Waste Management and Remediation A	2,452	1.7%	2,000	1.9%	4,452	1.8%	1325	0.5%
F: Construction	7,268	5.1%	5,000	4.8%	12,268	5.0%	8,537	3.2%
G: Wholesale and Retail Trade;	16,891	11.8%	7,000	6.8%	23,891	9.7%	33,835	12.7%

Repair of Motor Vehicles and Mot								
H: Transportation and Storage	5,497	3.8%	4,000	3.9%	9,497	3.9%	8,540	3.2%
I: Accommodation and Food Service Activities	10,256	7.2%	7,000	6.8%	17,256	7.0%	18,187	6.8%
J: Information and Communication	10,040	7.0%	13,000	12.6%	23,040	9.3%	14,900	5.6%
K: Financial and Insurance Activities	2,279	1.6%	1,000	1.0%	3,279	1.3%	2,660	1.0%
L: Real Estate Activities	2,404	1.7%	1,750	1.7%	4,154	1.7%	4,657	1.8%
M: Professional, Scientific and Technical Activities	30,932	21.6%	7,000	6.8%	37,932	15.4%	26,318	9.9%
N: Administrative and Support Service Activities	10,669	7.5%	7,000	6.8%	17,669	7.2%	19,143	7.2%
O: Public Administration and Defence; Compulsory Social Sec.	3,317	2.3%	3,000	2.9%	6,317	2.6%	8,229	3.1%
P: Education	13,395	9.4%	8,000	7.7%	21,395	8.7%	49,964	18.8%
Q: Human Health and Social Work Activities	11,219	7.8%	12,000	11.6%	23,219	9.4%	36,223	13.6%
R: Arts, Entertainment and Recreation	4,395	3.1%	6,000	5.8%	10,395	4.2%	7,420	2.8%
S: Other Service Activities	2,299	1.6%	-	-	2,299	0.9%	4,903	1.8%

Sources
Oxfordshire Local Skills Dashboard, Lightcast.io 2024

Public Services

<u>Financial context</u>

Table 7: 2025/26 net revenue budget requirement and council tax requirement for existing councils

	Oxfordshire County Council £000	South Oxfordshire District Council £000	Vale of White Horse District Council £000	Oxford City Council £000	Cherwell District Council £000	West Oxfordshire District Council £000	West Berkshire Council £000
Net revenue budget requirement	646,257	18,202	20,418	30,278	26,194	18,611	187,024
Council tax requirement	533,329	9,625	9,564	16,993	9,487	6,306	131,638

Table 8: Band D council tax 2025/26 (excluding parish precepts and special expenses)

	West Berkshire Council £	South Oxfordshire District Council £	Vale of White Horse District Council £	Oxford City Council £	Cherwell District Council £	West Oxfordshire District Council £
Oxfordshire						
Upper tier		1,911.40	1,911.40	1,911.40	1,911.40	1,911.40
Lower tier		151.24	161.69	356.72	158.50	129.38
Berkshire						
Unitary	1,921.41					
Fire authority	86.31					
Total	**2,007.72**	**2,062.64**	**2,073.09**	**2,268.12**	**2,069.90**	**2,040.78**

Housing Growth

The existing West Berkshire Local Plan sets out planning policies up to 2026. The Local Plan Review (LPR) is currently in preparation to cover the period up to 2041.

The LPR is currently at Examination. Hearing sessions took place in 2024 and West Berkshire Council has recently consulted on Proposed Main Modifications. The Planning Inspector is now considering all of the representations received and the Council's responses to them before he finalises and issues his Final Report.

The LPR identifies the development that is required to meet local needs over the Plan period. It sets out the strategy for distributing development within the district and the policies for protecting, conserving and enhancing the natural, built and historic environment. It plans to deliver at least 9,270 new homes over the plan period and includes two strategic site allocations:
- Sandleford Park, Newbury: 1,500 dwellings.
- North East Thatcham: up to approximately 2,500 dwellings.

Source: WBC Local Plan Review

South Oxfordshire and the Vale of White Horse District Councils are working together on a Joint Local Plan, which is currently at examination stage. This contains proposals to meet the housing requirement of 16,530 in South Oxfordshire and 14,490 in Vale in full, with a planned supply for around of 20,500 for South Oxfordshire and 19,600 homes for Vale.
Some of the major strategic sites are:
- In South, Grenoble Road site (edge of Oxford) – 3,000 homes, plus 10 ha of employment land. Berinsfield Garden Village – 1,700 homes. Redevelopment and intensification of Culham Science Centre– unlocking key planned infrastructure and adjacent 3,500 planned houses.
- In Vale, Dalton Barracks Garden Village (2,750 homes phase on Barracks Garden Village (2,750 homes phase one)
- New opportunities in Didcot Garden Town to explore at Didcot Gateway regeneration and Didcot Parkway Station – working with Great Western Railway

Public Service alignment

The geography for the proposed 'Ridgeway Council' meshes well with existing public sector organisational footprints.

The Buckinghamshire, Oxfordshire and Berkshire West Integrated Care Board, responsible for planning health services for the local population, includes the areas covered by South Oxfordshire, Vale of White Horse and West Berkshire. There is one director of public health that covers Reading Borough Council and West Berkshire Council. West Berkshire also has a Health and Wellbeing Board.

West Berkshire, South Oxfordshire and the vast majority of the Vale of White Horse (as well as Buckinghamshire and most of Hampshire) fall within the remit of the South Central Ambulance Service (SCAS) for 999 and 111 services. The only exceptions are the areas around Watchfield and Shrivenham which are covered by the South Western Ambulance Service (SWAS).

Similarly, the three constituent local authorities contained within the proposed 'Ridgeway Council' are currently served by Thames Valley Police, which covers over 2200 square miles and the three counties of Buckinghamshire, Berkshire and Oxfordshire.

In addition, while there are separate fire services for Berkshire and Oxfordshire, they share – alongside Buckinghamshire & Milton Keynes – a single joint emergency call handling, mobilising and resource management function based at Calcot, Reading (Thames Valley Fire Control Service).

Partnership arrangements
Berkshire Prosperity Board (BPB) - due to the reduction in government support for the Thames Valley Local Enterprise Partnership, six Berkshire councils have committed to working together to drive and deliver economic prosperity across the county with the aim of securing more funding, creating more jobs and enabling more affordable housing for residents. The BPB aims to:
- Inward investment and promotion of Berkshire as a business location
- Strategic business relationship management
- Strategic skills and employability programme delivery
- Cluster/sector development
- LVEP
- Strategic infrastructure
- Transformational projects.

Local Enterprise Partnership granted funding to support delivery of the Newbury Wharf project – Part of the Newbury Town Centre Masterplan (375k 2024-2025) and the delivery of the London Road Industrial Project, which changed its name to the Bond Riverside project at the back end of 2022 with same amount and spending timeline. However, we are in talks of extending access to unspent LEP funds supporting the Wharf Project past the current deadline of the end of March 2025 and for another year. However, LEP has now been abolished, and from 1 April 2024, their core functions have been transferred to Local Authorities - in our case, Wokingham Council as the Accountable Body that holds LEP funds.

Berkshire Local Visitor Economy Partnership - Following the application led by the economy team for West Berkshire to be part of the Berkshire Local Visitor Economy Partnership, West Berkshire has been granted official LVEP status by Visit England. We've developed a framework in which the Berkshire Local authorities, Visit Windsor, Newbury BID and other stakeholders will work to form a strategy and work steams

The Berkshire Economic Strategy 2025-2035 - commissioned by the six Unitary Authorities- outlines a roadmap to drive exceptional productivity and employment growth over the next decade. The strategy focuses on maximizing Berkshire's contribution to the UK economy by identifying projects for investment and defining collaborative actions to achieve a vision for the region's future. It aims to ensure that Berkshire thrives in the face of future challenges by providing a compelling case for investment in five identified transformational projects and to define the set of collaborative actions that will deliver an ambitious vision for Berkshire.
South Oxfordshire and the Vale of White Horse work with counterparts across Oxfordshire and Oxfordshire's Local Enterprise Partnership (OxLEP) through the Joint Oxfordshire Business Support (JOBS) group to coordinate business growth programmes.

A formal partnership arrangement exists between OxLEP, Oxfordshire County Council, South Oxfordshire and the Vale of White Horse to support the retention and distribution of business rates growth income from designated Enterprise Zone sites in South and Vale. The partnership works effectively to support economic growth opportunities within the Enterprise Zones.

A Local Partnership Group (governed by terms of reference) is currently in place to support and guide the councils' delivery of the UK Shared Prosperity & Rural England Prosperity Funds (UKSPF & REPF), these funds are designed to help support the government's missions, particularly for ambitious economic growth. Economic interventions funded by UKSPF, including business growth, skills and employment initiatives, have been delivered with a range of local partners, including OxLEP, the Low Carbon Hub, Oxford Brookes, and OSEP and are set to continue into 2025/26.

South Oxfordshire and the Vale of White Horse contribute to several additional local economic development initiatives, including as a steering board member of the Oxfordshire Inclusive Economy Partnership (OIEP), and have previously worked in partnership on initiatives such as Local Skills Improvement Plans (LSIPs) with Thames Valley Chamber of Commerce.

Social Care
Table 9: Social Care Categories

Social Care Categories	South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse	Social Care West Berkshire	Proposed Ridgeway Total	West Oxfordshire, Cherwell and City
Children				
Front door	6,249	12,317	18,566	10,130

Children in need	375	558	933	619
Child Protection	206	192	398	275
Children We Care For (1)	206	179	385	498
Care leavers (2)	101	233	334	249
Achieving permanence	20	31	51	33
Vulnerable adolescents	717	529	1,246	1555
Adults				
Adults	2,298	1,881	4,179	3,727

1. Excludes 85 Oxfordshire Unaccompanied Children and Young People (i.e. refugee minors) as it is not possible to disaggregate these by district
2. Excludes 171 Oxfordshire Unaccompanied Children and Young People (i.e. refugee minors) as it is not possible to disaggregate these by district

Education

The strategic lead for schools, education and young people in South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse is Oxfordshire County Council. In West Berkshire, this responsibility lies with West Berkshire Council.

Table 10: School and Pupil Numbers

	Schools	Pupils	Schools	Pupils	Schools	Pupils	Schools	Pupils
Special								
Academies	3	305	-	-	3	305	7	714
Free	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	35
Community	1	112	2	421	3	533	1	119
Voluntary Aided	1	-	-	-	1	-	-	-
Voluntary Controlled	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Foundation	1	89	-	-	1	89	-	-
Non-Maintained	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
PRU/APC								
Academies	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	15
Free	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Community	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Voluntary Aided	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Voluntary Controlled	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Non-Maintained	-	-	1	111	1	111	-	-
Nursery								
Academies	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Free	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Community	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Voluntary Aided	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Voluntary Controlled	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Maintained	2	123	2	243	4	366	5	324
Non-Maintained	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Primary								
Academies	51	12,532	6	1,173	57	14,265	73	16,742
Free	2	260	-	-	2	260	5	820

	South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse		West Berkshire		Proposed Ridgeway Total		West Oxfordshire, Cherwell and City	
Community	21	4,959	-	-	21	4,959	23	7,597
Voluntary Aided	13	1,459	15	2,229	28	3,688	15	3,774
Voluntary Controlled	20	3,543	15	2,172	35	5,715	19	3,808
Non-Maintained	-		31	6,763	31	6,763	-	-
Secondary								
Academies	17	18,269	7	8,471	24	20,116	19	21,988
Free	-	-	-	-	-	-	2	1,329
Community	-	-	2	2,913	2	2,913	1	685
Voluntary Aided	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Voluntary Controlled	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Non-Maintained	-	-	1	1,437	1	1,437	-	-
All Through								
Academies	2	1,159	-	-	2	1,159	1	595
Free	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Community	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Voluntary Aided	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Voluntary Controlled	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Non-Maintained	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-

Staffing

Table 11: Staff Numbers

Staffing	South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse	West Berkshire	Proposed Ridgeway Total	West Oxfordshire, Cherwell and City
School	7,600	4,861	12,461	10,832
Social Care - Children (1)	883	195	1,869	883
Social Care – Adult (2)	849	411	1,027	849
Other	3,773 (consists of 785 in Children's, 149 in Adult's, and 2839 in the rest of the OCC services)	952	1,560.5	3,773 (consists of 785 in Children's, 149 in Adult's, and 2839 in the rest of the OCC services)

(1 and 2) Total Oxfordshire social care numbers as not possible to disaggregate by district.

Councillors

Table 12: Councillors in Oxfordshire and West Berkshire

	Popn	No. of Cllrs (Unitary or District)	Popn per Cllr	No. of County Cllrs	Total No.of Cllrs	Popn per Cllr	Town Councils and Parish Councils/ Meetings
South Oxfordshire	153,424	36	4,262	13	49	3,131	85
Vale of White Horse	145,970	38	3,841	12	50	2,919	69
West Berkshire	163,367	43	3,799	n/a	43	3,799	62

Cherwell	166,321	48	3,465	14	62	2,683	79
Oxford	165,184	48	3,441	14	62	2,664	4
West Oxfordshire	119,331	49	2,435	10	59	2,023	81
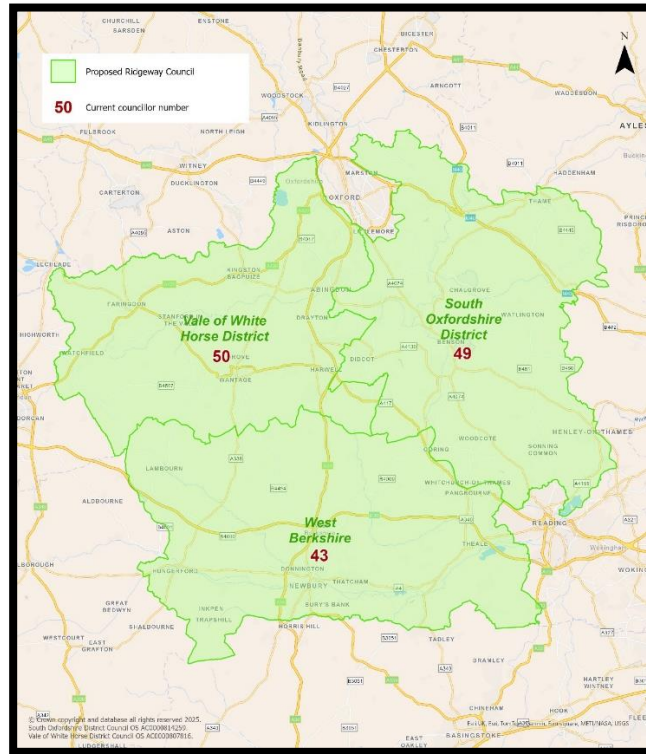
Map 5

Table 13: Cllrs in South, Vale & West Berkshire and Cherwell, Oxford & West Oxfordshire

	Population	Number of Cllrs	Population per Cllr
South Oxfordshire, Vale of White Horse and West Berkshire	462,761	117 (current number of councillors across the three authorities)	3,955
South Oxfordshire, Vale of White Horse and West Berkshire	**462,761**	**142 (current number of councillors across the three authorities and the 25 OCC councillors for South and Vale)**	**3,259**
Cherwell, Oxford and West Oxfordshire	450,836	145 (current number of councillors across the three authorities)	3,109
Cherwell, Oxford and West Oxfordshire	**450,836**	**183 (current number of councillors across the three authorities and the 38 OCC councillors for Cherwell, Oxford and West Oxfordshire)**	**2,464**

Table 14: Proposed councillor numbers in proposed unitary geography of South, Vale & West Berkshire

	Population	Proposed No. of Cllrs	Population per Cllr
South Oxfordshire, Vale of White Horse and West Berkshire	**462,761**	**80 - 90**	**5785 - 5142**

Table 15: Benchmarking Data - Unitary Authorities in England with a Population of 300,000+ (Mid-2023)

Unitary	Population	Number of Cllrs	Population per Cllr	Town Councils and Parish Councils/Meetings
North Yorkshire	627,629	90	6,974	570 (Town councils are in the process of being established for Harrogate and Scarborough)
Somerset	581,145	110	5,283	312
Cornwall	578,324	87	6,647	210
Buckinghamshire	566,694	147 (new ward boundaries for the 2025 local elections will reduce the number of councillors to 97)	3,855 (current boundaries) 5,842 (new boundaries)	171
County Durham	532,182	126 (new ward boundaries for the 2025 local elections will reduce the number of councillors to 98)	4,224 (current boundaries) 5,430 (new boundaries)	126
Wiltshire	517,979	98	5,286	252
Bristol, City of	482,998	70	6,900	n/a
West Northamptonshire	434,349	93 (new ward boundaries for the 2025 local elections will reduce the number of councillors to 76)	4,670 (current boundaries) 5,715 (new boundaries)	165
Cheshire East	412,458	82	5,030	106
Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole	404,050	76	5,316	5 (There are proposals to create four additional parish councils for

				other areas and town councils for both Poole and Bournemouth)
Dorset	384,809	82	4,693	295
Leicester	379,780	54 (and 1 directly elected mayor)	7,033	n/a
North Northamptonshire	367,991	78 (new ward boundaries for the 2025 local elections will reduce the number of councillors to 67)	4,718 (current boundaries) 5,492 (new boundaries)	106
Cheshire West and Chester	365,061	70	5,215	96
East Riding of Yorkshire	350,119	67	5,226	168
Nottingham	329,276	55	5,987	n/a
Shropshire	329,260	74	4,449	154
Northumberland	327,055	67 (new ward boundaries for the 2025 local elections will increase the number of councillors to 69)	4,881 (current boundaries) 4,740 (new boundaries)	148
Central Bedfordshire	308,302	63	4,894	79

Sources
ONS: Mid-Year Population Estimates, England and Wales, mid-2023
The Local Government Boundary Commission for England: Electoral Data - 2024
Northumberland County Council – Your Councillors[1]
North Yorkshire Council – Parish Council Contact Details
Somerset Council – Parish Council Contact Details
Cornwall Council – Names of Town and Parish Councils
Buckinghamshire Council – Parish Council Contact Details
Durham County Council – Parish & Town Councils
Wiltshire Council – Town and Parish Council Details
West Northamptonshire Council – Parish Council Contact Details
Cheshire East Council – Parish Council Contact Details
BCP Council – Parish Council Contact Details
Dorset Council – Parish and Town Council A to Z
North Northamptonshire Council – Parish Council Contact Details
Cheshire West and Chester Council – Contact Details for Town and Parish Councils
East Riding of Yorkshire Council – Parish and Town Councils
Northumberland County Council – Parish Councils
Central Bedfordshire Council – Town and Parish Councils in Central Bedfordshire

[1] The information on the number of Northumberland County Council Councillors contained in the Local Government Boundary Commission for England: Electoral Data 2024 spreadsheet is erroneous. The figure was, therefore, taken from Northumberland's website.

Section 3: Planned Approach For Full Proposal

Governance and Collaboration

The Councils' officers and members will continue to work together collaboratively to develop the Full Proposal for submission by no later than 28 November 2025. Both internal and partnership structures have been created to facilitate joint working as outlined in the structure chart below:
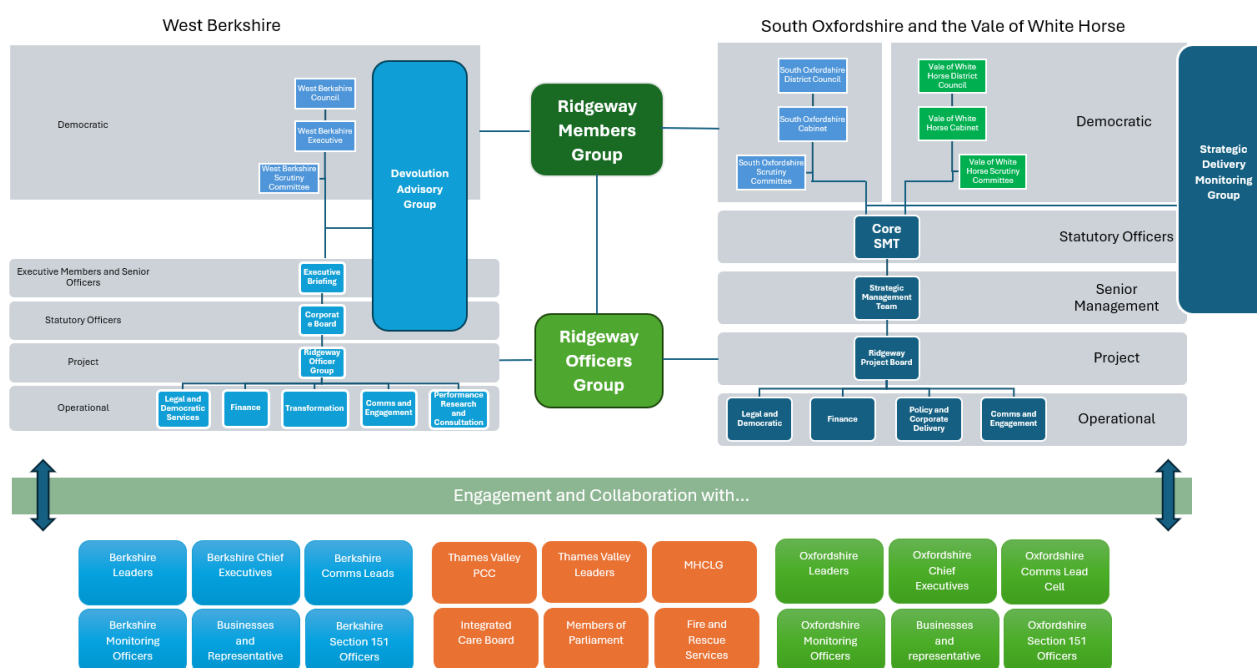
See *Appendix 2* for terms of reference for the key groups set out in this diagram.

Areas of Focus

Building on the work to date, the Councils will explore, analyse and develop a model for change, to create a new unitary area that will work hard for local people and for the local area to deliver sustainable growth, long term financial stability, strong governance, efficiencies, and modern, simple and transformed services. We will develop a model for a new council that can respond swiftly and resiliently to changing demands and local and national challenges. We will develop a structure, and a culture and will work effectively with partners, residents and businesses at the heart of the community we wish to serve.

Community Engagement Approach

Officers representing all three councils are working in partnership on a detailed communications and engagement plan to inform the proposals for a new 'Ridgeway Council', which will be submitted in November 2025.

Work began on the communications and engagement plan in February 2025 and will continue over the coming weeks and months. Attached as *Appendix 1* is the initial plan which sets out the communication and engagement undertaken so far and the strategy

for engaging and consulting all council stakeholders to support the development of the proposal in the coming months.

The engagement process will involve all stakeholders, including residents, businesses, schools and the education sector, council staff and members, town and parish councils, public and private sector partners and community organisations, in shaping the proposal for Ridgeway Council. It will ensure the proposal reflects local needs and that stakeholders understand the reorganisation's implications and have timely opportunities to provide informed feedback.

Section 4: Transition Approach

This proposal would create a new 'Ridgeway' council, and a rigorous and disciplined programme of change management and transformation will be required to deliver the full benefits of local government reorganisation as quickly as possible,

Emphasis will need to be placed on:
- Establishing strong and accountable governance and risk management at the earliest opportunity.
- Valuing the legacy of the existing authorities and levelling up to the best in each area.
- Maintaining continuity of service delivery and confidence in service delivery.
- Valuing the role of staff and elected members from the existing authorities.
- Maintaining and enhancing relationships with partners.
- Delivering integration savings.

A full detailed transition plan will be submitted as part of the full proposal and ultimately will be a decision for the Secretary of Stage drawing on relevant legislation and experience of other local government reorganisation. However, the following key phases are envisioned:

Phase 0 – Shadow council governance is established to be accountable for the formation of the new council, including establishing the initial organisation structure and setting the first budget. Elections to the new council are carried out and key officer appointments are made for the new authority as soon as practicable. A dedicated transition team is put in place to identify and manage integration activity required.

Phase 1 – Ensure smooth transition from interim governance arrangements to a functional council, whilst maintaining service delivery and strong operational and performance management and budget monitoring and management.

Phase 2.1 – Commence transformation and harmonisation programme to deliver the full benefits of local government reorganisation and to delivery additional efficiencies and improve outcomes over a longer sustainable period.

Phase 2.2 – A full formal boundary review undertaken by the Boundary Commission.

Strong programme management will be required to implement transition effectively and the programme will need to establish appropriate arrangements for risk management, business continuity through change, benefits delivery, programme governance and due diligence. Major workstreams, including the programme governance arrangements, for the transition programme will be considered as part of the Full Proposal.

Section 5: Supporting Information

APPENDICES		
SECTION THREE: Approach for Full Proposal		
1	Engagement for Ridgeway Council proposal	Pages 31 – 35
1a	Detailed summary of communications and engagement forums and activities to date	Pages 36 – 40
2	Terms of Reference for key groups:	
2a	West Berkshire, South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse LGR Member Group *(Draft – Subject to Approval)*	Pages 41 – 42
2b	West Berkshire, South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse LGR Officer Group *(Draft – Subject to Approval)*	Pages 43- 44
2c	West Berkshire Devolution Advisory Group	Pages 45 – 46
2d	South and Vale Strategic Delivery Monitoring Group	Pages 47 – 48
2e	South and Vale Ridgeway Officer Project Board	Pages 49 - 50

Engagement for Ridgeway Council proposal

March 2025

Officers representing all three councils are working in partnership on a detailed communications and engagement plan to inform the proposals for a new 'Ridgeway Council', which will be submitted by no later than the 28 November 2025.

Work began on the communications and engagement plan in February 2025 and will continue over the coming weeks and months. This overview sets out the communication and engagement undertaken so far and the strategy for engaging and consulting all council stakeholders to support the development of the proposal in the coming months. As discussions progress, further work will be undertaken to develop and implement the proposals set out over the following pages.

Engagement to date

Appendix 1a includes a more detailed catalogue summary of engagement processes and activities outlined in this section.

Partnership working groups

The following groups meet regularly to engage directly on matters relating to Devolution, potential Strategic Authority geographies, and Local Government Reorganisation. Some of these are pre-existing forums that have pivoted to working on these topics, some of them have been set up specifically or primarily for this.

Elected officials

- Berkshire Leaders – monthly meeting
- Oxfordshire Leaders working group – monthly meeting
- Thames Valley Leaders and Chief Executives – fortnightly
  All council Leaders in the Oxfordshire and Berkshire areas meet face-to-face along with senior offices to discuss the approach to agreeing a Strategic Authority geography in the Thames Valley region:
    - Friday 31 January – Oxford Town Hall
    - Monday 24 March – University of Reading

Officers

In *section 3* on *page 26* there is a detailed organogram setting out the governance arrangements within each council and to describe how the councils are working together formally to develop the Ridgeway Council proposal. The following forums provide engagement outlets and opportunities within the three councils, and with partner and neighbouring authorities.

- Chief Executives
    - o Oxfordshire Chief Executives – weekly meeting
    - o Berkshire Chief Executives – weekly meeting

- Oxfordshire Treasurers Association – S151 Officers meeting monthly
- Berkshire s151 Officer Meeting - fortnightly
- Oxfordshire Monitoring Officers Meeting – quarterly
- Monitoring Officer and S151 Officer meetings for LGR – monthly
- Berkshire Monitoring Officer Group - monthly
- Communications and engagement
  - West Berks, South and Vale – weekly working group
  - Oxfordshire-wide Communications Cell – weekly meeting to co-ordinate communications and engagement activities across the county
  - Co-ordination between Berkshire Communications leads

Activities

See *Appendix 1a* for a catalogue summary of all engagement activities so far.

Direct communication and engagement activity has been carried to date with a wide variety of stakeholders including the following:

- MPs
- MHCLG
- Neighbouring authorities
- Council Members
- Staff
- Unison (recognised Trade Union at all three councils)
- The public
- The press
- Police and Crime Commissioner
- Town and Parish councils

Future Engagement Strategy

Introduction

This engagement strategy outlines the approach to involving all stakeholders, including residents, businesses, town and parish councils, and community organisations in shaping the proposal for the creation of **Ridgeway Council**, a new unitary authority encompassing **West Berkshire**, **South Oxfordshire** and **the Vale of White Horse.**

All engagement activities will adhere to the following documents:

- The South and Vale Communications and Engagement Strategy
- The West Berkshire Communications and Engagement Strategy
- The West Berkshire Consultation Policy

Objectives

The engagement process will ensure that:

- the proposal is informed by **local voices** and **community needs** across all relevant stakeholders, including local representatives, residents, businesses, service providers and council staff; and

- stakeholders understand the **implications and benefits** of the reorganisation and have **sufficient and timely opportunities** to provide **informed feedback** that will help shape the final proposals.

It will do this by:

1. **Informing** stakeholders about the proposed changes, including the geographical scope and what this would mean for their public services.
2. **Engaging** a broad range of voices and giving enough time to ensure inclusive representation of opinions at a formative stage to ensure stakeholders have a meaningful opportunity to influence the proposal.
3. **Gathering feedback and properly considering views** to refine the proposal based on community and stakeholder input.
4. **Demonstrating transparency** by sharing findings and outlining how concerns are addressed.

Stakeholder identification and engagement methods

Detailed stakeholder maps will be drawn up as part of Phase 1 of the engagement (see Timeline section). The key stakeholders for this engagement process and the key methods of engagement are:

Stakeholder	Potential engagement methods
Political representatives (MPs, councillors, and regional government bodies).	Direct communication, meetings, briefings, workshops, surveys.
The public (across towns, rural areas, and diverse demographics).	Digital and social media surveys and polls, Live online Q&As, Drop-in exhibition events in key locations spread by relevant and appropriate demographics and geography, "Café-chat" drop-in sessions to reach alternative audiences, Pop-up information stalls in high-footfall areas (markets, town centres, local shops, community centres), Email newsletters, Consultation databases, Online portal/web presence.
Local business (small enterprises, large employers, and business groups and representatives).	"Business breakfast" networking events, targeted surveys using business mailing lists, roundtable discussions with local business leaders and industry representatives, direct engagement with Chamber of Commerce representatives.
Schools and the education sector	School forum meetings, workshops with higher and further education providers, engagement directly with schools and pupils.
Parish and town councils (to ensure community-level local representation).	Parish council forums, briefings, workshops and roundtable events.
Public sector bodies (The Integrated Care Board, Police and Crime Commissioner, Fire services, education institutions).	Direct communication and engagement, collaboration, meetings and roundtables/workshops.

Community organisations and voluntary sector (charities, faith groups, and advocacy organisations).	Engagement sessions and workshops including community organisations on equalities databases to ensure a wide representative sample of voices heard.
Council workforces, trade unions and contractors (to understand implications to service delivery, and to hear ideas and employment concerns).	Internal staff briefings and Q&A sessions, staff surveys, workshops and roundtables with key managers and with union representatives, direct engagement with contractor representatives.

Topics for Engagement

Stakeholders will be consulted on key aspects that are relevant to their experience, knowledge and expertise and sphere of influence. Broad topics will include:

1. **Geography** – How the proposed geography would affect them and their understanding and use of local services.
2. **Service delivery impact** – How they believe the proposals would change or improve public services.
3. **Democratic representation** – How will the new structure allow local voices to be heard?
4. **Economic and financial impact** – How will the proposals support economic growth, and how they will affect businesses and council financial resilience?
5. **Community identity and cohesion** – How will this new structure reflect local identities?
6. **Ideas and concerns** – What are the biggest challenges or what changes could be made that would settle any concerns? What ideas do they have that could inform and strengthen the proposed delivery model?

Timeline

	Activity	Timeline
Engagement Phase 1	Pre-engagement planning and stakeholder mapping	February – April
Engagement Phase 2	Initial engagement and feedback collection	May – July
Engagement Phase 3	Draft proposal refinement and targeted engagement	August – September
Engagement Phase 4	Final round of public consultation on submission draft	October
Engagement Phase 5	Submission of proposal	by 28 November

Reporting and Transparency

Ahead of the submission date in November, we will summarise all engagement findings into a comprehensive **Community Engagement Report**, highlighting:

- **Key themes** raised during the various engagement activities.
- **Revisions made** to the proposal based on those views.
- **Next steps and ongoing engagement** post-submission to set out steps for community involvement to implement the new council should the proposal be successful.

Conclusion and next steps

The councils are committed to ensuring the Ridgeway Council proposal is **robust, inclusive, and evidence-based**, meeting both government requirements and the expectations of local communities.

Communications and Engagement Officers are currently working on a detailed Engagement Plan that will identify the specific stakeholders and engagement methods, timelines, and feedback to be gathered. It will be important to ensure engagement activities are aligned appropriately with any similar processes taking place to ensure stakeholders fully understand the proposals and what is being asked of them, and to ensure they're able to engage positively and enthusiastically, whatever their views.

Press statements and public communication

West Berkshire Council

Date	Message
Ongoing	A dedicated webpage was created to provide current information on Local Government Reorganisation in West Berkshire - providing somewhere residents could return to for the latest information and ensuring good placement in Google search rankings for residents looking for information.
13 February	PUBLIC STATEMENT **Report on Devolution and Local Government Reorganisation considered at public meeting of the Executive.** The report provided an update on the Government's intentions for local government devolution and reorganisation and the Leader's intention to enter conversations about both of these matters with neighbouring local authorities on behalf of the Council.
25 Feb	PRESS STATEMENT **West Berkshire considers options for a new unitary authority** Members and officers at West Berkshire Council are currently in discussions with South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse District Councils, and the other five Berkshire unitary authorities, to look at different options to deliver local government reorganisation. These discussions have included the possibility of a new unitary council combining West Berkshire, South Oxfordshire and the Vale of White Horse, and exploring options for unitary councils within the county of Berkshire.
26 Feb	PUBLIC NEWSLETTER Announcement on press statement the lead article in in West Berkshire Council's weekly e-bulletin to 20,000+ residents.
Ongoing	MEDIA ENQUIRIES Enquiries received and statements issued to Municipal Journal, Local Government Chronicle, Penny Post, That's TV (Thames Valley).

South Oxfordshire District Council

Date	Message
15 Dec	PUBLIC STATEMENT **Leader's Report to Council – 12 December 2024** First reference to government White Paper and impact on the district. Reference to Swindon as unsuitable for the strategic authority.
10 Jan	PRESS STATEMENT **Councils should seek to influence Local Government Reorganisation for the benefit of communities** Leader welcomes decision of OCC to write to government. Leader reiterates how the best way to influence changes here is to work positively and quickly with the government.
24 Jan	PUBLIC NEWSLETTER Update on the latest LGR and Devolution news to official council e-newsletters for residents and Town and Parish Councils.

24 Jan	PRESS STATEMENT **Oxfordshire should be working with Berkshire and Buckinghamshire** The Leader sets out position and states shared identities and vibrant economies mean that Oxfordshire should look to work with its partners in the South-East in a new Strategic Authority rather than looking west towards Swindon.
24 Feb	PRESS STATEMENT **South Oxfordshire considers options for a new unitary authority** Members at South Oxfordshire District Council have been discussing the future of councils in the area following the government's recent White Paper on English devolution and local government reorganisation. Preference for a strategic authority that includes Oxfordshire and the Berkshire authorities, or a wider area incorporating Buckinghamshire. An arrangement would align well with the proposed unitary council structure bringing together South Oxfordshire, the Vale, and West Berkshire.
24 Feb	PRESS STATEMENT **South and Vale Leaders write to West Berkshire Council on unitary council proposals** The Leaders of South Oxfordshire and the Vale of White Horse District Councils have written to the Leader of West Berkshire Council to support the creation of a joint forum of senior council members from each authority to support the three authorities to work up a proposal for a possible unitary council across the three neighbouring areas.

Vale of White Horse District Council

Date	Message
19 Dec	PUBLIC STATEMENT **Leader's Report to Council – 18 December 2024** First reference to government White Paper and impact on the district.
10 Jan	PRESS STATEMENT **Oxfordshire should move quickly on Local Government Reorganisation** Leader welcomes decision of OCC to write to government. Leader reiterates Vale would be best served by moving swiftly to find the best solution for its residents.
24 Jan	PUBLIC NEWSLETTER Update on the latest LGR and Devolution news to official council e-newsletters for residents and Town and Parish Councils.
24 Jan	PRESS STATEMENT **The county council must make its position on devolution geography clear** Leader of the Vale of White Horse District Council has written to the Leader of Oxfordshire County Council, urging her to move swiftly to explain her council's position on a preferred geography for a Mayoral Strategic Authority. Reference to Swindon Borough Council's Leader comments. Vale leader sets out position on not supporting Swindon joining Mayoral Strategic Authority geography.
20 Feb	PRESS STATEMENT **A new council for the Vale, South Oxfordshire and West Berkshire?** Vale councillors held a public meeting to discuss the future of the district council in light of the government's plans for devolution and local

		government reorganisation. Among the topics discussed was the possibility of a brand-new council combining the Vale with those in neighbouring South Oxfordshire and West Berkshire.
24 Feb		PRESS STATEMENT **South and Vale Leaders write to West Berkshire Council on unitary council proposals** The Leaders of South Oxfordshire and the Vale of White Horse District Councils have written to the Leader of West Berkshire Council to support the creation of a joint forum of senior council members from each authority to support the three authorities to work up a proposal for a possible unitary council across the three neighbouring areas.

Engagement with elected officials

Central government

- **Friday 10 January** – Letter from Oxfordshire County Council Leader, Cllr Liz Leffman to Angela Rayner MP

Local MPs

West Berkshire

- **25 February** – MPs received a copy of West Berkshire Council's announcement on its entering discussions with neighbouring authorities.

South Oxfordshire

- **17 February** – Council Leader, Cllr David Rouane wrote letters to MPs Olly Glover and Freddie Van Mierlo with an update on unitary discussions.

Vale of White Horse

- **17 February** – Leader Cllr Bethia Thomas wrote letters to the MPs Layla Moran, Olly Glover and Charlie Maynard updating them on discussions with neighbouring councils on unitarisation.

Council Members

West Berkshire

- 17 December – Written briefing on top lines from White Paper
- 13 February – Report to Executive to highlight Government's intentions for devolution and reorganisation.
- 4 March – DAG – cross party devolution advisory group

South Oxfordshire

- 24 January – Council Leader, Cllr David Rouane wrote to all council Members setting out his views on a Strategic Authority geography.
- 10 February - Full member online briefing and Q&A

Vale of White Horse

- 13 February – Full member online briefing and Q&A

Neighbouring and partner councils

Discussion group between Berkshire and Oxfordshire Council Leaders alongside senior officers on potential geography for Thames Valley Mayoral Strategic Authority.

- Friday 31 January – Oxford Town Hall
- Monday 24 March – University of Reading

Formal letters from South Oxfordshire and/or Vale of White Horse

- **19 December** – South Oxfordshire Leader, Cllr David Rouane wrote to Cllr Leffman, Leader of Oxfordshire County Council on the subject of local government reorganisation.

- **19 December –** Vale Leader Cllr Bethia Thomas wrote to Cllr Liz Leffman, Leader of Oxfordshire County Council on the subject of local government reorganisation.

- **24 January** – Vale Leader Cllr Bethia Thomas wrote a letter to Cllr Liz Leffman, Leader of Oxfordshire County Council regarding potential Mayoral Strategic Authority geographies.

- **11 February** – Vale Leader Cllr Bethia Thomas wrote a letter to Oxfordshire County Council leader Cllr Liz Leffman expressing a preference for Swindon not to join an Oxfordshire strategic authority.

- **21 February** – Vale Leader Cllr Bethia Thomas and South Oxfordshire Leader Cllr David Rouane wrote a joint letter to West Berkshire Council Leader Cllr Jeff Brooks.

Other stakeholders

- **18 February** – South Oxfordshire Leader Cllr David Rouane sent an update to Matt Barber, Police and Crime Commissioner with an update on unitary discussions.

- **18 February** – Vale Leader Cllr Bethia Thomas wrote to Matt Barber, Police and Crime Commissioner with an update on unitary discussion with neighbouring councils.

Staff engagement

West Berkshire

Information published on staff intranet pages and news items.

- **7 February** – update from the Chief Executive on the key principles of Devolution and LGR

- **25 February –** message from the Chief Executive head of public announcement that discussions with neighbouring authorities were underway and that a Member Advisory Group had been established
- **3 March** – featured article in monthly staff newsletter

South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse

A Local Government Reorganisation landing page on the staff intranet with timeline and related Q&A page.

- Staff briefings (live and recorded) with chief executive 19 December 2024 and 14 January 2025.

Regular staff email updates on:

- 16 December – message from the chief executive updating all staff following the publishing of the white paper. Flag dates/times for staff briefing.
- 17 December – reminder for LGR briefing session.
- 19 December x 2 – link for staff briefing, PM summary of briefing and link to watch. Links to South and Vale leader statements.
- 23 December – update for staff on leader letters to Oxfordshire County Council. Links to letters.
- 7 January – Summary of the situation for staff. Links for Q&A session and appeal for questions for 14 January session. Point staff to intranet pages on LGR. Links to leader letters.
- 9 January – update on Oxfordshire County Council's Cabinet agreeing to send a letter to the government. Quotes from Leaders on our position.
- 10 January – update with press release links.
- 14 January – update with Q&A session details and links for intranet information.
- 27 January – update on recent press statements and County Council's response on devolution
- 3 February – update on the meeting of leaders from 13 councils from Oxfordshire, Berkshire and Swindon
- 5 February – update on government announcement on next steps and response to OCC letter
- 17 February – update on government response to all councils in Oxfordshire – with timelines
- 24 February – further update on timelines

Staff newsletter:

- 18 December – Christmas message from the chief executive, including ref to devolution.
- 9 January – update on LGR and link for submitting questions for the next Q&A session in January
- 15 January – Watch the recording of the staff briefing – links and promotion of Q&A page
- 29 January – summary on recent press statements

Local Government Reorganisation (LGR)

LGR Ridgeway Member Group

Draft Terms of Reference – Subject to Approval

Draft Date:	**3 March 2025**
Author:	Adrianna Partridge

1	**Background**

The LGR Ridgeway Member Group is established to provide a discussion and oversight forum to support the development of proposals for submission to MHCLG for local government reorganisation, that would lead to the creation of a New Unitary Authority (NUA) across the existing districts of West Berkshire, South Oxfordshire and the Vale of White Horse ('the Districts').

The LGR Ridgeway Member Group does not have any decision-making powers but will meet to review information, provide strategic oversight, and to ensure the effective co-ordination of the work necessary to submit an interim proposal by no later 21 March 2025 and a full proposal by no later than 28 November 2025 to Government for local government reorganisation across the Districts.

The LGR Ridgeway Member Group will ensure that the Councils' approach aligns with government expectations.

2	**Purpose**

The purpose of the LGR Ridgeway Member Group will be:
- To ensure the co-ordination of activities across the Districts to facilitate the development of an initial proposal and then full proposal for the NUA
- To review evidence and draft proposals to ensure they meet the requirements as set out by MHCLG, prior to consideration at formal meetings.
- To support the co-ordination of all communications activity across the Districts relating to the proposal for the NUA.
- To support engagement opportunities and events across the Districts regarding the proposal for the NUA.
- To support liaison with other relevant Local Authorities and public bodies

3	**Attendees**

The LGR Ridgeway Member Group is to be a member group supported by officers formed from across the Districts consisting of:

1. West Berkshire Council Leader
2. South Oxfordshire DC Leader
3. Vale of White Horse DC Leader
4. West Berkshire Council Deputy Leader
5. South Oxfordshire DC Deputy Leader
6. Vale of White Horse DC Deputy Leader
7. West Berkshire Council Chief Executive
8. South Oxfordshire and the Vale of White Horse DC Chief Executive
9. Democratic Services support from the Districts
10. Other Officers from the Districts as required

4	**Frequency of Meetings**

Meetings will be held at least monthly to support the development of the initial and full proposal, and will be supported by Democratic Services from the Districts.

Local Government Reorganisation (LGR)

LGR Ridgeway Officer Group

Draft Terms of Reference – Subject to Approval

Draft Date:	**25 February 2025**
Author:	Sarah Clarke

1	**Background**

The LGR Ridgeway Officer Group is established to provide support and to develop proposals for submission to MHCLG for local government reorganisation, that would lead to the creation of a New Unitary Authority (NUA) across the existing districts of West Berkshire, South Oxfordshire and the Vale of White Horse ('the Districts').

The LGR Ridgeway Officer Group does not have any decision-making powers but will initially meet to collate information, provide strategic advice, and to ensure the effective co-ordination of the work necessary to submit an interim proposal to Government for local government reorganisation across the Districts.

The LGR Ridgeway Officer Group will continue to support the development of a substantive submission for the NUA due no later than 28 November 2025, based on feedback provided by Government on the initial proposal.

The LGR Ridgeway Officer Group will ensure that the Councils' approach aligns with government expectations.

2	**Purpose**

The purpose of the LGR Ridgeway Officer Group will be:
- To co-ordinate activities across the Districts to facilitate the development of an initial proposal for the NUA
- To gather evidence as indicated by MHCLG to support member decisions on the initial proposal for the NUA
- To produce proposals for Members of the Districts to consider at formal and informal meetings, regarding the initial proposal that must be submitted to MHCLG by the 21st March 2025

- To produce proposals for Members of the Districts to consider at formal and informal meetings, regarding any substantive proposal to be submitted to Government no later than November 2025.
- To co-ordinate all communications activity across the Districts relating to the proposal for the NUA.
- To co-ordinate and support engagement opportunities and events across the Districts regarding the proposal for the NUA
- To co-ordinate the liaison with, and data analysis of, other relevant Local Authorities and public bodies

3	Attendees

The LGR Officer Group is to be an Officer group formed from across the Districts consisting of:

1. WBC Executive Director - Resources
2. S&V Deputy Chief Executive – Corporate and Communities
3. Service Director – Transformation - WBC;
4. Head of Policy and Programmes - S&V;
5. Performance, Research and Consultation Manager - WBC;
6. Team Leader Insight & Policy - S&V;
7. Principal Democratic Services Officer – WBC;
8. Communications Team Manager - WBC;
9. Communications and Engagement Manager – S&V;
10. Communications Team Leader – S&V;
11. Other Officers as required

4	Frequency of Meetings

Meetings will be held initially weekly to support the development of the initial proposal.

If the initial proposal is supported, this Group will meet at least fortnightly and in person, at venues across the districts.

Terms of Reference for the West Berkshire Devolution Advisory Group

Background

The Devolution Advisory Group (DAG) is established as a working group to provide support throughout the Council's discussions and negotiations in response to the Government's English Devolution White Paper 2024, to participate in the creation of a new strategic authority, and to develop proposals for devolution and local government reorganisation.

The DAG does not have any decision-making powers but will be called upon where appropriate to provide advice, scrutiny, and challenge to the Leader of the Council and Chief Executive in addressing the requirements of the Government's English Devolution White Paper 2024.

The DAG's primary role is to contribute to the design, implementation and evaluation of devolved powers and responsibilities, ensuring that the Council's approach aligns with government expectations and the needs of West Berkshire residents.

Purpose

The members of the Devolution Advisory Group (DAG) or their substitutes will be called upon where appropriate to provide strategic advice, scrutiny and challenge to the Leader of the Council and Chief Executive and contribute to the proposals and negotiation preparations for devolution and local government reorganisation.

Membership

The DAG is to be a joint Officer and Member group formed from the following:

1. Leader of the Council (Chairman);
2. Chief Executive
3. Executive Director - Place (or substitute);
4. Executive Director - Resources (or substitute);
5. Service Director Education / Service Director Transformation (if required)
6. Other Officers to present items as the agenda requires;
7. 8 additional Members of the Council representative of the geographical makeup of West Berkshire and nominated by Group Leaders in accordance with the proportionality of 4 Liberal Democrat Members, 3 Conservative Members and 1 Minority Group Member.

Terms of reference

The DAG terms of reference are:

1. To review, evaluate, and provide feedback on options for consideration regarding the development of a new Strategic Authority.

2. To review, evaluate and provide feedback on options for consideration, including the identification and assessment of potential opportunities and risks, regarding local government reorganisation and a new Unitary arrangement for the area.

3. To provide feedback to the Leader of the Council on any opportunities arising in relation to the allocation of powers, resources and funding under devolution.

4. To inform a strategic approach to local government reorganisation and devolution.

5. To ensure that the local government reorganisation and devolution process is inclusive, transparent and reflective of local needs and priorities.

6. To consider any other items as deemed pertinent by the Chairman.

Roles and responsibilities

1. The Leader of the Council will be responsible for considering the views raised by the members of the DAG when acting in their capacity as Leader of the Council.

2. Council Members of the DAG will be responsible for contributing constructively to strategic conversations held at the DAG.

3. Officers will be responsible for contributing constructively to strategic conversations held at the DAG, producing reports (when required), publishing the agenda and producing the minutes.

4. The DAG will remain in place for the duration of the devolution process, or until the Council determines that the objectives of the advisory group have been fulfilled.

Meetings

Members of the DAG are required to maintain the confidentiality of sensitive information discussed during meetings, particularly when concerning strategic decisions or government negotiations.

Members should declare any interests as outlined in the Councillor's Code of Conduct.

South and Vale Strategic Delivery Monitoring Group Terms of Reference

Purpose

The purpose of the strategic delivery monitoring group (SDMG) is to prioritise and oversee transformational and strategic priority activities across the councils. In doing so it will support the relevant Cabinet Members with responsibility for transformation and strategic delivery in championing, prioritising, reviewing, and co-ordinating such activity across the councils, as well as overseeing the effective delivery of activities by officers.

For the purposes of this group, transformational and strategic priority activities are defined as:

- Activity relating to local government reform;
- Opportunities to generate further income; and
- Opportunities to redesign services to make them more efficient and customer focussed.

The SDMG is a confidential forum that will ensure that service improvements and savings are prioritised and delivered in line with the corporate plans and medium term financial plans, and in a manner that reflects the needs of both councils equally. The group itself is not a formal part of the councils' decision making process but is able to function as the senior monitoring body through the powers and responsibilities already vested by Council in the Leaders and those officers present.

Objectives

- Provide the overarching prioritisation and review framework, regularly reviewing progress, performance, savings and impact to support the lead Cabinet Members and officers in their responsibilities.
- Provide on-going robust challenge for all programmes and projects and be the main conduit between members and officers for transformation and strategic priority activities and the balance of the impact of these across the two councils.
- Review and oversee the high-level interdependencies and risks associated with all strategic delivery programmes and activities, including wider portfolio initiatives, opportunities and change (both within South and Vale, and those that impact the wider system and national requirements).
- Strategically identify, monitor and prioritise programmes and projects, and consider their re-alignment, if necessary, especially against changing political priorities, to achieve an appropriate balance and focus of activity across both councils.
- Work collectively to ensure that programme and project delivery is secured against appropriate outcomes, KPIs, budget and timescales and that any changes to these are widely understood.

- Champion communication and support the relevant Cabinet Members in ensuring that at a programme level, the over-arching communication and engagement strategy is delivered across both councils.

Agendas and Reports

Agendas will be agreed a least a fortnight in advance by the Co-Chairs and reports will normally be available at least one week before the meeting.   Agendas will also seek to identify items as being 'for decision', 'for discussion' or 'for review/awareness'.   Once the Corporate Annual Delivery Plans have been approved by each council, a 'light touch' forward plan will be agreed by SDMG. This forward plan will be kept under review to reflect budget and policy decisions of Full Council and Cabinet in each council as and when they are taken.

Record of Meetings

Relevant actions will be recorded by Executive Support.

South and Vale Ridgeway Officer Project Board Terms of Reference

Background

The South and Vale Ridgeway Officer Project Board is established to support the development of proposals for submission to MHCLG for local government reorganisation, that would lead to the creation of a New Unitary Authority (NUA) across the existing districts of West Berkshire, South Oxfordshire and the Vale of White Horse ('the Districts').

The S&V Ridgeway Officer Project Board does not have any decision-making powers, but will ensure the collation of supporting information, provide strategic advice and updates to Core SMT, and ensure the effective co-ordination of the work necessary to submit an Interim and then Full Proposal to Government with West Berkshire for local government reorganisation across the Districts by the deadlines set.

The S&V Ridgeway Officer Project Board will ensure that the councils' approach aligns with government expectations.

Objectives

The purpose of the S&V Ridgeway Officer Project Board will be:

- To co-ordinate activities to facilitate the development of an initial proposal for the NUA
- To gather evidence as indicated by MHCLG to support member decisions on the initial proposal for the NUA
- To produce proposals for Cabinet members of the Districts to consider at formal and informal meetings, regarding the initial proposal that must be submitted to MHCLG by no later than the 21 March 2025.
- To produce proposals for Cabinet members of the Districts to consider at formal and informal meetings, regarding the full proposal that must be submitted to Government no later than 28 November 2025.
- To co-ordinate all communications activity across the Districts relating to the proposals for the NUA.
- To co-ordinate and support engagement opportunities and events across the Districts regarding the proposals for the NUA.
- To co-ordinate the liaison with, and data analysis of, other relevant Local Authorities and public bodies.

Members of the Project Board
Chief Executive, Deputy Chief Executive – Corporate and Communities, Section 151 Officer, Monitoring Officer, Head of Policy and Programmes, Communications and Engagement Manager. Any other officers to attend as required.

Senior Responsible Officer
Chief Executive

Programme Lead
Deputy Chief Executive – Corporate and Communities

Meeting Frequency
Weekly, with additional meetings able to be called, as and when agreed by the Programme Lead.

Record of Meetings
Relevant actions will be recorded by the Corporate Delivery Team.