Local Government Reorganisation – Full Proposal for Oxfordshire and West Berkshire

Committee considering report:	Council
Date of Committee:	4 November 2025
Portfolio Member:	Councillor Justin Pemberton
Date Portfolio Member agreed report:	28 October 2025
Report Author:	Sarah Clarke
Forward Plan Ref:	EX4754

1 Purpose of the Report

1.1 The English Devolution White Paper published on the 16 December 2024, outlined the government's plans to reset the relationship with local and regional government. The government stated that rebuilding and reforming local government would be the foundation of devolution, with a focus on getting the basics right.

1.2 On the 5 February, the government wrote to the Leaders of all two-tier councils (the five district councils and the county council) in Oxfordshire. This was a formal invitation to those Leaders to develop a proposal for local government reorganisation and to provide guidance on the development of proposals. The government invited the submission of Interim Plans by 21 March 2025, followed by Full Proposals by 28 November 2025.

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

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

2 Recommendations

It is proposed that 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.

(c) Recommends that 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 Councill will submit the full proposal directly to Government in line with the Oxfordshire invitation letter.

3 Implications and Impact Assessment

Implication	Commentary
Financial:	None arising directly from this decision. This report seeks approval to submit a proposal to government for consideration, and government will make the final decision, following consultation, as to what changes will be made to local government in West Berkshire. Consultancy fees have been incurred on a shared basis between the 5 authorities promoting this proposal, which will be offset in part by the funding approved by the government for councils undertaking local government reorganisation work in response to the governments invitation to do so. Consideration

	will be given to the potential application of transformation funding to fund the balance of the Council's contribution. The two unitary model proposal includes a full financial case based on work undertaken by PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC), CIPFA (the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy), People Too and this has been reviewed by the Section 151 officers from across the five councils supporting the two unitary model. Additional work will be required going forward, and it should be noted that the process of local government reorganisation coincides with the fair funding review, resulting in a lack of clarity over future levels of government funding for all councils.
Human Resource:	None arising directly from this decision. This report seeks approval to submit a proposal to government for consideration, and government will make the final decision, following consultation, as to what changes will be made to local government in West Berkshire.
Legal:	The government have invited any principal authority in the area of the county of Oxfordshire, to submit a proposal for a single tier of local government proposals under Part 1 of the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007 ('the 2007 Act')
Risk Management:	There is a risk that government will not support the proposal detailed in this report.
Property:	None arising directly from this decision. This report seeks approval to submit a proposal to government for consideration, and government will make the final decision, following consultation, as to what changes will be made to local government in West Berkshire.
Policy:	This proposal will support the governments devolution agenda and will meet the stated aims and criteria for local government reorganisation.

	Positive	Neutral	Negative	Commentary
Equalities Impact:				
A Are there any aspects of the proposed decision, including how it is delivered or accessed, that could impact on inequality?		X		There are many benefits arising from this proposal as outlined in the proposal document, but at this point, the decision is limited to the submission of a proposal and the government will subsequently determine which option to progress.
B Will the proposed decision have an impact upon the lives of people with protected characteristics, including employees and service users?		X		There are many benefits arising from this proposal as outlined in the proposal document, but at this point, the decision is limited to the submission of a proposal.
Environmental Impact:		X		There are many benefits arising from this proposal as outlined in the proposal document, but at this point, the decision is limited to the submission of a proposal.
Health Impact:		X		There are many benefits arising from this proposal as outlined in the proposal document, but at this point, the decision is limited to the submission of a proposal.
ICT Impact:		X		There are many benefits arising from this proposal as outlined in the proposal document, but at this point, the decision is limited to the submission of a proposal.
Digital Services Impact:		X		There are many benefits arising from this proposal as outlined in the proposal document, but at this point, the decision is limited to the submission of a proposal.

Council Strategy Priorities:		X		There are many benefits arising from this proposal as outlined in the proposal document, but at this point, the decision is limited to the submission of a proposal.
Core Business:		X		There are many benefits arising from this proposal as outlined in the proposal document, but at this point, the decision is limited to the submission of a proposal. There are also a number of Shared Service Arrangements that are in place between West Berkshire Council and other councils. Any existing shared service arrangements would continue following reorganisation, and future arrangements would be for the new authority to consider.
Data Impact:		X		There are many benefits arising from this proposal as outlined in the proposal document, but at this point, the decision is limited to the submission of a proposal.
Consultation and Engagement:	There has been significant consultation and engagement, as fully detailed in chapter 11 of the Proposal Document at Appendix A. Between **4 June** and **16 July 2025**, people shared their views through an online survey, **21 drop-in events**, and parish/town council sessions. **2,147** people responded to the survey – along with feedback from local councils, businesses and community groups across Oxfordshire and West Berkshire, in respect of the proposal detailed in this report. There has been additional engagement activity more recently in West Berkshire, following the resolution of Reading Borough Council in response to LGR, to seek the annexation into Reading of five wards at the eastern boundaries of West Berkshire. The proposals have also been considered by Members of the Devolution Advisory Group.			

4 Executive Summary

4.1 On 16 December 2024, the Government published the Devolution White Paper. The paper sets out the most significant reforms to local government since the Local Government Act 1972. It indicated the Government's aim to reorganise and simplify the structures of councils in England by replacing county and district councils with unitary authorities (LGR – local government reorganisation) and devolve more powers and funding from national to local government (devolution).

4.2 On 5 February 2025, the Government wrote to the Leaders of all principal authority two tier Councils in England, including those in Oxfordshire. This was a formal invitation to those Leaders to develop a proposal for local government reorganisation and provided guidance on the development of proposals. The government invited the submission of Interim Plans by 21 March 2025, followed by Full Proposals by 28 November 2025.

4.3 Following the submission of the Interim Plan in March 2025, this report proposes the submission of a Full Proposal for a two unitary model based on one new unitary council covering the entire existing boundaries of South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse District Councils and West Berkshire Council, with the working title of 'Ridgeway', and a second new unitary council covering the entire existing boundaries of Cherwell and West Oxfordshire District Councils and Oxford City Council, with a working title of 'Oxford & Shires'.

5 Supporting Information

Introduction and Background

5.1 The Government has set out its intention to significantly reform, at great pace, local government structures and implement devolution across England. The Government wishes to see successor councils emerge from the current two-tier system of district and county councils and that those successor councils and the existing unitary structured councils of England must join a Strategic Authority.

5.2 All Oxfordshire councils and West Berkshire Council support the Government's vision for simpler and more sustainable local government structures, where councils are empowered to respond to the needs of their communities and deliver value for money, efficient and high-quality services.

5.3 At its meeting on the 19 March 2025 West Berkshire Council resolved to support, alongside Cherwell District Council, South Oxfordshire District Council Vale of White Horse District Council and West Oxfordshire District Council, the submission of an interim proposal for a two unitary model covering the area of Oxfordshire and West Berkshire. Since March 2025, significant work has been undertaken by officers across these authorities and in multiple teams to develop the Full Proposal, which is produced at Appendix A to this report.

5.4 The Government indicated that they expected engagement work to be undertaken by Councils in developing recommendations so that any proposals submitted could demonstrate how they had regard to the views expressed. A significant engagement exercise was undertaken, hosting drop in events across the District, and additionally inviting town and parish councils and other partners to attend online events. These

events highlighted a clear preference amongst those living, working and learning in West Berkshire, to be part of a Ridgeway Council.

Proposals

5.5 The Government has set out criteria and guidance within the statutory invitation to support local government reorganisation. That guidance includes:

(a) A single tier and sensible geography avoiding creating (dis/)advantaged areas;

(b) The right size to achieve efficiencies, improve capacity and withstand financial shocks - new Councils must be a minimum of 500,000 with exceptions on a case-by-case basis;

(c) Prioritises the delivery of high quality and sustainable public services.

(d) Meets local need and is informed by local views;

(e) Supports devolution arrangements; and

(f) Enables stronger community engagement and delivers genuine neighbourhood empowerment

5.6 Whilst four of the six local councils in Oxfordshire and West Berkshire Council support and have developed the two unitary model proposed in this report, it should be noted that two other proposals will be submitted in Oxfordshire. Oxfordshire County Council will be proposing a one unitary model covering the whole of the current Oxfordshire county area, leaving West Berkshire Council unchanged. The proposal can be read in full here Local government reorganisation and devolution | Oxfordshire County Council. Oxford City Council is proposing a three unitary model covering a 'Greater Oxford' area which would cover the existing Oxford City council area expanded to encompass most of the area currently designated as greenbelt that is currently in neighbouring districts, a 'Northern' council area covering the remaining parts of the existing Cherwell and West Oxfordshire district councils and a 'Southern' council covering the remaining part so the existing South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse district councils and the West Berkshire unitary area. The proposal be read in full here www.oxford.gov.uk .

5.7 The two unitary model for Oxfordshire and West Berkshire proposed in this report, sets out a clear, evidence-based plan to deliver better, more efficient and more locally accountable public services. It will create two new councils that offer the right balance between efficiency and local identity, each servicing around 450,000 – 500,000 people, meeting the Government's criteria and being large enough to be efficient and stable, but small enough to stay connected to communities. The full proposal developed by Cherwell District Council, South Oxfordshire District Council, Vale of White Horse District Council, West Berkshire Council and West Oxfordshire District Council is attached as **Appendix A.**

5.8 The Government has outlined that Full Proposals need to be submitted by 28 November 2025. They anticipate that statutory consultation could be launched in the New Year and would likely close after the local elections in May 2026. Following this, decisions on which proposal to implement could be announced before the summer recess. Secondary legislation would then be prepared, to be laid in the House after the summer

recess. The legislation could then be made, subject to Parliamentary approval. This would allow for shadow elections to the new unitary authorities on 6 May 2027. The new authorities would then go live on 1 April 2028.

5.9 It is considered that the Two Unitary model best meets the governments criteria for reorganisation, by proposing two councils that will big enough to deliver financial stability whilst being small enough to be representative and responsive to the communities that we serve. Importantly, this proposal will result in the creation of two new councils that will be ideally placed to drive growth and fully support the governments devolution agenda.

6 Other options considered

6.1 The government has not formally invited West Berkshire Council to submit a proposal for Local Government Reorganisation, and it could therefore do nothing. However, government has stated its intention to reorganise small unitary councils so that these operate with a population size of about 500k residents, which means that West Berkshire Council will be subject to reorganisation proposals. The Council has rejected the 'do nothing' option as this would close all future options to working with the existing Councils in Oxfordshire, and the strength of the business case and engagement activity has highlighted a strong future option for the Council.

6.2 Another option for West Berkshire Council to meet the government's plans for reorganisation, would be the potential to merge with a number of the existing Berkshire unitary councils.

6.3 It is considered, for all the reasons set out in the Full Proposal, that there are compelling arguments which support the Full Proposal, which highlights why a two unitary council model of local government will meet both the governments objectives, but also provides the best opportunity to ensure sustainable, responsive, and effective local government services to all our communities.

7 Conclusion

7.1 It is recommended that West Berkshire Council support the submission to government of the proposal for the creation of two unitary councils across Oxfordshire and West Berkshire, for the reasons that have been fully detailed in Appendix A.

8 Appendices

8.1 Appendix A – Full Proposal for a Two Unitary Local Government Model across Oxfordshire and West Berkshire

Background Papers:

1. Report to Executive dated 19 March 2025 - 4. LGR Ridgeway Report - Final March 2025.pdf
2. Interim Proposal for LGR in Oxfordshire and West Berkshire approved by Executive on 19 March 2025 - 4. Ridgeway Interim Proposal UPDATED FINAL Clean.pdf

Subject to Call-In:

Yes: ☐ No: ☒

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

Wards affected: All

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