

UNMODIFIED PROPOSAL FOR THREE OXFORDSHIRE UNITARY COUNCILS

Dear Secretary of State,

On behalf of Oxford City Council, we are pleased to submit our submission pack in response to the call for Local Authorities to make suggestions for new Unitary Government solutions in Oxfordshire.

Our work represents substantial work with partners, business and communities across Oxfordshire and West Berkshire. We are confident that our proposals represent the best solution for Oxfordshire and West Berkshire, and that they help to meet the Government's priorities.

Working with your officials and the published guidance, we have developed the following:

1. An "unmodified" submission – type-C proposal as set out in the 2007 Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act. This includes a request for modification, in order to meet our aspirations and the Government's objectives, and includes West Berkshire alongside the district and city authorities currently within the Oxfordshire County Council area.
2. A "modified" submission – which represents our conclusion as to the best way to deliver LGR in Oxfordshire. Subject to your agreement to modification, it is this submission we wish to take forward and through consultation. This is a Type C proposal including West Berkshire alongside the district and city authorities currently within the Oxfordshire County Council area.

We look forward to hearing from you and working with the Government on the next phase of this work.

On behalf of:

Councillor Susan Brown

Oxford City Council

Part 1 – Unmodified Submission & Request for Modification

Submission (Unmodified): Three Unitary Councils in Oxfordshire and West Berkshire

Introduction

In response to the invitation made by the Minister of State for Local Government and English Devolution on the 5 February 2025, Oxford City Council submits the following proposals under the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007.

We believe the optimal solution for Local Government Reorganisation in Oxfordshire is for a three-unitary approach with authorities firmly rooted in place. **Our clear preference is for the creation of three unitaries, including the creation of a Greater Oxford Council which will involve boundary changes. That requires a modification to this proposal to be made by the Secretary of State. Our attached 3UA proposal document *Empowering People, Growing Prosperity, Building Communities* sets out a detailed rationale for such a modification to this unmodified proposal.**

Understanding both the challenges and opportunities across Oxfordshire forms the foundation of this proposal, which shapes authorities around the right scale and economic geography to improve outcomes through community-centred, preventative public services. This model will create a new, single tier of local government built upon meaningful localism, enhancing the ability of government to respond to local needs while providing a clear link to the emerging Thames Valley Mayoral Strategic Authority (MSA).

Our proposal recognises Oxford's role as an engine for growth, a world leader for innovation. It recognises Northern Oxfordshire's strong base of advanced manufacturing and green technology alongside the strong network of market towns, tourism destinations and idyllic smaller villages to the West and the newly-announced New Town in Heyford Park. It recognises Ridgeway as the region's energy powerhouse with a wide range of cutting-edge life science, quantum and space technologies companies, with its own strong market towns. It enables each of these areas to grow its strengths. It ensures that each of the three authorities can speak with a clear voice to one area, being close to its communities and able to represent them strongly at the regional MSA level.

We believe that this three-unitary model provides a clearer basis to represent local priorities to the Valley Mayoral Strategic Authority than alternative proposals for unitary structures in Oxfordshire. It also recognises the historic status and potential of Oxford as a regional economic engine with national significance and global reach.

The inclusion of West Berkshire in the total geography gives a current-day population of approximately 0.9million, providing a base for three financially viable authorities. This creates a geographically coherent Ridgeway – West Berkshire has very similar demographics to the existing South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse district councils. They retain elements of shared identity, and prior to the 1974 local government reorganisation, much of what is currently southern Oxfordshire and all of the Vale of White Horse were part of Berkshire. Crucially, this proposal respects the

views and work of our neighbours. We recognise the desire of our neighbours to the South to join with West Berkshire creating a new Ridgeway Council and so we have included this as a Type C adjoining area within this proposal.

Although West Berkshire has previously sought Exceptional Financial Support, its inclusion with South Oxfordshire and Vale of the White Horse in a Ridgeway Council mitigates the risk of future financial failure. In the absence of West Berkshire, it is likely that a doughnut of rural Oxfordshire alongside a Greater Oxford would be required.

Our vision for change

Our submission is built from our belief and understanding that:

- Oxfordshire is not a single homogenous area. It has a population size bigger than almost any other unitary authority in the country. Local government delivered at this scale would not be able to suitably consider the distinct strengths and challenges of communities.
- There are distinct geographies across Oxfordshire and West Berkshire, based on historical identities, networks of market towns and economies. These distinctions should form the basis of natural areas of local government and governance.
- The city of Oxford is an economic and innovation driving force for the wider region – particularly the Oxford Cambridge Growth Corridor – and unitary status focussed on the city could unlock its further potential to grow while addressing existing transport issues.
- The most important factor for effective local government is to be place-based. This enables the wider requirements, strengths and challenges of that place to be considered, and maximise both access to and enfranchisement with local services and democracy.
- The current situation for public service delivery is unsustainable. Effective public services must be delivered locally, with services considering the needs at a neighbourhood level and with a sensible and coherent geography to focus on partnership and prevention.
- Devolution across the Mayoral Strategic Authority for Thames Valley is best supported by multiple strong unitary Councils – each able to speak to a distinct area and not have to balance between rural and urban priorities. Cities should have their own authorities represented at this table to present a strong, investible proposition to a strategic authority to progress economic growth.

Proposal

We formally submit the following combined ‘Type B’ and ‘Type C’ submission (as set out in the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007) for the creation of three new unitary authorities in Oxfordshire. This unmodified proposal **maintains the local authority boundaries** that sever suburban communities from their city of Oxford however this unmodified approach does still achieve the goal of creating three new unitary authorities with clearly differentiated populations.

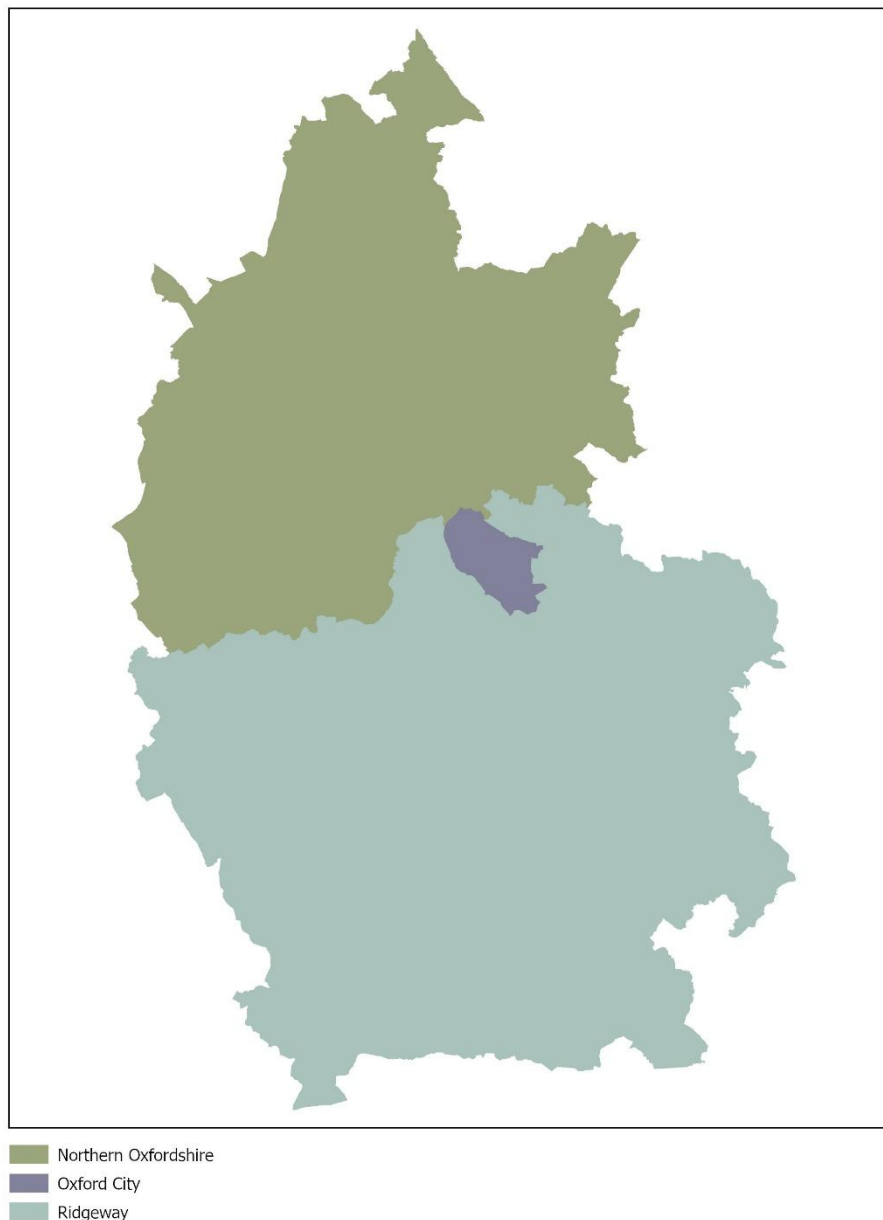


Figure 1. Unmodified Unitary Map – using district boundaries as the building blocks

1. **Oxford City** – Creating a new, city unitary for the City of Oxford recognises its status as an economic engine for the region which is currently inhibited by County-level governance structures.

The ideal solution for this proposal seeks to harness the transformative opportunities of LGR to expand the City of Oxford boundaries to give communities who currently lie beyond the city limits but operate as de facto members a democratic voice over how their city evolves and public services are delivered. This will also give the city access to land to address housing shortages and an ability to unlock the economic growth opportunities which lie just beyond the boundary.

However, this **unmodified proposal** recognises that, even if boundary changes are not possible, creating a new unitary for the City of Oxford is essential to improve the lives of residents across Oxfordshire. The stark differences in the needs and priorities of urban Oxford and the more rural areas of Northern Oxfordshire and Ridgeway require separate and specific local governments which can drive economic growth and enable every resident to live well and contribute to their community.

2. **Northern Oxfordshire** – Creating a new unitary authority for the rural and market town communities in Northern Oxfordshire will enable the supercharging of their specific growth sectors such as advanced manufacturing, green technology and logistics. It will also create a new local government authority which can address the specific needs and priorities of these communities which include enhancing public services to support the aging population, address geographical isolation from services which drives rural deprivation and enhancing democratic representation for these communities whose interests are often eclipsed by urban areas under the current model.
3. **Ridgeway** – Creating a new unitary authority bringing together the historically linked area of the Ridgeway will enable a focus on growing its status as Oxfordshire's energy powerhouse and area of scientific innovation. It will grow the offer of the Harwell Science and Innovation campus and the wider companies working in cutting edge technologies. It will also create a new local government authority which can address the specific needs and priorities of the communities across its network of market towns and villages. It will support the aging population while addressing the pockets of deprivation in otherwise affluent towns and breaking down barriers which stop some residents from sharing in the wider prosperity of the place.

Ideally, this LGR proposal will capitalise upon this historic opportunity to transform local government to modify existing local authority boundaries to ensure that the villages surrounding Oxford, with strong commuting and leisure links to the city, are able to build on these links and strengthen access, while retaining the existing characteristics of their settlements. This would also enable targeted green belt release to meet the demand for housing and additional commercial space for Oxford.

However, this **unmodified proposal** demonstrates that even without boundary changes, the creation of a new unitary authorities for Northern Oxfordshire and Ridgeway provides significant advantages. This is essential to ensure this new level of local government is founded upon meaningful localism, enhances devolution by strengthening the voice of these communities at a regional level and creates opportunities to reshape public services to the specific shared needs of these communities through a preventative public services model.

As set out in the diagram below, our proposal, based on **unmodified local government district boundaries**, is for three new unitary councils designed around distinct social, economic and place geographies covering:

New Unitary	Comprised of (full Districts)	Population (2025)	Population ¹ Projection (2040)	Council Tax Base 25/26
Oxford City	City of Oxford	171,498	173,100	47,638
Northern Oxfordshire	Cherwell, West Oxfordshire	293,188	334,469	108,596
Ridgeway	South Oxfordshire, Vale of White Horse, West Berkshire	472,156	520,767	191,303

We believe our approach represents a strong fit against all criteria set out in the invitation for LGR submissions:

Criteria 1: Establishing of a single tier of local government for the whole area concerned	✓
This proposal creates three new meaningful unitary authorities shaped around functional geographies: Oxford City, Northern Oxfordshire and Ridgeway. These unitary authorities will provide a single tier of local government aligned with the specific demographics, economies and needs of these areas. This new unitary structure will enable the tailoring of services and investments to local needs, alongside the ability to unleash the potential of the distinct growth sectors in each of the proposed unitaries. This approach ensures each authority can respond best to local needs, geographies and priorities to provide effective local government, which responds to its communities. It empowers every resident to live well and contribute to the community which they feel a part of. Limitations (without modifying boundaries) Whilst it is essential that Oxford City, Northern Oxfordshire and Ridgeway are established as three separate unitary authorities, the benefits delivered by this approach can be maximised through a change to the boundaries of the City of Oxford to include areas which already operate <i>de facto</i> as part of the city's economic area. This will ensure the new local governments are able to tailor strategies and services to the unique needs and priorities of their populations. It would also address the historic under bounding of Oxford which has driven demand for (and therefore cost of) housing and seen innovative industries unable to locate or grow around the city.	

¹ [Population estimates for England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland: mid-2022](#)

Criteria 2: Unitary local government must be the right size to achieve efficiencies, improve capacity and withstand financial shock	✓
The functional foundations of the three unitary authorities within this proposal will enable the new local governments to unlock the unique growth sectors in each area to supercharge economic growth. This will be accompanied by an ambitious transformation of public service delivery. The functional organisation of unitary boundaries will enable the precise targeting of services to the needs of populations to achieve efficiencies and improve capacity. Finally, the creation of larger local government authorities will improve financial resilience and has the potential to increase council tax revenue through the harmonisation process. Limitations (without modifying boundaries) Whilst this unmodified proposal will ensure significant benefits for Oxford City, Northern Oxfordshire and Ridgeway, without expanding the boundaries of the Oxford City, land constraints significantly restrict housing delivery, economic strategies cannot empower certain growth sectors which lie just beyond the city limits and services cannot be accurately targeted to include users who live in areas such as Kidlington. This also results in the city's council tax base not representing those who use its services and infrastructure which therefore fails to maximise the city's resilience to financial shocks without establishing new boundaries around the functional areas of the city.	

Criteria 3: prioritising the delivery of high quality and sustainable public services to citizens	✓
The functional organisation of the three new unitary authorities creates an opportunity to transform the delivery of public services through an outcomes-focussed system rooted within a community-based, preventative approach. It creates the opportunity to address persistent health and educational inequalities within Oxford which have proved difficult to resolve in the current county model. For Northern Oxfordshire and Ridgeway this approach will reshape service delivery to join up services in a cost-effective way through delivery alongside local partnerships – suitably tailored to their more rural setting. The functional approach to the design of unitary authorities will provide strategic direction to enhance the quality and sustainability of public services. These will also benefit from new Neighbourhood Area Committees, designed around PCNs to ground services within a people-first approach which targets offerings to the unique needs of each community within the wider strategy. This will enable every resident in Oxford City, Northern Oxfordshire and Ridgeway to live well and contribute to their community. Limitations (without modifying boundaries) Creating dedicated unitary authorities for Oxford City, Northern Oxfordshire and Ridgeway will enable local governments to more specifically target public services to their citizens. However, without expanding the boundaries of Oxford, services targeted to the problems shared by residents of Kidlington and their neighbours in the City of Oxford for example will be duplicated across each unitary authority. Therefore, expanding the boundaries of the City of Oxford is essential to maximise efficiencies and ensure the highest quality of service delivery. It will also enable stronger planning of transport to ensure that those living in the areas around Oxford can better access its facilities and opportunities.	

Criteria 4: Showing how councils can work together and support local place identity	✓
Local needs and viewpoints are the reason this proposal has been developed. Engagement has shown that residents want councils which represent their communities and are not so large that they feel remote from local people. Only by creating distinct authorities for the contrasting geographies, demographics and identities of Oxford City, Northern Oxfordshire and Ridgeway can the unique identities of each place be truly represented and strengthened. Any proposal which combines the city of Oxford with large rural areas means that rural and urban identities and priorities will be in conflict. Engagement has clearly shown that rural Oxfordshire feels distinct from Oxford and vice versa. Diluting the governance of the places across a wider area would dilute the identity of each place. These three separate unitary authorities are essential to support local place identity and ensure that local government structures respond to local needs. However, this proposal also ensures continued opportunities for collaboration between the unitary authorities for certain services where it makes sense to do so and take advantage of benefits of scale. This enables local government to adopt a strategic approach aligned with their communities' needs and priorities, giving them the option to deliver services independently or collaborate where service needs overlap. Limitations (without modifying boundaries) Only this proposal recognises the importance of creating a local authority which directly responds to the distinct local priorities of Oxford and enables the rural areas of Northern Oxfordshire and Ridgeway to focus on their own priorities and protect their local identities. However, without expanding the boundaries of Oxford, these will continue to artificially separate communities outside the Oxford local authority area that already form part of the wider city conurbation. Rather than having a say in the running of the city they are connected to, these residents will have their needs and identity combined with those distant rural locations. Expanding the boundaries would not erase the local identities, it would respect these villages as their own unique places with individual character and attractions but who have strong ties to the city, rather than the market towns further afield.	

Criteria 5: Supporting devolution arrangements	✓
This 3-unitary proposal significantly enhances devolution arrangements and ensures the fair representation of the diverse residents of Oxfordshire at the developing proposal for the Thames Valley MSA. Being able to represent three voices at this table ensures there is a balance between the urban and rural priorities of the wider area. It ensures that the city of Oxford has an equal footing in this strategic area with its other major metropolitan centres – such as Slough and Reading. It also ensures that the rural voices of Ridgeway and Northern Oxfordshire can be heard alongside those of the city of Oxford – without a single authority attempting to balance the contrasting priorities of very different areas and populations. Limitations (without modifying boundaries)	

To support devolution in Oxfordshire, it is essential that Oxford is represented at the Thames Valley MSA. However, without changing the boundaries of the new unitary to create Greater Oxford, the **MSA would lose out on a major opportunity for maximising economic growth in the region.** The increased housing delivery and economic growth which larger boundaries around Oxford would provide will help to meet the ambitions to make Oxford and wider Oxfordshire part of Europe's answer to Silicon Valley. Keeping the under bounded nature of the city would retain the limits of available commercial space which would mean **major innovative industries would choose to settle in Silicon Valley or Boston over the UK.**

Criteria 6: Stronger community engagement and empowerment



The organisation of three unitary authorities around functional economic geographies and meaningful community identities means that stronger community engagement and empowerment is built into their design.

This design principle means that each new unitary authority will more closely align with the interests and priorities of its communities than the current administrative geographies do. This right-sized approach means that that local voice is more likely to be heard and represented effectively.

In addition, the proposed structures for enabling hyper-local engagement will also create a clear and consistent mechanism for meaningful community engagement and empowerment across the three unitary authorities. In particular, the creation of **Neighbourhood Area Committees (NACs)** will create a direct link between community and civil society groups and formal decision-making structures in the new authorities. They will ensure that service design and provision will be informed by the unique make-up of each community within the wider strategy of the unitary authority.

Existing local democratic institutions will retain an important role in this new structure, with the participation of Parish Councils in the NACs proposed, to further deepen the links between the new structure and already-existing social and democratic fabric of the current county area.

Limitations (without modifying boundaries)

Whilst this proposal improves community engagement and empowers local voices, the benefits could be significantly enhanced by modifying existing boundaries to recognise the functional geography of the City of Oxford. This also ensures that these Oxford-adjacent residents not currently included within the city boundaries **do not dilute the voices of rural and market town communities** in the new Northern Oxfordshire and Ridgeway unitary authorities.

Request for modification –

The preceding proposals are submitted following the invitation and the terms of section 2 of the Act. They follow a considerable amount of work completed with our partners. Pursuant to the Act, in particular section 7, the Secretary of State can, by order, implement proposals with modifications. Following our extensive workings, local knowledge, and analysis we are requesting that modifications are made to our proposals to substantially improve the overall benefits to be gained by reorganisation.

This approach follows the trajectory set out in our Interim Plan submissions and is considered by all partners to be essential to achieve best outcome for residents, communities and businesses through substantial enhancement of the benefit case. The modified proposal delivers a local government structure fit for the next fifty years.

The specific modification we are seeking is that –

- The boundaries of the Greater Oxford unitary set out above are extended to encompass areas around the City of Oxford with clear links to it, this includes the following parishes:

Parish	Current District
North Hinksey	Vale of White Horse
Wytham	
South Hinksey	
Wootton	
Appleton-with-Eaton	
Besselsleigh	
Cumnor	
Kennington	
Sunningwell	
Beckley and Stowood	South Oxfordshire
Berinsfield	
Cuddesdon and Denton	
Dorchester	
Drayton St. Leonard	
Elsfield	
Forest Hill with Shotover	
Garsington	
Horspath	
Little Milton	
Sandford-on-Thames	
Stadhampton	
Stanton St. John	
Toot Baldon	
Warborough	
Woodeaton	
Waterperry with Thomley	
Begbroke	Cherwell
Bletchington	

Charlton-on-Otmoor
Fencott and Murcott
Gosford and Water Eaton
Hampton Gay and Poyle
Horton-cum-Studley
Islip
Kidlington
Noke
Oddington
Shipton-on-Cherwell and Thrupp
Wendlebury
Weston-on-the-Green
Yarnton

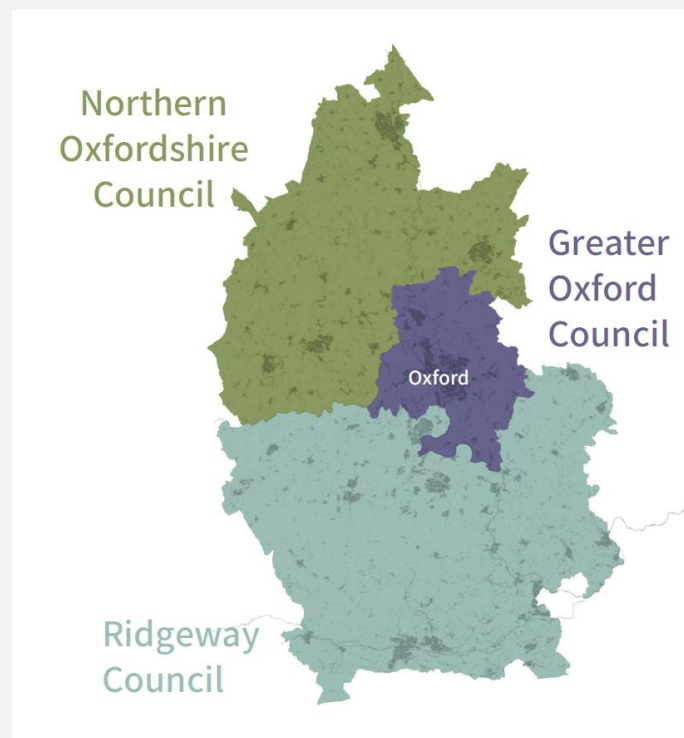


Figure 2. Modified Unitary Map

The proposal for a Green Belt-based boundary for Greater Oxford requires three local authority boundary changes around the city. In line with government guidance, parish councils have been used as the building blocks for these changes. Where parishes straddle the boundary, an in-out decision has been made largely on the basis of settlement patterns. Parishes that sit in the natural expansion space for Abingdon (Ridgeway) have been included in the Ridgeway geography. Eynsham is included in Northern Oxfordshire as an area with direct links to Witney (Northern Oxfordshire) and recognising that the topography would leave it untouched by Greater Oxford's strategic Green Belt release.

We request this on the basis that –

- This would allow a substantial enhancement to the proposal set out above, and our ability to better meet the LGR criteria, as set out in our modified submission (attached) and enable the creation of a new Greater Oxford authority.
- This would restore the historic identity and current demographic links across Ridgeway with the inclusion of West Berkshire in the proposal.
- Modifications would see the creation of similar-sized councils by population compared to the Type B compliant proposals, creating a more balanced set of unitary authorities within Oxfordshire.
- The release of green belt around Oxford through the creation of Greater Oxford with expanded boundaries would unlock up to 40,000 additional homes by 2040, with an additional increase in commercial sites which would greatly increase GVA.
- There is a very strong financial sustainability justification, on the basis these modified proposals unlock a combined model which achieve £48.6m recurring net annual savings across the Oxfordshire Local Government system by year 5.
- Whilst we model a significant reorganisation one-off cost, estimated at around £36.2m, and costs relating to the transformation of services, these will be paid back from benefits within a 4-year period without need for Government support.

These boundary changes are –

- The most effective way to deliver a new Greater Oxford Unitary, which addresses the historic under-bounding. Formed of the key areas adjacent to the city where much new housing and economic growth is proposed, thereby supporting its long-term and sustainable growth and eliminating the democratic deficit which sees residents in the suburbs excluded from decisions within the city's current boundaries.
- Enabling far greater delivery of housing and economic growth than other proposals through strategic green belt release of 2.6% of current green belt. Land value capture from this release will be used to enhance the wider green belt, improving it as green space to support environmental priorities and enhancing access to these areas to support the wellbeing of residents.
- Minimal in overall impact, preserving existing parishes as their building blocks, with three of the six existing districts contained entirely within the three new unitary authorities.

Discounted options

We do not believe it practical to achieve the same via other means – particularly a future Principal Area Boundary Review (PABR). The significant downside of a PABR approach would be the substantially increased transition and service disruption time, alongside the significantly – and unnecessary – increased costs to implement. In effect, as the size and shape of authorities (particularly Oxford) are materially different a PABR would mean –

- Requiring, effectively, two rounds of reorganisation. Round 1 impacting seven authorities, and round 2 impacting three authorities.

- Transition period extended by a further 4 years, with substantial additional disruption for staff and service users
- Transition costs growing, in particular by duplication of transformation elements and additional ICT costs accrued
- Payback being delayed substantially, with benefits of savings of both economies of scale and transformation being deferred

On this basis we believe immediate modification to the only practical route forward.

We request this be considered, and our modified submission, as attached, be the version presented for consultation.

Part 2 – Modified Submission