Governing Oxfordshire: What will Local Government Reform Deliver?

Summary of an Oxford Civic Society meeting to explore the challenges for Oxfordshire of local government reform, held at the Mathematical Institute, University of Oxford, 1 November 2025

Session 1

The first two speakers set out the overall context of local government reform proposals for Oxfordshire. Prof Danny Dorling argued that boundary changes in themselves would not solve the most fundamental problems of the city and the county. Those problems were born of deep social inequalities exacerbated by the inability of local government – stripped of its major functions over a long period – to pursue policies which would counteract inequality and social exclusion. The deep divide in Oxford's education system, the segmentation of neighbourhoods, the problems of travel and congestion, and the emerging crisis of adult social care were all the result of long-term policy failure linked to the hollowing out of the powers of English local government. As a result, Oxford's problems have gradually intensified, exacerbated by demographic change. The crisis is most acute in the city but the wider county is not immune. The real challenge, Danny Dorling argued, was to address these social tensions. He warned, in conclusion, that in the current unprecedently volatile political climate, it was misguided to suppose that drawing boundaries round particular configurations of unitary-tier territory would deliver predictable political advantage to any particular party or enable the delivery of any particular set of policies.

In the light of the economic and social diversity between the Oxford growth spine, running along the north-south communication routes, and the less densely populated areas and smaller market towns outside the spine itself, Ian Green argued that the basic choice faced by the county was between consolidation and disaggregation of decision-making. The segmented nature of the county's economy created different needs and different policy priorities between areas. A fundamental question was therefore whether these contrasts were best managed and resolved by a single unitary authority, or through at least two and possibly three authorities. If the choice turned out to be in favour of more than one unitary, there was a further conundrum of where to draw the boundaries. Extending the area of the city might help address critical urban housing needs, but was controversial for the green-belt communities the city would absorb. It would also cut the growth spine artificially in two places, making strategic economic planning potentially incoherent - unless perhaps regional devolution eventually took this role right out of the

hands of local government. In that case, however, the choice of governance formula would, at least for economic planning purposes, be irrelevant. Yet a single very large unitary could not only cut across the strong identity of Oxford as a city and a driver of growth; it would also strip out an important layer of political representation needed to help the adaptation of policy to local community needs.

Session 2

The second session then heard from authority leaders who set out their preferred reform proposals. In presenting the County Council's proposal, Leader of the OCC Liz Leffman argued for the clarity and simplicity of a single unitary covering the entire county. Like the two speakers who followed her, she supported the general principle of a single front door for all services delivered by local government, but she argued that the county represented a natural unit which, if broken into two or three single front doors for different geographies, would lose coherence and make cooperation between the different sub-sections of the county more difficult. A further fundamental element of her case was familiarity, cost and efficiency. Most functions would remain in an authority very much like the existing County Council, with well-established working models for the main policy areas. Transition costs and disruption would she argued be minimal, and efficiency savings would come in very quickly from consolidation of functions currently performed by the districts. She recognised the challenge posed by the size of a single unitary for all Oxfordshire and emphasised the proposals in the County's scheme to address this. The most important was a provision for separate area neighbourhood committees, built around councillors from the relevant areas, supplemented by appointed representatives from a variety of other local-level bodies, which, working with parish and town councils, would ensure neighbourhoods had a clear voice, and that policy took account of local needs.

The proposal for two unitaries, presented by the leader of West Oxfordshire, Andy Graham, entailed a northern authority consisting of West Oxfordshire, Cherwell, and the current City and a southern one based on the Vale, South Oxfordshire and West Berkshire. Cllr Graham argued that local government reform was a once-in-a-generation opportunity to improve local government performance. The key to grasping this opportunity lay in authorities being closer and more in touch with a fast-changing set of local realities, in contrast to the potentially over-large administration inherent in a single unitary. The two-authority proposal, built on roughly equal size populations, with each council aligned along what Cllr Graham saw as natural growth corridors, would be 'large enough to be resilient but small enough to care'. He argued that financial modelling also showed the two unitary structure would deliver the highest savings over the long run. At the lowest level, residents would experience clearer faster more joined up thinking in daily decisions under what he called a "localities model' of governance. That model not only emphasised smaller unitaries, but a high degree of further decentralisation through local neighbourhood areas of 30-50000 people, spread across each of the two unitaries, and a special role for the city of Oxford to safeguard and reflect its long-standing identity and traditions.

The three-unitary "Greater Oxford" was presented by Susan Brown, leader of Oxford City Council. It was based on five principles: a strong voice and identity for communities, the securing of economic prosperity for all, a solution to the housing crisis, better overall quality of life, and a future-proofed system of local government. Cllr Brown argued that the City's engagement with the public over its plans showed a strong preference for nearness and proximity. People did not want their distinctive voices and preferences to be diluted or even lost under the single- or two-unitary proposals. What applied to Oxfordshire applied even more strongly in a future regional mayoral authority. Oxford could be severely disadvantaged compared with other major regional towns like Reading, Slough and possibly Swindon under a single-unitary structure. She refuted the suggestion that the city-based unitary would be too small: evidence suggested that the biggest authorities were not the best performers on for example the delivery of adult social care, or children's services. Modelling also showed, she claimed, that transformational savings could be achieved through the three unitary model, with all three authorities likely to be fully financially viable. Singly out the critical issue of housing, Cllr Brown claimed the City had an excellent recent local record in tackling the rapidly escalating problems of housing and homelessness. However, the historic boundaries of the City were extremely constraining. Housing overspill drove development out to the smaller county towns and villages in an unsatisfactory and unplanned way, adding transport problems to housing problems. The solution was a "Greater Oxford" geography (to build approximately 40,000 new homes by 2040) in proximity to jobs, and on a far more rational basis than hitherto. In response to fears for the green belt, Cllr Brown argued that only about 2.6% of the green belt would be absorbed for housing under the City's proposals.

Questions and discussion:

Discussion was wide-ranging, touching on many issues. The multiple dimensions of housing policy formed the largest part of the discussion, with several questioners focusing on how to speed up building programmes against the variety of different bottlenecks (regulatory complexity, infrastructure inadequacy, financial viability) impeding housing delivery. Capturing the discussion is not possible in a summary note, but links to a recording of the whole morning's proceedings, including the final question session, will be made available on this website shortly.

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