

DRAFT

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

RESOURCES AND PLACE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD ON MONDAY 10 NOVEMBER 2025

Councillors Present: Carolyne Culver (Chairman), Jeremy Cottam, Erik Pattenden, Christopher Read, Richard Somner, Howard Woollaston and Dennis Benneyworth (Substitute) (In place of Ross Mackinnon)

Also Present: Councillor Justin Pemberton (Executive Portfolio Holder: Community Engagement, Economic Development and Regeneration and Devolution and Local Government Reorganisation), Joseph Holmes (Chief Executive), Martyn Sargeant (Service Director (Strategy & Governance)), Stephen Chard (Democratic Services Manager), Gordon Oliver (Principal Policy Officer (Scrutiny & Dem Services))

Apologies for inability to attend the meeting: Councillor Ross Mackinnon, Councillor Antony Amirtharaj and Councillor Laura Coyle

PART I

1 **Declarations of Interest**

Councillor Carolyne Culver declared an interest in Agenda Item 3 by virtue of the fact that she was a member of Unison and staffing matters would be discussed at this meeting. However, she reported that as her interest was a personal or an other registrable interest, but not a disclosable pecuniary interest, she determined to remain to take part in the debate and any votes.

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

The Committee considered the report (Agenda Item 3) which outlined the full proposal for Local Government Reorganisation (LGR) for Oxfordshire and West Berkshire.

Councillor Justin Pemberton introduced the item:

- 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. Rebuilding and reforming local government would be the foundation of devolution, with a focus on getting the basics right.
- On 5 February 2025, the government wrote to the Leaders of all two-tier councils (including the district and county councils in Oxfordshire). This was a formal invitation to develop a proposal for LGR and provided associated guidance. Submission of interim plans had to be submitted by 21 March 2025, with full proposals by 28 November 2025.
- On 10 February 2025, West Berkshire Council received a formal request from South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse Councils to consider the option of a new unitary council covering the three areas. An interim proposal for Ridgeway Council was approved by West Berkshire Council's Executive at its meeting on 19 March 2025.

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- A second new unitary authority was proposed for Cherwell and West Oxfordshire District Councils and Oxford City Council, with the working title of 'Oxford and Shires'.
- This report proposed the approval by Executive of the full proposal for submission to Government.
- Financial implications from LGR had been considered, with consultants employed by the five local authorities promoting this proposal. This provided guidance on costs and when it would be possible to offset them, based on a financial model. Potential savings were outlined in the report, which would arise from transition and transformation activity.
- Consultation and engagement had been conducted from the outset on this proposal and had been extensive. Feedback had been received from parish councils, businesses and over 2,000 residents. The responses showed strong support for the Ridgeway proposal.
- The report had already been considered by Full Council where proposals were endorsed. It would next proceed to the Executive for sign-off, but the final decision rested with central government. It was hoped that decisions would be announced by the summer of 2026. Subject to that decision, shadow elections would be held for Ridgeway Council in May 2027. These Members would oversee work on arrangements for the new local authority, which would go live on 1 April 2028.
- The Ridgeway Council proposal was in line with the government's criteria which required local authorities to be the right size to be financially stable, while still being able to meet local needs. Further, it was felt that West Berkshire shared many commonalities with South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse and it was believed that the proposal would be a strong one for the government to consider.
- Competing proposals were expected to be submitted by Oxfordshire County Council and Oxford City Council.

(Councillor Howard Woollaston joined the meeting at 6.48pm).

A lengthy question and answer session followed, summarised as follows:

- Concern was raised regarding Reading Borough Council's (RBC's) LGR proposals for eastern areas of West Berkshire. It was confirmed that should the Ridgeway proposal not be accepted, then neither would the RBC proposal. If the RBC proposal was accepted, then formal consultation would follow.
- Members sought clarification as to whether support for the Ridgeway proposal was universal across the district. A poll of Theale residents gave a strong response in favour of the village staying within West Berkshire. Meetings had been held with other parish and town councils, where views were predominantly that communities felt part of West Berkshire. However, it was acknowledged that some residents felt a closer link to Reading. Statistics available to date suggested that the response from residents was in favour of the proposal, with a similar picture right across West Berkshire.
- The consultation had captured the views of residents and organisations across the three local authorities, but it was noted that external parties were also able to respond.
- Central government guidance had been for the new unitary authorities to have a population of approximately 500,000. The population of the Oxfordshire County Council proposal would be significantly in excess of that figure.

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- If Ridgeway was not accepted, then West Berkshire Council would look to develop a proposal with neighbouring local authorities to the east. However, there was no timescale as yet for the potential merging of existing unitary authorities. This would need to be led by secondary legislation.
- Concerns were raised about the potential funding allocation for Ridgeway Council. It was hoped that this would be fair, with a full understanding of SEND pressures across the area. Officers indicated that a White Paper on SEND reform was expected in 2026.
- Concern was expressed that government grants were lower in rural areas than urban areas. Members felt this was a point to highlight with Members of Parliament (MPs).
- Officers highlighted the relatively sound financial position for the Ridgeway proposal outlined in the report, but acknowledged that there were risks from the national budget position and the Fair Funding Review.
- It was noted that CIPFA's financial resilience index showed that the Ridgeway/Oxford and Shires option to be the best of the competing models proposed.
- It was considered that some benefits from the Ridgeway proposal would be felt over time as a result of increased purchasing power. However, contracts would continue to be let in advance of LGR where existing contracts could not be extended. It was likely that there would be dual contracts running across different parts of the local authority area until such time as they could be merged. Secondary legislation would be needed to address constraints imposed by current procurement law. It was suggested that residents' expectations would need to be managed in this regard.
- It was acknowledged that the proposal contained a significant number of assumptions, which had been developed with input from Price Waterhouse Coopers, with CIPFA providing additional assurance. Also, learning was being shared by local authorities that had already been through the process.
- Areas of risk were acknowledged, but transition plans were included in the paperwork. An area of challenge was highlighted as the migration of data, between different IT systems. The aim would be to have single systems across Ridgeway.
- Officers suggested that of the available options, Ridgeway would deliver most benefit to residents with arrangements able to be put in place from an earlier stage and with less disruption to services.
- If the Ridgeway proposal was approved, the focus would be for safe and legal services from day one. Business as usual activities would need to continue.
- Officers highlighted that there would be some efficiency gains, such as from eliminating duplication amongst some senior roles.
- The number of Councillors proposed for Ridgeway was another point of concern. Under the proposal, Ridgeway would have 96 councillors (a reduction from 142 currently). There would only be a reduction of five councillors in West Berkshire as a result of three member wards becoming two member wards. Most of the proposed reduction would be in South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse.
- It was highlighted that some parish councils were in the process of preparing their Neighbourhood Development Plans, and Members wondered if it was worth their while continuing with these. Officers confirmed that there would still be a need for such plans.

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- The Committee noted that the government's priority was to address two-tier authorities. These could implement changes through existing legislation. New legislation would be required to implement LGR for existing smaller unitary authorities. By partnering with South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse, West Berkshire could accelerate the LGR process.
- It was confirmed that the shadow authority would be elected in May 2027 and would be responsible for appointing the new chief executive, senior leadership team and statutory officers, and setting the budget for the new local authority. It was anticipated that the term for existing West Berkshire Councillors would be extended to 1 April 2028 and they would continue to make decisions in relation to the outgoing local authority.

Action: Sarah Clarke to amend the Ridgeway proposal document to ensure that the proposed date for the election of the shadow authority was correct throughout.

- It was noted that Ridgeway Council would meet the threshold for establishing a housing revenue account (HRA), and that this could be used as a fund to borrow against in order to deliver council houses in future. It was suggested that this would be something that the new council could explore. However, officers indicated that there would be challenges with operating an HRA with such a small portfolio. It was noted that the Committee was due to review social housing at a future meeting, and it was suggested that the HRA suggestion could be discussed at that meeting.

Action: Consider the potential for a future HRA as part of the scrutiny review of local housing services.

- Members asked what consultation had been undertaken with staff and if there would be parity across the three constituent local authorities in terms of consultation and union recognition. It was confirmed that staff had been invited to participate in the wider consultation. LGR had also been discussed as part of Let's Chat sessions and the CEO had held regular briefings for staff. Consideration of ongoing engagement would be part of the detail to be worked up following the government announcement. The need for a standard approach was recognised. It was suggested that agreements with Unison could be extended to include other trade unions. The need to harmonise terms and conditions across the three authorities was recognised by the current senior leadership team. Lessons would be learned from other local authorities that had already merged. However, it was felt that the merger of the Ridgeway authorities would be relatively straightforward, since there were only three local authorities involved.
- Members suggested that if the Ridgeway proposal was approved, there should be a further scrutiny review to look further at the detail of the processes. Officers confirmed that a Joint Scrutiny Committee would be established to do this, but informal joint working could take place prior to a Joint Committee being established. Members indicated that a Joint Governance Committee may also be appropriate.

Action: In the event that the Ridgeway Council proposal is approved, bring a report to a future meeting of the Resources and Place Scrutiny Committee setting out next steps / preparatory work.

- It was confirmed that the Devolution Advisory Group would continue and there would be opportunities for Members to feed into this. However, conversations around devolution were not as advanced as for LGR.

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- Members asked if discussions had taken place with town and parish councils regarding services that could potentially be devolved to them. Officers indicated that some of the new unitary authorities had already done this, so there were good practice examples to learn from.
- There was discussion around the potential for the number of councillors to be reviewed in future. While the proposed number of 96 councillors was below the upper limit of 100 suggested by the Electoral Commission, it was recognised that the Boundary Commission would be likely to review this in future and may recommend that the number be reduced. Concern was expressed that some councillors may struggle with the number of residents they would need to represent and the number of parish council meetings that they would need to attend under the new arrangements.
- It was noted that South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse Councils had added text to their sections of the proposal around their climate commitments. It was proposed that West Berkshire Council should do the same.
- There was discussion around whether to include a recommendation around welcoming the imminent recognition of Unison so all staff across the three local authorities would be on an equal footing. This was felt to be too political and was not supported.
- There was further discussion about how parish councils could be engaged and supported in future, and whether there was a need for community panels similar to what was proposed for Oxford and the Shires.
- It was confirmed that the final version of the Ridgeway proposal would be made available online: <https://twocouncils.org/home>

RESOLVED that the Committee:

- a) Was informed that since the statutory invitation to all councils in two tier areas, significant work had been undertaken by all Oxfordshire Councils and West Berkshire Council.
- b) Was informed that there had 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) Was informed of the 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 covering the entire existing boundaries of Cherwell and West Oxfordshire District Councils and Oxford City Council, with the working title of 'Oxford & Shires'.
- d) Was informed that two other proposals would 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) Was informed that should Executive agree to the submission of the full proposal for a two unitary model, Cherwell District Council, South Oxfordshire District Council, Vale of White Horse District Council and West Oxfordshire District Council would submit the full proposal directly to Government in line with the Oxfordshire invitation letter.

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- f) Recommend to the Executive that the following text be added to the vision statement on page 74 of the proposal: 'Deliver strong action on climate change and promote nature recovery'.
- g) Recommend that future analysis of consultation responses, should include a spatial analysis.
- h) Recommend that the Executive continue to liaise with town and parish councils to discuss how they could be best engaged with and supported in future, the delivery of public services, and to review and disseminate best practice in this area.

(The meeting commenced at 6.30pm and closed at 8.26pm)

CHAIRMAN

Date of Signature