

GOVERNMENT CONSULTATION ON LOCAL GOVERNMENT REORGANISATION

COMMENTS AND QUESTIONS FROM OXFORD CIVIC SOCIETY

Following engagement with a wide range of stakeholders, including a well-attended public meeting, Oxford Civic Society is submitting this response to Government's consultation on Local Government Reorganisation.

The Oxford Civic Society response assesses how far the proposals meet Government's stated objectives, identifies areas of weakness, and highlights questions requiring further consideration by Government.

1. The Government's Objectives

Local government reorganisation forms part of a wider devolution agenda aimed at modernising governance and improving public services. The Government's objectives include supporting economic growth and regional competitiveness; aligning local government with emerging devolution arrangements; replacing the two-tier system with unitary authorities; achieving efficiency savings; improving service integration; enabling effective planning for housing, infrastructure, and climate adaptation; and strengthening community empowerment, accountability, and public engagement.

Oxford Civic Society stresses that an assessment of reorganisation proposals should extend beyond administrative efficiency to consider how new structures support long-term economic resilience, strategic planning, and meaningful local democracy.

2. Proposals from Oxfordshire

Three reorganisation proposals for Oxfordshire were submitted to Government in November 2025.

- Oxfordshire County Council proposed a single county-wide unitary authority covering the existing areas of Cherwell, Oxford City, South Oxfordshire, Vale of White Horse, and West Oxfordshire.
- Cherwell District Council, South Oxfordshire District Council, Vale of White Horse District Council and West Oxfordshire District Council proposed two unitary authorities: an *Oxford and Shires Council* comprising Cherwell, Oxford City and West Oxfordshire, and a *Ridgeway Council* comprising South Oxfordshire, Vale of White Horse, and West Berkshire.
- Oxford City Council proposed three unitary authorities, involving the division of existing district areas: a *Greater Oxford Council* comprising Oxford City and selected parishes from Cherwell, South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse; a *Northern Oxfordshire Council* comprising the remainder of Cherwell and West Oxfordshire; and a *Ridgeway Council* comprising the remainder of South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse together with West Berkshire.

The consultation invited views on each proposal. Oxford Civic Society focused on whether they reflect Oxfordshire's distinctive economic geography, align with emerging devolution arrangements, and provide effective governance within new unitary authorities.

3. The Oxfordshire Knowledge Spine

A common weakness of all three proposals is their limited recognition of the Oxfordshire Knowledge Spine as a defining feature of the county's economy. Identified in the Strategic Economic Plan, this innovation corridor is anchored by world-class institutions including the University of Oxford, Harwell Campus, and Culham Science Centre. Together, these support a dense ecosystem of research, skilled employment, start-ups, and growing businesses, particularly in life sciences and advanced manufacturing. Most importantly, the ecosystem nurtures innovation.

The strength of the Knowledge Spine lies not only in individual sites, but in the functional relationships between them, including shared labour markets, transport connections, and knowledge exchange. This economic asset is central to Oxfordshire's prosperity and its contribution to the wider regional and national economy, yet it is not clearly reflected in any of the proposals.

- ***A key question is therefore whether reorganisation should do more to support and enhance this distinctive strength.***

4. Oxford, the Economy and the City's Special Case

The proposed unitary authority boundaries are driven more by political than by functional considerations. This raises several more questions.

- ***Do any of the proposals, including the Greater Oxford option, adequately recognise the city's dominant role in the county's economy and its national significance?***
- ***Should Oxford and the Knowledge Spine ecosystem be more closely aligned administratively?***
- ***Do the proposals acknowledge that the city faces environmental and social priorities that differ markedly from those of the county's more rural areas?***

The recent announcement of an Oxford Development Corporation is another matter to be considered – this Corporation will be working closely with local government and there is now a unique opportunity to ensure that the boundaries defined for the development corporation and the boundaries of new unitary authorities are complementary. This implies that the Oxford and the Knowledge Spine ecosystem should be more closely aligned administratively.

5. Devolution Geography

Oxford Civic Society considers that local government reorganisation cannot be assessed in isolation from emerging devolution arrangements. The Government has proposed a Thames Valley mayoralty covering Oxfordshire and neighbouring authorities. The functions of this mayoralty will include the preparation and implementation of a Mayoral Spatial Development Strategy which will help to indicate locations for housing, employment, and associated transport. The opportunities for local government reorganisation provided by this wider geography are not reflected in the current reorganisation proposals.

- ***Could closer alignment with neighbouring areas strengthen the benefits of the Knowledge Spine, support the long-term viability of more rural authorities, and provide greater flexibility in addressing Oxford's growth pressures?***
- ***Do these considerations suggest that alternative configurations, better aligned with functional economic areas and strategic planning needs, deserve thoughtful consideration?***

6. Community Engagement and Localism

Finally, Oxford Civic Society questions how the proposals would strengthen community empowerment. Although all three proposals refer to enhanced local engagement, for example through area committees, none explains clearly how such arrangements would operate or how they would ensure meaningful democratic accountability.

- ***What roles do parish and town councils play in unitary authorities and how can their roles be strengthened?***

Even more, we are concerned that the importance of the city should be recognised if the single unitary or two unitary proposal is adopted, by endowing a new council for the city with powers going beyond those of a normal parish or town council.

The Society is currently contributing to research to develop ideas on how this could work. This work is directly relevant to the implementation of unitary authorities and underlines the need to recognise the exceptional circumstances of the City of Oxford and that structural change needs to be accompanied by genuine opportunities for local participation and influence.

If you would like to discuss any of these responses, please contact me using this e-mail address. I'll be delighted to discuss it.

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