

A new council for a
BETTER
Oxfordshire

Better services
Simpler
Lower cost
More local

Proposal for a new council for Oxfordshire
March 2017

A new council for Oxfordshire Executive Summary

Oxfordshire County Council, South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse District Councils have worked together to develop a joint proposal for a new single unitary council for Oxfordshire.

The proposal is about creating a council that will sustain Oxfordshire as a great place to live, work and bring up families.

Entitled *A new council for A Better Oxfordshire*, the joint proposal combines the best ideas and feedback from local councils, residents, businesses, partners, and the wider Oxfordshire community into a final proposal to be submitted to government in March 2017.

It makes the case for abolishing the existing two-tier structure of six councils and replacing them with one single council for Oxfordshire. A joined up, leaner, more cost effective council that can meet the big demands of a modern government, whilst understanding and fulfilling the needs of local people.

Importantly, it brings together services such as housing, social care, and homelessness, enabling the council to prioritise people's needs and plan effectively.

The new council will have strong and democratically accountable political leadership, with decisions taken at the appropriate level. It will serve a single economic area aligned with the boundaries of major partners including the local enterprise partnership (OxLEP), the NHS and Thames Valley Police. It offers the best route to securing new ways of funding for the infrastructure that is critical to the productivity of business and the quality of life for local residents.

Changing for the better

There is strong local support for change. These proposals have been developed with stakeholders, including an independent advisory group from other public service and business organisations, central government, parish and town councils and, most importantly, the people who live in Oxfordshire.

The new council for Oxfordshire will have both delivery and financial capacity to be resilient in the face of changing circumstances and rising demand. One way of achieving this will be by maximising the benefits of joining up our wellbeing services, and vulnerable people, through good housing, social services and benefit support.

Local government is increasingly being asked to do more to support the economy, deliver homes that local people need and make better use of the money it raises from residents and businesses.

In addition, and as a result of changes in central government funding, English councils will soon be funded mainly from council tax and business rates.

It is vital therefore that we look for better, smarter and more cost effective ways of delivering our services to local people in the future - ensuring these important services are delivered to residents across Oxfordshire for generations to come.

The significant savings made by eliminating duplication from running six councils will be used to improve public services and protect them from future cuts.

Separate studies by Grant Thornton and PwC show a single council for Oxfordshire would save around £100m over five years, after the one-off costs of £16m for reorganisation.

By working together, the county and district councils have identified that these savings could be achieved by removing the duplication under the current system and integrating local government transformation. For example, through investment in a single digital platform to improve efficiency and customer service, and by joining up public health, housing and community services.

Local government in Oxfordshire is already in a strong position to fund public services locally, but reorganisation is needed urgently if we are to manage the big challenges facing us today, such as:

- Meeting the demand for care services from a growing and ageing population
- Tackling an acute housing shortage
- Closing a £1.7bn gap in infrastructure funding.

Better for communities

A single council for Oxfordshire will be responsible for delivering all local services across the county, enabling it to make substantial savings, whilst improving outcomes for residents, giving them a say in the future of their city, towns and parishes, and working better with partners.

It will be simpler, deliver better services and outcomes, be more local, and operate at lower costs – at least £100 million over five years.

Importantly it will bring together the best elements of all the existing councils, building on strengths, but avoiding the weaknesses and frictions that the current structure has.

In practice this means services will be better joined up, with strategic decisions around important issues such as planning and infrastructure having a county-wide approach, whilst important local issues will remain in the control of local people.

To support this local approach, between, 15 – 20 executive area boards will be set up across Oxfordshire. These boards will be made up of the unitary councillors representing the area, joined by partners and representatives of towns and parishes. The boards will enable local decision making to address local priorities and will have a formal role in developing policies and services that affect the county as a whole, ensuring that the voice of local communities is represented at the strategic level.

The area boards will serve the diverse and complex needs of Oxfordshire's rural, urban and market town communities. They will focus on both environmental and social issues such as green spaces and parks, anti-social behaviour, health and well-being, business and economic development and support to the community and voluntary sectors.

The Better Oxfordshire proposals recommend the new council's constitution should include a commitment where the area boards are formally consulted as part of the new council's budget, policy and service development.

We have also taken steps to recognise the city of Oxford's unique qualities - globally recognised for its outstanding academic excellence and economic influence. A 'City Convention' will be established to look at the decision making and governance powers for the city that reflects its historic, political and cultural make-up. The proposal includes establishing a new local council for Oxford with the powers to raise a substantial precept and manage community assets and local community, social and environmental issues. This arrangement will allow the unitary council to reflect the position of the city of Oxford at the centre of a vibrant city region that stretches across Oxfordshire while ensuring that genuinely local matters and local need are addressed.

The proposals will also ensure that existing council housing will be kept in public ownership.

Better structure, better services, better outcomes

Under the Better Oxfordshire proposal all unitary council services will be accessible from a single council, with one website, one phone number and councillors able to tackle all the issues in your local area.

Once set up, the new council will have one set of elected members and one set of officers. They will be accountable and responsible for all local government services, including housing, planning, transport, school places, environmental health services and housing need and care services. It also provides the strong and accountable leadership required by government for a future deal on infrastructure, housing and skills.

It will have the strength to drive sustainable and economic growth, focusing on high-quality jobs, affordable new homes, transport and community infrastructure – maximising Oxfordshire’s contribution to the UK economy.

A joined up strategic planning framework will also ensure better outcomes, with the new council for Oxfordshire being responsible for delivering a strategic Local Plan, establishing a shared vision for sustainable growth across the county, covering social, environmental and economic development alongside infrastructure delivery.

This approach will generate balanced and sustainable communities and long-term confidence for developers and communities – ensuring decisions on important high profile issues such as the green belt and housing need are taken strategically, and ensuring environmental protection is maintained where it is most needed.

With the population of Oxfordshire currently at 678,000, set to increase by 17% by 2031, and with significant increases of very elderly residents expected along with rising numbers of children and adults with learning and physical disabilities, it is vital that we review how best to deliver our services for the future.

Joining up the key strategic functions of planning, transport and housing will also help to unlock Oxfordshire’s nationally significant economic growth potential.

For example:

- Joining up planning, transport and housing will support economic growth.
- Council services will be funded locally from council tax and business rates.
- Budgets and powers will be delegated between 15 and 20 ‘area executive boards’ based on the existing district boundaries.
- The overall number of Oxfordshire councillors will be more than halved
- Parishes and town councils will have more influence.
- Environmental services such as street cleaning and maintenance will be grouped together under local management.
- A single county plan will align housing, jobs and infrastructure planning, and deliver urgently needed homes.
- Setting up of an innovative public/private investment fund will help close the £1.7bn gap between planned infrastructure and actual investment needed.
- Joining up social care, housing and benefits will help to reduce the pressure from the rising demand for children’s and adult social care, reduce care costs and improve wellbeing.
- Joining up services such as town planning and leisure could encourage active lifestyles and improve health and wellbeing.
- Partnership working with a single council responsible for safeguarding and community safety will help to make communities safer.
- Community hubs based in libraries, leisure centres, fire stations and health facilities will deliver more joined-up services.

These are the just some of the benefits that a single council for Oxfordshire will bring. The full proposals are available at www.betteroxfordshire.org.

What will a new unitary council mean for me?

For residents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More efficient so more money spent on frontline services • One website, one phone number, one council for all services • Single customer account so you give your details once • One councillor for your local area
For businesses	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Single voice for Oxfordshire nationally and internationally • More investment in infrastructure • Joined up business services: planning, licensing, public protection • Business account manager for all council services
For councillors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clear mandate as the representative of the single principal authority for your area • Residents welcome accountability for all council services • Greater influence over area and county decisions • Joined up support from council staff to help residents
For public sector partners	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Single point of contact and decision-making • Boundaries that make sense (e.g. NHS, Police, OXLEP) • Single strategies and policies for whole county • A strategic partner with more influence on government
For parishes and town councils	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A real voice for your community which is listened to • Better support for neighbourhood planning • The opportunity for more devolution of powers for those that want them
For central government and regional partners	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A coherent vision for Oxfordshire with accountable leadership • A financially resilient council managing budget pressures locally • Infrastructure investment partner focused on housing and sustainable growth • Regional leadership for the Oxford-Milton Keynes-Cambridge growth corridor
For the voluntary and community sector	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A more stable funder and commissioner • Improved partnerships at community and strategic level • Single organisation focusing on improving lives of people
For staff	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Make a greater difference to people and communities through joined up services • Greater financial stability enables innovation and long-term planning • Pride in working for a new, vision-led organisation • Clearer lines of accountability and responsibility

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