

South Oxfordshire's response to MHCLG's Consultation on Proposals for Local Government Reorganisation in Oxfordshire ([weblink](#)).

This is a copy of the response from South Oxfordshire District Council which was submitted online via the MHCLG consultation portal on Thursday 26 March

Consultation on Proposal from Oxfordshire County Council

1. To what extent do you agree or disagree that the proposal suggests councils that are based on sensible geographies and economic areas
 - Strongly Agree
 - Somewhat Agree
 - Neither Agree nor Disagree
 - Somewhat Disagree
 - Strongly Disagree
 - Don't Know

Strongly Disagree.

2. To what extent do you agree or disagree that the proposed councils will be able to deliver the outcomes they describe in the proposal?
 - Strongly Agree
 - Somewhat Agree
 - Neither Agree nor Disagree
 - Somewhat Disagree
 - Strongly Disagree
 - Don't Know

Strongly Disagree.

3. To what extent do you agree or disagree that the proposed councils are the right size to be efficient, improve capacity and withstand financial shocks?
 - Strongly Agree
 - Somewhat Agree
 - Neither Agree nor Disagree
 - Somewhat Disagree
 - Strongly Disagree
 - Don't Know

Strongly Disagree.

4. To what extent do you agree or disagree that the proposed councils will deliver high quality, sustainable public services?
 - Strongly Agree

- Somewhat Agree
- Neither Agree nor Disagree
- Somewhat Disagree
- Strongly Disagree
- Don't Know

Strongly Disagree.

5. To what extent do you agree or disagree that the proposal has been informed by local views and will meet local needs?
- Strongly Agree
 - Somewhat Agree
 - Neither Agree nor Disagree
 - Somewhat Disagree
 - Strongly Disagree
 - Don't Know

Strongly Disagree.

6. To what extent do you agree or disagree that establishing the councils in this proposal will support devolution arrangements?
- Strongly Agree
 - Somewhat Agree
 - Neither Agree nor Disagree
 - Somewhat Disagree
 - Strongly Disagree
 - Don't Know

Strongly Disagree.

7. To what extent do you agree or disagree that the proposal enables stronger community engagement and gives the opportunity for neighbourhood empowerment?
- Strongly Agree
 - Somewhat Agree
 - Neither Agree nor Disagree
 - Somewhat Disagree
 - Strongly Disagree
 - Don't Know

Strongly Disagree.

8. If you would like to, please use the free text box to explain the answers you have provided to questions 1-7 referring to the question numbers as part of your answer. You may also use the box to provide any other comments you have on the proposal.

We do not support the one unitary council proposal for Oxfordshire. This option only has the support of the County Council - just one of the six upper and lower tier authorities in Oxfordshire.

We refer below to the question numbers to explain our concerns about the proposal from Oxfordshire County Council for a one unitary model.

Q1 on whether this proposal is based on sensible geographies and economic areas:
No.

The One Oxfordshire proposal could create the largest non-metropolitan unitary council in England. In our opinion, it would be far too remote from residents and communities to act effectively on their behalf.

The economic plans outlined by Oxfordshire County Council focus primarily on the A34 corridor, while ignoring large parts of the rest of the county. Little, if any consideration, has been given to the potential of other parts of Oxfordshire and we fear that if this proposal is chosen as the preferred option for LGR, communities in these areas will be at greater risk of economic and social isolation.

The One Oxfordshire proposal also fails, despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary, to consider West Berkshire as part of a sensible geographic and economic area. Two of the three proposals for LGR in Oxfordshire and five of the six councils within the county agree that the inclusion of West Berkshire within this process is the correct approach, this has cross-party support. West Berkshire has very similar economic and demographic characteristics to its potential partners in South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse, as well as established historic and community connections. The adoption of the One Oxfordshire proposal would leave West Berkshire with no alternative but to join with Reading and/or Wokingham under any future LGR. This would result in a council marked by a pronounced rural-urban divide and lacking in demographic and geographic coherence.

Q2 on whether the proposed councils will be able to deliver the outcomes they describe in the proposal:

No.

Oxfordshire County Council's performance across a wide range of services has been poor. It has failed to fulfil the needs and requirements of many residents in important areas such as Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) and highways maintenance over several years and we are, therefore, unconvinced that it will be able to deliver the outcomes described in the One Oxfordshire proposal.

The One Oxfordshire proposal is a rather conservative document that fails to adequately provide a vision for local government in the county going forward. For example, in important areas, such as adult and children's social care, the plans outlined by Oxfordshire County Council set themselves against reforming services – even though these are areas in which the county are either underperforming and/or spending considerably above the national average. The One Oxfordshire proposal, in contrast to some of the other options on the table, is, therefore, effectively offering residents the status quo of poorly performing and expensive services.

In addition, as Oxfordshire County Council has struggled to find savings in its most recent budget, we believe that it would be unlikely that it will be able to deliver the savings outlined in its LGR proposal – especially as the Council has made clear that they remain opposed to reforming or innovating in the provision and delivery of services.

Oxfordshire County Council's proposal also has a completely unrealistic understanding of the role and responsibilities of district councils. Their work on how they would assume/undertake the services currently delivered by lower-tier authorities in the county is either vague and/or unworkable. For example, given the statutory steps involved it would be impossible to deliver a local plan within 12 months of vesting day.

Q3 on whether the proposed councils are the right size to be efficient, improve capacity and withstand financial shocks:

No.

Oxfordshire County Council is struggling to deliver services and manage its budget over the same geography as that proposed by the One Oxfordshire proposal. It is unrealistic to assume that creating a unitary authority – which from its own prospectus – has no ambition for reforming the delivery of services would be any more efficient or effective than what is currently in place.

The One Oxfordshire proposal also fails to address how West Berkshire, which is currently in receipt of Exceptional Financial Support, will be able to be placed on a more stable financial footing.

Q4 on whether the proposed councils will deliver high quality, sustainable public services:

No.

It is unlikely that the One Oxfordshire proposal will deliver high quality, sustainable public services, as what it can achieve is limited by its unimaginative approach to service delivery. As Oxfordshire County Council is failing on this metric, it would appear to be a rather unrealistic assumption that adopting the same methods, but in the guise of a unitary authority, will somehow lead to improved and sustainable public services.

As the One Oxfordshire proposal as constituted does not provide any direct provision to address their higher-than-average social care costs, there are also significant concerns that this ever-increasing need could negatively impact the funding for high-performing district and city services. This would initially impact discretionary services like Leisure, which provides significant health and wellbeing benefits and reduces strain on the NHS, but could also reduce investment in crucial statutory services like homelessness prevention.

Q5 on whether the proposal has been informed by local views and will meet local needs:

No.

The One Oxfordshire proposal could create the largest non-metropolitan unitary council in England. In our opinion, it would be far too remote from residents and communities to act effectively on their behalf. The experience that residents have had with the services currently provided by Oxfordshire County Council conclusively shows that a county-wide authority is simply too large to be responsive to local needs and demands.

The One Oxfordshire proposal also does not effectively reflect the views of many important local stakeholders, for example town and parish councils. Oxfordshire County Council, through limiting their engagement with these bodies, has failed to appreciate the opinions of residents and communities.

Furthermore, the One Oxfordshire proposal does not reflect the views and needs of West Berkshire. While Oxfordshire County Council may argue that the opinions of stakeholders, residents and communities in West Berkshire is not their concern, the case for a county-wide unitary is surely undermined by failing to even acknowledge, let alone heed, their voice.

Q6 on whether establishing the councils in this proposal will support devolution arrangements:

No.

The economic plans outlined by Oxfordshire County Council focus primarily on the A34 corridor, while ignoring large parts of the rest of the county. Little, if any consideration, has

been given to the potential of other parts of Oxfordshire and we fear that if this proposal is chosen as the preferred option for LGR, communities in these areas will be at greater risk of economic and social isolation.

Oxfordshire County Council's economic plans miss many of the key deliverables of the Oxford Growth Commission, because of their almost singular focus on the A34 corridor at the expense of the rest of the county.

In addition, we would contend that an Oxfordshire-wide strategic authority, even if it did have coherent and detailed economic plans for areas outside of the A34 corridor, would be too big to unlock the potential of the county as a whole. It would be unable to respond to local needs and opportunities in a way that smaller, more dynamic councils would be able to.

The adoption of the One Oxfordshire proposal would also have a deleterious impact on the county's influence at the strategic authority level. By only having one voice on any potential strategic authority, Oxfordshire would be limiting any potential sway that it may have when decisions are being made.

Q7 on whether the proposal enables stronger community engagement and gives the opportunity for neighbourhood empowerment:

No.

Due to the size of the proposed council, a single county-wide unitary authority in Oxfordshire would simply be too large to understand and engage with communities. Oxfordshire County Council's previous actions in this area, such as its parish charter, have been at best ineffective and at worst a complete failure. Moreover, feedback that we have received shows that there is a lack of trust between our communities and Oxfordshire County Council. As the One Oxfordshire proposal contains no clear strategy for engaging and working with town and parish councils, this is a situation that is unlikely to change.

The area committees included in the One Oxfordshire proposal are too large to be effective. They, therefore, would not be able to fulfil the functions that Oxfordshire County Council has assigned to them. On a related note, the proposed geographies of the committees are illogical and are perhaps a reflection of the lack of understanding of local communities apparent in the One Oxfordshire proposal. For example, Grove and Wantage would, under current plans, be in separate areas. In addition, we are unconvinced by the plans to allow these committees to have control over local services – very little detail has been provided about how this would work in practice (including what they would control, which decisions they would take, how they would interact with town/parish councils).

In our opinion, the One Oxfordshire proposal would create a democratic deficit by providing too few councillors to enable communities to be properly represented. This in turn could lead to increased distrust, feelings of exclusion and general disenchantment with the entire process. Councillors should be accessible to residents, be able to make effective decisions, and effectively manage their responsibilities – we do not believe that the One Oxfordshire proposal achieves this.

Oxfordshire County Council also suggests the introduction of a single planning committee for the whole county. This is unfeasible given the geography and population of Oxfordshire, and further increases the risk of rural areas being disconnected. Furthermore, it is another indication of the obvious lack of understanding of the roles and responsibilities of district councils inherent in the One Oxfordshire proposal.

Conclusion:

We are firmly opposed to the One Oxfordshire proposal because it presents a model of local government that is too large, too remote and fundamentally ill-equipped to meet the needs of Oxfordshire. By potentially creating the largest non-metropolitan unitary council in England, the proposal would weaken local representation, reduce democratic accountability, and leave residents feeling increasingly disconnected from decision-making. The experience of Oxfordshire County Council's current service performance, particularly in areas such as SEND, highways maintenance, and financial management, provides little confidence that a county-wide unitary would deliver significantly better outcomes – on the contrary, we believe that it would entrench existing weaknesses.

The One Oxfordshire proposal also fails to demonstrate a credible or inclusive economic strategy. Its narrow focus on the A34 corridor disregards substantial parts of the county and neglects the opportunities and needs of communities beyond this area. It similarly overlooks the clear geographic, economic and community linkages with West Berkshire, dismissing the views of local stakeholders and ignoring the strong evidence that supports a more coherent approach to reorganisation. As a result, the proposal risks deepening inequality, fostering economic and social isolation, and diminishing the county's wider regional influence.

Moreover, Oxfordshire County Council's assumptions about absorbing district-level responsibilities are both unrealistic and unsupported by detailed planning. The proposed governance structures – such as oversized area committees and a single county-wide planning committee – are either impractical or inappropriate and would further dilute local representation. The absence of meaningful engagement with town and parish councils, coupled with limited understanding of district-level functions, reinforces concerns about the proposal's credibility.

Finally, the One Oxfordshire proposal offers no compelling vision for reform or improvement. It relies on maintaining current approaches that are already failing residents, assumes unachievable financial savings, and provides no innovation in service delivery. At a time when public services must be more responsive, more efficient, and more locally attuned, the proposal instead offers an outdated and ineffective model that would leave Oxfordshire worse off.

For these reasons, we strongly contend that the One Oxfordshire proposal is not in the best interests of residents or communities, nor does it provide the right building blocks for good local government and secure the long-term future of the county.

9. I confirm that I have not provided any information that identifies an individual in the free text box.

Yes.

Consultation on Proposal from Cherwell District Council, South Oxfordshire District Council, Vale of White Horse District Council, and West Oxfordshire District Council

1. To what extent do you agree or disagree that the proposal suggests councils that are based on sensible geographies and economic areas?
 - Strongly Agree
 - Somewhat Agree
 - Neither Agree nor Disagree
 - Somewhat Disagree
 - Strongly Disagree
 - Don't Know

Strongly Agree.

2. To what extent do you agree or disagree that the proposed councils will be able to deliver the outcomes they describe in the proposal?
 - Strongly Agree
 - Somewhat Agree
 - Neither Agree nor Disagree
 - Somewhat Disagree
 - Strongly Disagree
 - Don't Know

Strongly Agree.

3. To what extent do you agree or disagree that the proposed councils are the right size to be efficient, improve capacity and withstand financial shocks?
 - Strongly Agree
 - Somewhat Agree
 - Neither Agree nor Disagree
 - Somewhat Disagree
 - Strongly Disagree
 - Don't Know

Strongly Agree.

4. To what extent do you agree or disagree that this proposal will put local government in the area as a whole on a firmer footing, particularly given that some councils in the area in receipt of exceptional financial support?
 - Strongly Agree
 - Somewhat Agree
 - Neither Agree nor Disagree
 - Somewhat Disagree
 - Strongly Disagree
 - Don't Know

Strongly Agree.

5. To what extent do you agree or disagree that the proposed councils will deliver high quality, sustainable public services?

- Strongly Agree
- Somewhat Agree
- Neither Agree nor Disagree
- Somewhat Disagree
- Strongly Disagree
- Don't Know

Strongly Agree.

6. To what extent do you agree or disagree that the proposal has been informed by local views and will meet local needs?
- Strongly Agree
 - Somewhat Agree
 - Neither Agree nor Disagree
 - Somewhat Disagree
 - Strongly Disagree
 - Don't Know

Strongly Agree.

7. To what extent do you agree or disagree that establishing the councils in this proposal will support devolution arrangements?
- Strongly Agree
 - Somewhat Agree
 - Neither Agree nor Disagree
 - Somewhat Disagree
 - Strongly Disagree
 - Don't Know

Strongly Agree.

8. To what extent do you agree or disagree that the proposal enables stronger community engagement and gives the opportunity for neighbourhood empowerment?
- Strongly Agree
 - Somewhat Agree
 - Neither Agree nor Disagree
 - Somewhat Disagree
 - Strongly Disagree
 - Don't Know

Strongly Agree.

9. If you would like to, please use the free text box to explain the answers you have provided to questions 1-8 referring to the question numbers as part of your answer. You may also use the box to provide any other comments you have on the proposal.

We fully support the two unitary authority (2UA) proposal for Oxfordshire. This option has the support of all the district councils – meaning that it is the preferred option for four of the six current upper and lower tier authorities in Oxfordshire. It requires no boundary changes and is ready to deliver the benefits of unitaries at exactly the right scale.

Q1 on whether this proposal is based on sensible geographies and economic areas:

Yes, the 2UA proposal has a sensible geography. It is based on a coherent functional geography that reflects how places and communities actually operate in this area.

Importantly, the proposed structure enables integrated planning for housing, employment and infrastructure. This is because the proposed two unitaries align with key growth areas and transport corridors, for example like the A34 strategic road network which links West Berkshire and southern Oxfordshire. The A34 corridor connects Thames Valley opportunity areas along the M4 in Berkshire with Science Vale, a cluster of innovation campuses of international importance for economic growth and solving global problems. This proposal creates authorities with an appropriate blend of urban centres, market towns and rural areas, enabling balanced decision-making bringing together urban and rural interests. This means decisions recognise the interdependence of places, while maintaining local identity.

The 2UA proposal also aligns with Functional Economic Areas, harnessing the reality that economic activity, labour markets and supply chains operate across district boundaries. Evidence supporting this is in AECOM's Independent Economic Analysis of the 2 Unitary Proposal for Oxfordshire and West Berkshire. This configuration supports coordinated economic development across connected market towns, rural areas and growth locations. The proposed two unitary structure aligns with opportunities on the ground and with delivery. The proposed population size offers the right scale for financial resilience and effective delivery of demand-led services, without losing accessibility or local connection.

Q2 on whether the proposed councils will be able to deliver the outcomes they describe in the proposal:

Yes. The 2UA proposal will be able to deliver the outcomes described because it is underpinned by financial sustainability. Financial modelling demonstrates the proposal's sustainability: the 2UA solution will bring significantly improved financial resilience across the whole of Oxfordshire and West Berkshire. It does this because high-cost, demand-led services (such as adult and children's social care) work and are resilient at the scale of the proposed authorities. Transition costs would be proportionate and achievable within a reasonable payback period. Analysis by CIPFA has shown that this is the most resilient model for both Oxfordshire and West Berkshire.

On achieving the outcomes, evidence from an independent national research report by PeopleToo backs the 2UA approach as having scope for improved outcomes in adult and children's social care. In terms of the LGR transition, having two upper tier authorities significantly reduces disaggregation risk. Rather than building new services from scratch, the 2UA proposal would involve building on the existing management structures and delivery capabilities that are already in place. This transition would be based on existing partnership working, using the governance arrangements detailed in the proposal. Risks have been identified along with mitigation strategies. The two unitary model offers a lower risk transition because the number of merging organisations is proportionate and manageable.

On planning and development, we note the recent government announcement for a Greater Oxford Development Corporation. By addressing many of the strategic infrastructure issues facing Oxfordshire – like sewerage and energy – a development corporation covering some of the stalled private sector developments in the area could work in conjunction with the new unitary authorities to deliver for our existing and future residents.

Q3 on whether the proposed councils are the right size to be efficient, improve capacity and withstand financial shocks:

Yes, the 2UA proposal creates the best sized authorities of all the proposals. It is the only

proposal which meets the government criteria for unitary councils to be around 500,000 population, with both unitaries being just under that target by vesting day and soon reaching 500,000 with planned housing growth. In terms of efficiency, independent analysis by PwC and CIPFA show that these will be two financially resilient councils, with good payback periods and high potential savings, while being able to maintain local focus. The CIPFA study shows that 2UA is the most resilient outcome for Oxfordshire and West Berkshire. The 2UA proposal sets out a sensible approach to managing the transition and transformation costs of turning seven authorities into two. One-off transition costs are forecast to be only slightly higher than the one unitary option. The Exceptional Financial Support that West Berkshire Council is receiving is addressed in the 2UA proposal (see also Q4 below). The 2UA proposal does not suggest addressing debt centrally or writing it off.

Q4 on whether the proposal will put local government in the area as a whole on a firmer footing, particularly given that some councils in the area are in receipt of exceptional financial support:

Yes, this proposal will put the area as a whole on a firmer footing. There is one council within the 2UA proposal which has been granted in-principle Exceptional Financial Support to support its 2026/27 budget, this is West Berkshire. Receiving support for 2026/27 does not necessarily mean that West Berkshire Council will be in receipt of Exceptional Financial Support in future financial years. Independent research and analysis by PwC and CIPFA demonstrate that the 2UA proposal delivers two financially resilient councils. The CIPFA report shows this to be the most resilient outcome for Oxfordshire and West Berkshire. The 2UA model delivers good payback periods and high potential savings, while maintaining local focus.

Q5 on whether the proposed councils will deliver high quality, sustainable public services:

Yes. For several clear and important reasons, the 2UA proposal will be able to deliver high quality, sustainable public services.

Firstly, the process of moving from a two-tier system to two unitary authorities connects district and county council services in highly advantageous ways. For example, bringing planning for housing and economic growth together with transport and education planning will unlock opportunities. This structural simplification removes fragmentation, reduces delays and provides both shared objectives and clear lines of accountability, improving responsiveness and making better decisions all round.

For residents, unitary councils will be less confusing. It will be simpler for service users to access services and support. There will be a more coherent customer journey when residents interact with council services. On the elected member side, a single local ward councillor means a single point of contact, cutting out the need to redirect a resident's enquiry or request to a different councillor in a different council. Service standards for users will be consistent because of integrated governance across all services.

Secondly, the 2UA proposal creates authorities of the right size to benefit from economies of scale AND focus on localities. It hits the sweet spot between ensuring local representation and achieving efficiencies: large enough to be efficient but small enough to understand local needs. Our proposal for area committees bolsters a community-based approach. The proposition involves working closely with town and parish councils in a place-based approach that has attracted their wide support.

Thirdly, the 2UA proposal will deliver tangible improvements to council services by, for example, closer working between housing and adult social care teams under a locality approach. Focussing on prevention and collaborative working across public sector partners will help manage pressures on the system and go hand-in-hand with better results for service users. There are many opportunities to reform public services and achieve better value for money by strengthening local accountability while still benefiting from a sensible scale for the two unitary authorities.

Finally, delivering high quality services and improvements to existing services requires a model which provides financial security and a viable transition. As explained under Q3, independent studies have demonstrated that the 2UA model creates two financially resilient councils, with good payback periods and high potential savings. It is the best over the long-term because it is the most resilient option for Oxfordshire and West Berkshire.

Q6 on whether the proposal has been informed by local views and will meet local needs:

Yes.

The 2UA proposal has been informed by the views of residents and communities across Oxfordshire and West Berkshire. The councils involved undertook an extensive engagement exercise across the impacted areas to ascertain the opinions and needs of the local population. This work helped to shape and enhance the 2UA proposal and ensures that it is fit for purpose.

The proposed local authorities (Ridgeway and Oxford & Shires) contained within the 2UA proposal are of the right size to be sustainable, but also locally responsive. Their close proximity to the communities they serve will enable services to be designed effectively to meet their needs and requirements.

In addition, the 2UA proposal builds upon existing economic, community and historic connections. Before 1974, Vale of White Horse and considerable tracts of South Oxfordshire were administered alongside West Berkshire as part of Berkshire. There are, therefore, pre-existing and long-standing ties between these areas – they also have similar demographic characteristics. For many residents, the 2UA proposal is restoring something valuable.

The 2UA proposal also protects the distinct heritage and identity of the city of Oxford. It puts forward a structure that delivers the efficiency and capacity that HM Government requires, while ensuring Oxford, as part of the Oxford & Shires council, retains the appropriate powers, identity and accountability befitting a city of its scale, pan-regional economic influence and global profile.

Q7 on whether establishing the councils in this proposal will support devolution arrangements:

Yes.

The two-unitary (2UA) proposal achieves the right balance of scale across the wider Thames Valley strategic area. By establishing two broadly comparable authorities, each with an approximate population of around 500,000 residents, the model ensures that Oxfordshire's councils would neither dominate nor be overshadowed within any future strategic authority.

At the same time, the 2UA model is sufficiently large and capable to exert strategic influence - within Oxfordshire and across the wider region. Ridgeway and Oxford & Shires

will both be large enough to help shape regional investment decisions, secure inward funding, and engage credibly with national government and strategic partners.

The proposed councils will also be large enough to realise meaningful economies of scale, yet not so large as to become bureaucratic, remote, or slow to respond. This scale enables the proposed unitary authorities to retain a clear focus on the distinct needs of their communities, ensuring that service delivery remains attuned to local needs.

In addition, the 2UA proposal will help ensure that the economic potential of all of Oxfordshire and West Berkshire can be properly recognised, prioritised and developed. It allows for both future authorities to focus on the drivers of productivity, innovation and regeneration within its own geography, while contributing to aligned county-wide opportunities. This helps avoid the emergence of neglected areas and ensures that growth is evenly supported across Oxfordshire.

Q8 on whether the proposal enables stronger community engagement and gives the opportunity for neighbourhood empowerment:

Yes.

The 2UA proposal presents a model that is fundamentally the right size for councils to genuinely understand – and meaningfully respond to – the communities they serve. By creating authorities that are neither excessively large nor artificially constrained, the proposal ensures that organisational structures can be built around real geographies, established relationships, and coherent places. This will enable decision-making to be reflective of local needs.

The proposal sets out a strong place-based approach to service delivery. By coordinating services around the needs of places rather than the boundaries of existing organisations, the 2UA proposal will enable councils to design preventative, integrated and community-centred support. This means aligning health, social care, housing, community safety and economic development in a way which reflects how residents actually experience services. Such an approach will help reduce duplication, strengthen early intervention and improve outcomes.

In addition, preventative working is a central feature of the 2UA proposal, recognising that long-term sustainability requires reducing demand on high-cost, reactive services. Through closer collaboration across the public sector – supported by coherent geographies and shared priorities – the new councils will be better placed to tackle the issues affecting local communities.

Under the 2UA proposal, neighbourhood-level engagement will be strengthened through the introduction of appropriately designed area committees that will be the right size and scale to be effective. The 2UA proposal also recognises the importance of town and parish councils – and the unique identity of Oxford.

The 2UA proposal delivers the right level of democratic representation for residents across Oxfordshire. While the overall number of councillors will reduce, the proposal ensures that each elected member retains the ability to act as an effective local representative. By striking an appropriate balance, the 2UA model avoids overstressing councillors while maintaining strong democratic accountability. Furthermore, it achieves a fair balance between urban and rural representation.

Conclusion:

The 2UA proposal is about choosing the right structure for the future of the area, large enough to benefit from economies of scale, but small enough to care. Providing a locality-

based approach, these authorities would have a local identity and local responsiveness for residents. The 2UA authorities would punch above their weight, harnessing opportunities for growth in these vital parts of southern England, while leading the way in local government good practice and innovation.

2UA is based on a sensible and functional geography that reflects how communities, economies and infrastructure operate across the region. By aligning with key transport corridors, major employment centres and established patterns of movement, the 2UA proposal creates two balanced authorities that are well positioned to manage growth and deliver integrated planning for housing, transport and economic development. This structure brings together urban centres, market towns and rural communities in a way that supports balanced decision-making while preserving local identity and place-based priorities.

The 2UA model is underpinned by demonstrable financial sustainability. Independent analysis confirms that this configuration delivers the strongest financial resilience for both Oxfordshire and West Berkshire, with robust payback periods, achievable savings and sustainable funding structures for demand-led services such as adult and children's social care. Crucially, the proposal builds on existing organisational strengths rather than requiring the costly and risky creation of entirely new structures. Transition costs are proportionate, deliverable and significantly lower risk than any proposal requiring wholesale disaggregation.

Importantly, the 2UA proposal has also considered how it will effectively deliver high-quality public services in a more integrated, rational and user-centred way. Moving from a two-tier system to two unitary authorities brings together functions such as housing, planning, education, transport and social care within a single organisational framework – removing fragmentation, reducing delays and enabling preventative, whole-system working. Residents will benefit from clearer pathways to access support, consistent service standards and a single accountable local representative. The strengthened focus on prevention, early intervention and cross-agency collaboration will help manage rising demand pressures while improving outcomes across communities. Therefore, and unlike the alternatives, the 2UA proposal has developed a coherent approach to the delivery of local government services. It has recognised the opportunity that LGR has provided to re-assess how services are provided and, thereby, improve outcomes for residents.

The 2UA proposal offers the right scale for democratic representation and local responsiveness. Authorities of around 500,000 residents are large enough to be efficient and influential, yet still of a size that allows councillors to maintain meaningful engagement with the people and places they represent. The proposal's commitments to neighbourhood-level area committees, strong partnership with parish and town councils, and bespoke arrangements to protect Oxford's civic identity, ensure that local voices and accountability remain at the heart of the system. This is a model that strengthens, rather than dilutes, local democracy.

Moreover, the 2UA proposal reflects the views and priorities of residents, communities and local stakeholders. The extensive engagement undertaken across Oxfordshire and West Berkshire has shaped a proposal that is both locally supported and practically deliverable. It builds upon long-standing economic, social and historic connections while also protecting what is distinctive about Oxford.

We, therefore express our strong support for the 2UA proposal, as it presents the most coherent, credible model for local government in Oxfordshire and West Berkshire. It also provides a vision for the future direction of local government in the area that, if realised, will help to improve services for residents, grow the local economy and support devolution.

10. This is a proposal that affects wider public services. To what extent do you agree or disagree that the proposal sets out a strong public services and financial sustainability justification for these changes?

- Strongly Agree
- Somewhat Agree
- Neither Agree nor Disagree
- Somewhat Disagree
- Strongly Disagree
- Don't Know

Strongly Agree.

11. If you would like to, please use this free text box to explain your answer to question 10

The 2UA proposal is rooted in clear coherent plans for delivering the advantages for strong public services that unitary authorities bring - like joining-up services and providing a simpler customer journey for service users - while doing this at the right scale and over the right geography. The economic merits of the proposal are plain to see – this is the unitary model which creates financially resilient councils, with good payback periods, high potential savings, and provides the most resilient outcome for Oxfordshire and West Berkshire.

12. I confirm that I have not provided any information that identifies an individual in the free text box.

Yes

Consultation on Proposal from Oxford City Council

1. To what extent do you agree or disagree that the proposal suggests councils that are based on sensible geographies and economic areas?
 - Strongly Agree
 - Somewhat Agree
 - Neither Agree nor Disagree
 - Somewhat Disagree
 - Strongly Disagree
 - Don't Know

Strongly Disagree.

2. To what extent do you agree or disagree that the proposed councils will be able to deliver the outcomes they describe in the proposal?
 - Strongly Agree
 - Somewhat Agree
 - Neither Agree nor Disagree
 - Somewhat Disagree
 - Strongly Disagree
 - Don't Know

Strongly Disagree.

3. To what extent do you agree or disagree that the proposed councils are the right size to be efficient, improve capacity and withstand financial shocks?
 - Strongly Agree
 - Somewhat Agree
 - Neither Agree nor Disagree
 - Somewhat Disagree
 - Strongly Disagree
 - Don't Know

Strongly Disagree.

4. To what extent do you agree or disagree that this proposal will put local government in the area as a whole on a firmer footing, particularly given that some councils in the area are in receipt of exceptional financial support?
 - Strongly Agree
 - Somewhat Agree
 - Neither Agree nor Disagree
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 - Don't Know

Strongly Disagree.

5. To what extent do you agree or disagree that the proposed councils will deliver high quality, sustainable public services?
 - Strongly Agree
 - Somewhat Agree

- Neither Agree nor Disagree
- Somewhat Disagree
- Strongly Disagree
- Don't Know

Strongly Disagree.

6. To what extent do you agree or disagree that the proposal has been informed by local views and will meet local needs?
- Strongly Agree
 - Somewhat Agree
 - Neither Agree nor Disagree
 - Somewhat Disagree
 - Strongly Disagree
 - Don't Know

Strongly Disagree.

7. To what extent do you agree or disagree that establishing the councils in this proposal will support devolution arrangements?
- Strongly Agree
 - Somewhat Agree
 - Neither Agree nor Disagree
 - Somewhat Disagree
 - Strongly Disagree
 - Don't Know

Strongly Disagree.

8. To what extent do you agree or disagree that the proposal enables stronger community engagement and gives the opportunity for neighbourhood empowerment?
- Strongly Agree
 - Somewhat Agree
 - Neither Agree nor Disagree
 - Somewhat Disagree
 - Strongly Disagree
 - Don't Know

Strongly Disagree.

If you would like to, please use the free text box to explain the answers you have provided to questions 1-8 referring to the question numbers as part of your answer. You may also use the box to provide any other comments you have on the proposal.

We do not support the three unitary councils ('3Councils') proposal for Oxfordshire. This option only has the support of Oxford City Council - just one of the six upper and lower tier authorities in Oxfordshire.

Q1 on whether this proposal is based on sensible geographies and economic areas:
No.

The Greater Oxford proposal is focussed on an expanded Oxford, anything outside that has been an afterthought. This 3Councils proposal fails to provide coherent plans for either the (diminished) Ridgeway or Northern Oxfordshire councils that it has included within its plans.

The proposal, by any objective analysis, creates at least one and possibly two unviable unitary authorities and fails to outline in any detail how either of the non-Greater Oxford councils will function and/or deliver services.

The economic plans outlined by Oxford City Council focus almost exclusively on Greater Oxford, while ignoring large parts of the rest of the county. Little, if any consideration, has been given to the potential of other parts of Oxfordshire and we fear that if this proposal is chosen as the preferred option for LGR, communities in these areas will be at greater risk of economic and social isolation.

The proposal also seeks to create an artificial geography around the city which fails to consider interconnectivity, community connections or common sense. The only justification advanced by Oxford City Council for its proposed altered boundaries are that it will unite all the green belt under one authority, but fails to appreciate the complexities and ambiguities inherent within this approach.

Q2 on whether the proposed councils will be able to deliver the outcomes they describe in the proposal:

No

The proposed disaggregation of services across three separate councils presents a significant operational challenge and introduces considerable risk to service continuity. Fragmenting functions that are currently delivered in an integrated manner is likely to create complexity, reduce efficiency, and weaken the resilience of provision during transition.

Although the proposal acknowledges that partnership arrangements may be required to ensure services continue to operate effectively, such models are often fragile. They depend heavily on sustained political alignment, shared priorities, and consistent resourcing. In our view, local authorities should ideally be able to deliver essential services independently, without an over-reliance on partnership working.

In addition, the deliverability of the projected economic and housing growth is highly uncertain. Ambitions relying on the release of green belt or grey belt land carry risks, including lengthy planning processes, legal challenges, and potential public opposition, all of which could significantly extend timelines.

There are also broader concerns about whether the development sector currently has the capacity or incentive to deliver in the way Oxford City is proposing. Based on our experience of allocating major strategic sites on former edge-of-Oxford green belt land to help meet Oxford's needs, we consider it unlikely that housebuilders would bring forward so much development simultaneously on the edge of the city because that would lead to local market saturation. The same goes for employment land including lab space: market absorption rates mean that plan too much development in one place, and developers hold back, wanting to deliver sites one-by-one to maximise sale prices. Oxford City Council lacks these insights.

The recent announcement regarding the creation of a Greater Oxford Development Corporation shows the City Council's long-standing difficulties in delivering the housing, commercial floorspace, and infrastructure that the city requires. Although in theory new powers and public funding could assist with delivery, there is a risk of a Development Corporation facing the same infrastructure capacity and market saturation issues.

In contrast, our 2UA proposal is grounded in a proven track record of delivering growth at a scale significantly higher than anything Oxford has achieved. It enables economic development and housebuilding to be distributed across a broader geography, supporting

higher overall levels of delivery without overwhelming or stagnating the market in any one area. This stands in stark contrast to the 3Councils proposal, which concentrates development so heavily that it risks precisely the kinds of market saturation and delivery constraints we have outlined.

Q3 on whether the proposed councils are the right size to be efficient, improve capacity and withstand financial shocks:

No.

The proposal to establish three new unitary councils raises significant concerns regarding their long-term viability and operational resilience. Two of the proposed councils would fall below the population threshold of around 250,000 residents, limiting their ability to realise economies of scale, drive efficiencies or develop the organisational capacity needed to manage increasing demand pressures and withstand financial shocks.

Additionally, the absence of detail on transition and transformation costs makes it difficult to assess the true financial implications of the proposal. It is also unclear how the benefits proposed by Oxford City have been calculated, therefore, raising questions about their deliverability.

Q4 on whether the proposal will put local government in the area as a whole on a firmer footing, particularly given that some councils in the area are in receipt of exceptional financial support:

No.

This proposal to establish three new unitary councils would weaken the situation. By creating two councils below the population threshold of around 250,000 residents, this proposal would fall well short of the mark and would squander the opportunity offered by LGR. As described under question 3, we have serious concerns around the long-term viability and operational resilience of this model. Setting up three smaller unitaries would limit their ability to achieve economies of scale, drive efficiencies or develop the organisational capacity needed for success. There are information gaps in the proposal on detailed transition and transformation costs, and a lack of clarity on how 3Councils would generate the level of financial benefit required to reduce the current levels of Exceptional Financial Support. This is not a sensible path for putting local government in the area on a firmer footing.

Q5 on whether the proposed councils will deliver high quality, sustainable public services:

No.

The creation of three smaller unitary councils would almost certainly lead to the fragmentation of services. Breaking up established operational structures risks duplicating functions, reducing coordination, and weakening the consistency and quality of service delivery.

Although shared services can offer efficiency benefits, they are inherently dependent on stable political relationships, aligned strategic priorities and sustained financial commitment. These conditions can shift rapidly with changes in leadership or local priorities, making such arrangements fragile over time. Designing a proposal that depends on shared services to remain viable suggests that the proposed councils may not, in practice, be capable of operating independently.

Q6 on whether the proposal has been informed by local views and will meet local needs:

No.

The 3Council proposal creates three small unitary authorities which are likely to face financial challenges. With a lack of financial viability, financial security would be in jeopardy, presenting a significant risk of failing to meet local needs. As budgets continue to tighten and demand for services grows, authorities would face difficult decisions about which services they can sustain and at what level.

The Greater Oxford proposal does not reflect the views of residents living within the green belt. Oxford City's plans are almost exclusively focused on the benefits that a Greater Oxford would bring to the city, and, therefore, pay scant regard to the needs of the communities that would be brought within this new authority's control (there is little mention of any potential benefits for these areas). If, as indications suggest, Greater Oxford is effectively a council just for Oxford, there is a very real risk of a stark rural-urban divide emerging within the authority – with non-Oxford based residents in rural parishes feeling that they are being ignored and that decisions are being taken without their input and/or consent.

More broadly, the Greater Oxford proposal does not adequately take into account the perspectives, needs or priorities of the other local authorities across Oxfordshire. Oxford City Council has not adopted a genuinely comprehensive or collaborative approach to engagement. Its consultation efforts have been primarily focused within the city boundaries, with little meaningful attempt to involve residents, communities or stakeholders elsewhere in Oxfordshire or West Berkshire.

As a result, the proposal reads as a plan by Oxford City Council for Oxford City – one that pays little, if any, attention to what happens in those parts of Oxfordshire that would fall outside the proposed Greater Oxford area.

Q7 on whether establishing the councils in this proposal will support devolution arrangements:

No.

There is a significant risk that the proposed arrangements could result in an over-concentration of focus on the city itself, potentially overlooking the strengths, assets, and distinct contributions of surrounding areas, including the towns, garden communities and major economic hubs like Science Vale. This approach will prioritise urban challenges and opportunities, leaving less capacity to recognise or invest in other areas.

Another concern is that the three councils created by the Greater Oxford proposal would be too small to exert meaningful strategic influence. Financial pressures and a smaller staff body would weaken their ability to participate in regional bodies such as a future strategic authority. This would make it harder for these councils to advocate effectively for their priorities.

There is also a broader risk of fragmented or inconsistent strategic planning across Oxfordshire. Effective long-term planning for growth and infrastructure requires alignment between neighbouring authorities, but if structures become uneven or priorities diverge, joined-up thinking becomes far more difficult to achieve.

Q8 on whether the proposal enables stronger community engagement and gives the opportunity for neighbourhood empowerment:

No.

The Greater Oxford proposal carries a significant risk of overlooking the essential links between Oxford and the rural areas that surround it. These rural communities play a crucial role in the wider functioning of the county. The Greater Oxford proposal is overly focused on the needs of the city of Oxford and, therefore, fails to consider the interactions/links between the county's urban and rural areas. This disconnect will limit the council's effectiveness in areas such as economic development and infrastructure planning and may lead to opportunities being missed for coherent planning, shared investment, and balanced economic development across Oxfordshire.

Conclusion:

We are strongly opposed to the Greater Oxford proposal. It is fundamentally flawed in design, lacking both coherence and credibility. The proposal fails to set out viable plans for the two councils that would sit outside Greater Oxford, instead creating at least one – and likely two - unitary authorities that would be too small to be financially sustainable, resilient, or capable of delivering the full range of modern local government services. The absence of detail on how these authorities would operate, alongside the significant risks associated with disaggregating services across three new councils, undermines confidence in the overall proposal.

The Greater Oxford proposal also advances an artificial geography that takes little account of community identity, existing interdependencies, or practical boundaries. Its narrow and city-centric approach to economic planning neglects the needs, assets and opportunities of large parts of Oxfordshire. It betrays a lack of insight and experience into serving rural areas. As a result, it risks deepening economic and social isolation for communities beyond the immediate Oxford area. The proposed reliance on development in the green belt and grey belt compounds this uncertainty, with the deliverability of this subject to substantial planning, legal and public-acceptance challenges. The 'all eggs in one basket' approach to delivering housing and employment within a narrow belt of land at the edge of Oxford is highly likely to saturate the market and deliver slower overall growth than the 2UA proposal.

Crucially, the proposal's financial and operational assumptions are neither explained nor justified. With two of the three proposed authorities falling below the population level required for a viable unitary council, the model is predisposed to financial instability. The fragmentation of services inherent in creating three small authorities would likely reduce efficiency, duplicate functions, and undermine resilience. The proposal's dependence on shared service arrangements further exposes its weakness, given these partnerships inevitably rely on sustained political alignment and shared priorities – conditions that cannot be guaranteed over time.

The proposal also fails to reflect the views or interests of residents, particularly those living in the green belt parishes who would be absorbed into Greater Oxford, without any meaningful assessment of how it would benefit them. More broadly, it disregards the perspectives and needs of the wider county. It is, in effect, a proposal for Oxford rather than one for Oxfordshire.

Furthermore, the creation of three small authorities would diminish Oxfordshire's strategic influence, weakening its ability to participate effectively in regional decision-making and undermining efforts to achieve coherent, county-wide planning. The proposal's failure to address the essential connections between Oxford and the rural areas that support and depend upon it would lead to missed opportunities for integrated planning, balanced investment, and sustainable growth.

Taken together, these deficiencies demonstrate that the Greater Oxford proposal is neither realistic nor responsible. It is not grounded in a credible understanding of local government

finance, service delivery, or community identity, nor does it provide a clear or workable vision for Oxfordshire's future. Instead, it poses serious risks to service continuity, financial sustainability, democratic representation, and the long-term wellbeing of residents across the county. For these reasons, we firmly conclude that it should not be taken forward as an option for local government reform in Oxfordshire.

9. This is a proposal that is accompanied by a request that the Secretary of State considers boundary change or that affects wider public services. To what extent do you agree or disagree that the proposal sets out a strong public services and financial sustainability justification for these changes?
- Strongly Agree
 - Somewhat Agree
 - Neither Agree nor Disagree
 - Somewhat Disagree
 - Strongly Disagree
 - Don't Know

Strongly Disagree.

10. If you would like to, please use this free text box to explain your answer to question 10

We have grave concerns about the boundary change proposals under this model and their impacts on all three proposed authorities.

Firstly, looking at the proposed Greater Oxford. It is evident that many of the areas proposed for inclusion within Greater Oxford do not naturally identify themselves as part of Oxford. Incorporating them into a Greater Oxford authority risks overlooking these differences. As a result, tensions are likely to arise, and residents lose confidence that their specific circumstances will be understood or appropriately reflected in decision-making. These areas also have needs that differ significantly from those of Oxford. If, as seems likely, a Greater Oxford monomaniacally focuses on the city's priorities, those living outside Oxford risk seeing their concerns and interests overshadowed or completely ignored.

Turning to the other two unitaries north and south of an expanded Oxford, the feasibility of the Greater Oxford proposal relies heavily on altering existing boundaries – changes that would diminish the population bases of the other two councils involved in the reorganisation. By transferring significant areas into Greater Oxford, these other authorities would become smaller and potentially less viable.

11. I confirm that I have not provided any information that identifies an individual in the free text box.

Yes