



Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government

Jim McMahon OBE MP
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2 Marsham Street
London
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Council Leaders in Oxfordshire and West Berkshire

By email

29 October 2026

Dear Leaders,

I am writing to set out the outcome of the Government's review of the framework for the local government reorganisation programme and, separately, the Secretary of State's current provisional view on the proposals for local government reorganisation in Oxfordshire.

We are grateful for all the work that went into developing proposals and preparing for implementation, and for the patience you have shown throughout this process. We recognise that the review period has not been easy, and do not take for granted your continued commitment to the long-term work needed to fix the foundations and put local government in the best possible position.

Outcome of the programme review

Following the announcement to Parliament on 7 September 2026, the Secretary of State and I have worked with officials to interrogate the key pillars and framework underpinning the Local Government Reorganisation programme, including asking whether the existing unweighted criteria ('criteria') set in February 2025 and its objectives continue to support the policy priorities of the new Government.

We have concluded that the basis of the programme is robust and that the criteria against which proposals have been submitted were both correct on their own terms and continue to support the Government's policy agenda. Following this initial phase of the review, we can therefore confirm that the Government remains committed to delivering Local Government Reorganisation and that we will continue to move forward with the programme based on the criteria, which we hope gives confidence as the programme progresses.

Minded to decision for Oxfordshire

Separately from the programme-level review, the Secretary of State and I, in my capacity as Minister for Local Government, Devolution and Regional Growth, are currently minded to implement the **three unitary option submitted by Oxford City Council with modifications to the proposed boundaries to create Greater Oxford Council, Northern Oxfordshire Council and Ridgeway Council. Elections to new councils would take place in May 2028, ahead of vesting in April 2029.** That proposal, together with the modifications that we are currently minded to make, would establish the following new councils:

Proposed new council	Existing council areas that will make up the proposed new council (excluding county council)	Current population size (approx.)
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Greater Oxford Council	• Oxford City Council, plus: ○ 15 parishes from Cherwell District Council ○ 17 parishes from South Oxfordshire District Council ○ 9 parishes from Vale of White Horse District Council	241,000
Northern Oxfordshire Council	• Cherwell District Council, excluding: ○ 15 parishes to Greater Oxford Council • West Oxfordshire District Council.	265,000
Ridgeway Council	• South Oxfordshire District Council, excluding: ○ 17 parishes to Greater Oxford Council • Vale of White Horse District Council, excluding: ○ 9 parishes to Greater Oxford Council • West Berkshire Council	429,000

Consideration of the proposals

This letter sets out our consideration of the performance of each proposal against the criteria and the reasons why we are currently minded to select the preferred proposal. Where relevant, the letter also sets out areas where further information is sought to assist with reaching a final decision. Further detail of the minded to process is set out at the end of this letter.

We have considered the proposals and options received from councils in relation to the Oxfordshire invitation area, including:

- **The one unitary proposal from Oxfordshire County Council**
- **The two unitary proposal from Cherwell District Council, West Oxfordshire District Council, Vale of White Horse District Council, South Oxfordshire District Council and West Berkshire Council**
- **The three unitary proposal from Oxford City Council that included a request for boundary modifications (“three unitary option”)**

West Berkshire Council forms part of the proposed Ridgeway council under both the two unitary proposal and the three unitary option. We have considered its inclusion throughout our assessment of those proposals against the six criteria. We have assessed each submitted proposal and option against the criteria and considered their strengths and weaknesses before reaching this minded to decision.

All proposals and options meet the criteria set out in the invitation of 5 February 2025.

Criterion 1: A proposal should seek to achieve for the whole of the area concerned the establishment of a single tier of local government

The three unitary option meets criterion 1.

Given the importance that the Government places on Oxford and the OxCam region for national economic growth, and the shortage of housing in and around Oxford being a factor constraining that growth, we have placed weight on the modified three unitary option’s response to Oxford’s boundary constraint. It would provide the opportunity for more focused leadership across the proposed council areas of Greater Oxford, Northern Oxfordshire and Ridgeway, as we explain below.

In more detail, the three unitary option presents Greater Oxford as a response to the constraints created by the city’s tightly drawn boundary. Oxford’s existing boundary separates the city from nearby communities that have strong housing, travel, economic and service links with it. The proposed Greater Oxford authority would bring more of this functional urban area within a single administrative geography, providing a more sensible geography for housing and supporting the wider economic area. It would

enable coordinated decisions on housing, infrastructure, transport, planning and services, with dedicated leadership and a broader organisational and potential tax base. Although the proposed Greater Oxford council would not encompass the whole functional urban area or fully resolve Oxford's underbounding, we consider that it would represent a material improvement on the existing geography and may be a more effective approach to addressing housing challenges around Oxford, which could in turn better support economic growth across Oxfordshire.

We have also considered the other two proposed authorities under the three unitary option in their own right. The proposed Northern Oxfordshire council would bring together most of Cherwell and West Oxfordshire. It would include the established market towns such as Banbury, Bicester and Witney, alongside surrounding rural communities with distinct identities. This would provide an authority focused on the particular housing, economic, transport and service needs of those towns and their surrounding areas. It would contain significant employment centres, planned housing growth and strategic road and rail connections.

The proposed Ridgeway council would bring together the remaining parts of South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse with West Berkshire. It would include a network of towns, employment centres and more dispersed communities across southern Oxfordshire and West Berkshire, connected in part through Science Vale and the A34 and M4 corridors.

In our judgment, the evidence submitted provides a credible basis for treating the proposed Northern Oxfordshire council and Ridgeway council as coherent geographies. In Northern Oxfordshire, the pattern of market towns and surrounding rural communities provides a basis for coordinating growth, infrastructure and services across the proposed authority. In Ridgeway, there are relevant connections between settlements, employment centres and strategic transport corridors, although these relationships vary across the area and do not all operate at the same geographical scale. We have weighed these limitations against the evidence of common characteristics and practical connections within each area.

On balance, we consider that each could provide a sufficiently coherent economic area and a sensible geography for housing, infrastructure, and local government with an appropriate tax base.

Turning to the other proposals, which meet criterion 1, the one unitary proposal would retain the existing Oxfordshire boundary and provide a single strategic framework for housing, infrastructure, transport and economic development. It offers the greatest economies of scale and simplicity and the most balanced geography. The proposal states that a countywide authority could plan for Oxford's growth alongside the needs of the wider county, coordinate housing and infrastructure across existing district boundaries and maintain local influence through area-based arrangements. Departmental analysis also indicates that the one unitary proposal aligns well with the identified Oxford functional urban area. We recognise these advantages.

However, Oxford's urban, housing and infrastructure pressures would need to be balanced against the priorities of other towns and rural communities across the county. A single countywide geography may not be as able to provide dedicated leadership for Oxford and its adjoining communities or make the wider Oxford area the central focus of the new authority. The three unitary option sets out that competing urban and rural priorities have previously made it difficult to agree the location and scale of growth needed around Oxford. On balance, we place greater weight on the more focused geography offered by the proposed Greater Oxford Council under the three unitary option.

The two unitary proposal would create Oxford & Shires Council and Ridgeway Council. It offers a balance between organisational scale and more localised leadership, with two authorities organised

around economic and transport connections. The Oxford & Shires Council would address some of Oxford's underbounding to the north and provide a stronger focus on the city than the one unitary proposal. However, Oxford would remain within an authority also covering market towns and rural areas, while the boundary with Ridgeway would continue to constrain the ability to plan for Oxford's growth to the east, west and south. We therefore consider that the two unitary proposal would respond less comprehensively than the modified three unitary option to Oxford's boundary constraint and would not provide the same dedicated focus on the distinct priorities of Greater Oxford and Northern Oxfordshire.

We recognise the stronger scale, simplicity and countywide coordination offered by one unitary and the balance between scale and local focus offered by two. Our view is that those advantages do not outweigh the more differentiated geographical focus offered by the three unitary option.

Criterion 2: Unitary local government must be the right size to achieve efficiencies, improve capacity and withstand financial shocks

The three unitary option meets criterion 2.

Each of the three proposed authorities would be below the guiding population figure of 500,000. The guiding principle of 500,000 is not a fixed threshold, and we have made clear that councils across the programme could develop proposals for authorities with populations either above or below that figure in statements to Parliament and in discussions with the sector over many months. It is also relevant that many single-tier councils, with a median population of around 275,000, have operated effectively across the same key services for decades. We have considered the justification for each proposed authority separately. Our view is that there are sufficient area-specific reasons to justify each proposed council below the guiding population figure.

The three unitary option identifies opportunities arising from housing, population and economic growth and the concentration of major institutions and employment within and around Oxford. As set out in criterion 1, the proposed Greater Oxford authority's footprint, the growth prospects of Oxford city, and the clearer focus on Oxford's urban, housing and infrastructure pressures that the proposed Greater Oxford council would provide give an area-specific basis for concluding that the size of the proposed council is justified.

The Northern Oxfordshire council would combine most of Cherwell and West Oxfordshire. The proposal identifies the growth of Banbury, Bicester and Witney, the area's significant employment base and the combined organisational capacity available across the proposed authority. Although it would serve a mixed pattern of market towns and rural communities, we consider that the submitted evidence provides a reasonable basis for concluding that it could support upper-tier statutory services and manage future growth, and that the proposed authority is justified on that basis.

The Ridgeway council would combine the remaining parts of South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse with West Berkshire. The proposals identify the concentration of growth and employment around Science Vale, the scale available from combining southern Oxfordshire with West Berkshire and opportunities for more resilient commissioning and specialist services. Although it would serve places with differing economic, transport and service needs, our judgement is that the proposed authority would provide a sufficiently coherent and resilient basis for local government. These factors justify an authority below the guiding population figure of 500,000.

We have considered projected efficiencies separately from longer-term financial sustainability. We have lower confidence in the efficiency evidence submitted for the three unitary option due to the scale and

timing of savings. The three unitary option would also involve more service disaggregation and the most complex implementation requirements. We have noted those disadvantages. We have also taken account of West Berkshire's current financial position. Our sustainability analysis indicates that including West Berkshire produces weaker results on some modelled sustainability measures for the proposed Ridgeway council. However, Ridgeway's overall sustainability may be similar to or better than the relevant existing arrangements, while inclusion within a larger authority is likely to improve West Berkshire's financial position. Taken together, our department's sustainability modelling nevertheless indicates that all options, including the three unitary option, could produce financial sustainability outcomes similar to or better than the relevant existing arrangements.

Turning to the other proposals, which also meet criterion 2, we judge the one and two unitary proposals both have stronger comparative evidence on organisational scale and efficiencies. The one unitary proposal also offers the strongest evidence on overall organisational capacity, while the two unitary proposal combines additional scale with a lower degree of service disaggregation than the three unitary option. We have given those advantages appropriate weight. We nevertheless consider that the three unitary option meets this criterion: the Department's modelling supports its potential to perform similar to or better than the existing arrangements. The evidence provides a reasonable basis for concluding that Greater Oxford, Northern Oxfordshire and Ridgeway could each have sufficient capacity and resilience to withstand shocks.

Criterion 3: Unitary structures must prioritise the delivery of high quality and sustainable public services to citizens

The three unitary option meets criterion 3.

We consider that the three unitary option could better shape services around the different needs of Greater Oxford, Northern Oxfordshire and Ridgeway. These include the pressures of a growing city, the needs of dispersed communities in northern and western Oxfordshire and growth along the southern area's main transport and economic corridors. The case for services designed around each area also reflects the different pressures on urban and rural communities, including demand for social care, housing and accessible services. In our view, this provides us with confidence that the option can develop services that respond more closely to local circumstances and place greater emphasis on prevention and early intervention.

The three unitary option includes a place-based target operating model, service-level blueprints and an implementation roadmap covering early intervention and prevention, adult and children's social care, special educational needs and disabilities, education, housing, community safety and enabling services. It also proposes closer alignment with neighbourhood health structures and recognises that some services may need to be delivered through shared, transitional or jointly commissioned arrangements. We consider that this demonstrates that the proponents have examined the principal service implications and identified mechanisms through which more locally sensitive and preventative services could be developed.

We recognise that the three unitary option would involve the greatest division of existing countywide services, including adult social care, children's services, safeguarding, public health and special educational needs and disabilities. Detailed workforce, governance, commissioning, data, contractual and operational arrangements would still need to be developed. The three unitary option would therefore present more service disaggregation and implementation risk.

Those risks would need to be managed through careful implementation planning, including transitional service arrangements, workforce and leadership planning, and continued joint commissioning and

partnership working where appropriate. Not every service or system would need to operate separately from vesting day. The three unitary option could therefore combine more locally focused leadership and service design with shared or cross-boundary arrangements for services where appropriate. The new councils would need to protect access to services, referral routes, specialist provision and relationships with providers and neighbouring councils while permanent arrangements were developed.

The department has worked with other government departments to develop a robust [support offer](#) comprising several elements. Funding will enable each area undergoing transition to bring in additional capacity to support a safe process. [National work](#) to develop future directors of health and social care services will help ensure that, in the medium term, there are enough suitably qualified leaders to deliver effective and safe services.

Our judgement is that the potential benefits from focused leadership, tailored service design and prevention outweigh the risks, subject to the implementation planning, and government funding and support described above.

Turning to the other proposals, which also meet criterion 3, the one unitary proposal offers the greatest service continuity and the lowest risk from dividing countywide services. It would retain services, workforces, systems and established partnerships within a single organisation. Its scale could also support consistent commissioning and integration across Oxfordshire. The proposal includes area-based arrangements intended to maintain local responsiveness within a countywide structure. However, our judgment is that the three unitary option, supported by its place-based target operating model, provides greater scope to design and tailor services around the differing circumstances of Oxford, the market towns and rural communities.

The two unitary proposal offers a balance between organisational scale and more localised delivery and would require less division of existing countywide services than the three unitary option. However, each authority would still cover a large and diverse geography, and countywide services, workforces, systems, assets and partnerships would still need to be divided.

On balance, we recognise more service-disaggregation and implementation risks in the three unitary option. However, it is our view that the three unitary option balances those greater risks with a developed place-based operating model and a clearer structural separation between Greater Oxford, Northern Oxfordshire and Ridgeway.

Criterion 4: Proposals should show how councils in the area have sought to work together in coming to a view that meets local needs and is informed by local views

The three unitary option meets criterion 4.

The consultation did not establish a clear consensus on any of the proposals or options.

The three unitary option sets out that existing boundaries do not always reflect patterns of settlement, service use, housing need, economic activity or the places with which people identify. It supports that case with evidence on demographic differences, market towns, employment centres, transport links and engagement undertaken while developing the option.

We have considered opposition to the three unitary option from affected parishes and concerns about rural identity, representation, heritage, landscape, floodplain management and links with surrounding market towns.

Statutory and policy protections for the Green Belt, flood risk, heritage and the natural environment would remain in place, unchanged by reorganisation. Development decisions would continue to be

taken through the planning system, in accordance with the relevant legal requirements. The proposed Greater Oxford council would, however, be able to consider housing, infrastructure, transport and flood risk across the city and adjoining communities within one council, which we judge to be beneficial.

We recognise that affected parishes have raised substantive concerns that transferring to the proposed Greater Oxford Council would not reflect their rural identity or their relationships with surrounding market towns. However, we consider that separate councils for Greater Oxford, Northern Oxfordshire and Ridgeway would be able to provide a clearer institutional focus on the differing circumstances and priorities of each area. The proposed Greater Oxford council would focus on the city and adjoining communities; the proposed Northern Oxfordshire council on its market towns and rural areas; and the proposed Ridgeway council on the towns and rural communities across southern Oxfordshire and West Berkshire. This supports our preference for the three unitary option, while recognising that the views on identities and boundaries are contested.

While all parishes would move into new unitary authorities, town and parish councils and existing parish boundaries would remain. We consider that these arrangements would help preserve local representation and identity for the communities affected. Our judgement is that the proposed boundaries could support effective local government, provided that the new councils establish neighbourhood arrangements that give transferred communities a meaningful say and reflect the different interests of towns, villages and dispersed communities, as considered under criterion six below. The new councils would also need to maintain effective relationships across their boundaries. We will continue to consider the views of affected communities before taking a final decision.

Turning to the other proposals, which also meet criterion 4, the one unitary proposal would retain the existing Oxfordshire boundary and avoid transferring parishes into Greater Oxford. This would respond to the concerns of communities that oppose the proposed transfer and of those who wish to remain within a single Oxfordshire-wide authority.

The two unitary proposal provides the strongest evidence of councils working together. This is a clear advantage under criterion 4. It also offers more localised leadership than the one unitary proposal and does not face the same level of opposition associated with the Greater Oxford modification in particular. However, the consultation did not establish a clear consensus for any proposal. We have taken these matters into account in our overall assessment.

Criterion 5: New unitary structures must support devolution arrangements

The three unitary option meets criterion 5.

We consider that the three unitary option would give Oxford a more distinct voice within any future devolution arrangements through the proposed Greater Oxford council. The proposed Northern Oxfordshire and Ridgeway councils would also represent their own economic strengths, public service needs and growth priorities. This would recognise Oxford's role as a regional economic centre while giving northern and southern Oxfordshire and West Berkshire separate representation. We consider that giving Oxford a distinct voice in future devolution arrangements could support the more focused approach to housing, infrastructure and economic growth in and around Oxford, which is an advantage for the reasons described under criterion 1.

The three unitary option sets out that three constituent authorities would enable the different areas to bring distinct priorities to future devolution arrangements while collaborating on matters that operate across council boundaries. We consider that separate leadership for the three areas provides a sound basis for that model. It would not remove the need for joint decisions on transport, infrastructure, skills,

housing and economic development, but it would allow those decisions to be informed by three recognisable sets of local priorities.

Three councils would require more coordination than one or two, including arrangements to develop shared positions within any future devolution arrangements. We regard this as manageable and place greater weight on the three unitary option's potential to provide a distinct voice for Oxford and separate representation for Northern Oxfordshire and Ridgeway. In our view, that potential outweighs the relative advantages of the other proposals.

Turning to the other proposals, which also meet criterion 5, the one unitary proposal would provide a single Oxfordshire voice within future devolution arrangements. It offers simpler representation and a single council position on countywide priorities. The two unitary proposal would create two constituent councils, offering a balance of representation with fewer councils to coordinate than under the three unitary option. However, neither proposal would give Oxford the distinct voice offered by the three unitary option. On balance, we consider that separate representation for Greater Oxford, Northern Oxfordshire and Ridgeway would better reflect their differing priorities within future devolution arrangements.

Criterion 6: New unitary structures should enable stronger community engagement and deliver genuine opportunity for neighbourhood empowerment

The three unitary option meets criterion 6.

We consider that the three unitary option offers a clearer focus on the different places and priorities within the three proposed council areas. It proposes Neighbourhood Area Committees, and the continuation of town and parish councils and their participation in neighbourhood arrangements. This provides a specific model for neighbourhood governance and does not rely solely on the smaller size of the proposed authorities. It would give the new councils and implementation bodies a basis from which to develop routes for residents and local organisations to influence priorities, services and decisions.

Our judgement is that these arrangements provide a credible basis for Greater Oxford to give transferred parishes a meaningful say and support strong communities. Northern Oxfordshire could use the arrangements to reflect the different interests of its communities, including Banbury, Bicester and Witney and their surrounding areas. Ridgeway could similarly reflect the interests of its towns and rural communities, including Abingdon, Didcot, Henley-on-Thames, Newbury, Thame, Wallingford and Wantage, alongside its smaller and more dispersed communities.

However, the detailed powers, resources and membership of the proposed committees, and their relationship with the new councils, would need to be developed during implementation. We consider that the three unitary option provides a sound basis for neighbourhood empowerment and community engagement, although its effectiveness would depend on the powers, resources and influence ultimately given to neighbourhood bodies.

Turning to the other proposals, which also meet criterion 6, the one unitary proposal includes area-based arrangements and stronger relationships with town and parish councils as its response to operating at scale. The two unitary proposal would provide greater organisational scale than the three unitary option while allowing leadership and service delivery to focus on the different needs of its two proposed areas. It could therefore support more locally responsive services and more focused leadership than a single countywide authority, although detailed arrangements for neighbourhood engagement would need to be developed.

All three proposals therefore contain approaches to neighbourhood governance. Our judgement is that the three unitary option provides the strongest basis for neighbourhood empowerment through its clearer place-based focus and specific neighbourhood model, while recognising that successful delivery would depend on the detailed arrangements established during implementation.

It is important to note that the English Devolution and Community Empowerment Act 2026 requires all councils in England to make appropriate arrangements for effective neighbourhood governance in neighbourhood areas, with the Secretary of State able to make further provisions on those arrangements through regulations. Local government reorganisation provides an opportunity to embed this approach from the outset. Effective neighbourhood governance can help ensure that, within larger unitary structures, communities retain a strong local voice, are able to influence decisions affecting their area, and see their distinct identities and priorities reflected in how the new councils operate. We will publish a Neighbourhood Governance Framework later this year, which will provide new councils with some high-level principles to consider.

Boundary change justification

The published guidance states that existing district areas should ordinarily be the building blocks for proposals and that more complex boundary changes require a strong public services and financial sustainability related justification.

We have considered boundary changes requested alongside the unmodified three unitary proposal and whether the boundary changes in the modified three unitary option are justified in line with the criteria. Following careful consideration, in our view, the boundary change required for the selected option is justified.

We have considered the modification separately from the inclusion of West Berkshire. Our assessment is based on the modification requested by Oxford City Council and the parish schedule submitted with that request. The modification would transfer 41 adjoining parishes into Greater Oxford, comprising nine from Vale of White Horse, 17 from South Oxfordshire and 15 from Cherwell, listed in Annex A. The proposed boundary is organised broadly around the Oxford Green Belt, using whole parishes as building blocks.

On public services, the boundary changes would bring Oxford and adjoining communities with housing, infrastructure and service connections to the city within the proposed Greater Oxford council. We consider that this would support more coordinated planning and service delivery across the wider urban area by enabling housing, transport, infrastructure and public services to be considered together.

The modification would also create Northern Oxfordshire and Ridgeway councils. We consider that the boundary changes would help to enable each council to deliver public services with a clearer focus on the circumstances and needs of its area. Northern Oxfordshire would be better placed to respond to the needs of its market towns and rural communities, where distance, demographic change and access to services present particular challenges. Ridgeway would be able to plan across southern Oxfordshire and West Berkshire, reflecting the different needs of its larger towns, smaller settlements and rural communities.

We therefore consider that the requested modification would enable each proposed council to shape public services more closely around the needs of residents of Greater Oxford, Northern Oxfordshire and Ridgeway respectively. These place-based benefits lead us to judge that the modification could improve public service delivery over the longer term. As set out under criterion 3, we recognise that there would be transition and implementation challenges but consider that these could be effectively

managed. The potential benefits of more focused leadership and tailored public service design strengthen the justification for the modification.

On financial sustainability, as set out under criterion 2, our assessment indicates that the three unitary option could produce outcomes similar to or better than the relevant existing arrangements. This supports our judgement that the modification has a sufficient financial sustainability-related justification. The modification would also bring planning for housing and infrastructure across Oxford and adjoining communities within a single authority. We consider that this more coordinated approach could help unlock housing in and around Oxford and wider economic growth across Oxfordshire, strengthening Greater Oxford's tax base over time and improving the longer-term financial sustainability of the area as a whole.

We have weighed those potential benefits against the fact that the Greater Oxford boundary would not encompass the whole functional urban area or fully resolve every aspect of Oxford's underbounding; the additional costs, service disaggregation and implementation risks across the area; and the concerns raised from affected communities. We consider, however, that the benefits outlined would represent a sufficiently material improvement and would outweigh the disadvantages, providing the required public services and financial sustainability related justification overall.

The inclusion of West Berkshire within Ridgeway

We have considered including West Berkshire within the proposed Ridgeway council. The three unitary option may improve West Berkshire's financial position and provide greater collective capacity to manage service and financial pressures and build more resilient commissioning and specialist service arrangements.

A new Ridgeway council would bring together southern Oxfordshire and West Berkshire, including Science Vale, parts of the M4 and A34 corridors and a network of market towns and villages. We consider that the area's historical and demographic links, related housing, infrastructure and economic interests, and shared strengths in energy and scientific innovation would provide a coherent basis for the new authority. It would also provide greater organisational and financial resilience, support strategic planning and investment and enable services to be tailored to the needs of its towns and rural communities.

We have considered the fire and rescue implications. The new Ridgeway council would initially span the areas served by Oxfordshire Fire and Rescue Service and Royal Berkshire Fire and Rescue Service. A legally compliant interim arrangement has been identified for fire and rescue governance across the existing Oxfordshire geography, pending any longer-term alignment of fire and rescue governance through a potential future devolution arrangement. Transitional arrangements would still be required, and detailed governance, operational and service arrangements would need to be developed through implementation. We nevertheless regard fire governance as a manageable implementation consideration.

We have considered whether West Berkshire should instead be removed from the proposed Ridgeway council. This would produce a materially different Ridgeway, with a smaller population and tax base. It would also leave West Berkshire to address its existing financial challenges outside the larger structure proposed by both the two and three unitary options.

On balance, our judgement is that including West Berkshire within the proposed Ridgeway council provides a stronger basis for managing West Berkshire's service and financial pressures within a larger authority, compared to the existing structures. We recognise the adverse effect on some of Ridgeway's

modelled sustainability measures and the additional implementation requirements arising from existing Berkshire shared services and other cross-boundary arrangements. We have weighed those considerations but have concluded that the potential improvement to West Berkshire's financial position; the organisational capacity available through the larger proposed Ridgeway council; and the opportunities identified for more resilient commissioning and specialist service arrangements mean the inclusion of West Berkshire is justified.

Conclusion

For the reasons set out above and considering the proposals' performance against the criteria in the round, the Secretary of State is currently minded to proceed with the **three unitary option submitted by Oxford City Council with modifications to the proposed boundaries to create Greater Oxford Council, Northern Oxfordshire Council and Ridgeway Council**. The factors the Secretary of State currently regards as weighing particularly strongly are: the three unitary option's clearer response to Oxford's underbounded geography and its potential to better support housing, infrastructure and economic growth (criterion 1); the opportunity for tailored public services and focused leadership for services across the proposed Greater Oxford, Northern Oxfordshire and Ridgeway councils (criterion 3); and the representation those areas could provide within future devolution arrangements (criterion 5).

The one unitary proposal would create a single council for Oxfordshire and could set a single countywide approach. However, it would mean that Oxford's housing and infrastructure pressures would sit alongside competing countywide priorities rather than be the central focus of a dedicated council. It would also combine the different needs of Oxford and the county's towns and rural communities within one large council without separate leadership, which could impact the delivery of responsive public services, and representation in future devolution arrangements.

The two unitary proposal would create Oxford & Shires and Ridgeway, including West Berkshire. However, the boundaries would restrict Oxford's growth in some directions and it would remain part of a larger council rather than have dedicated leadership focused on the city and adjoining communities. It would not distinguish as clearly between Oxford's needs and the rest of the proposed authority or give each a separate voice in future devolution arrangements.

Status of this provisional view

This letter does not constitute a final decision to implement this or any other proposal.

The conclusions set out above represent the Secretary of State's current provisional view, reached following consideration of the relevant material. Before reaching a final decision, the Secretary of State will consider all representations received in response to this letter together with any other relevant material.

The Secretary of State remains open to reaching a different conclusion following that consideration, including modifying the provisionally preferred proposal further, deciding to implement a different proposal, or deciding not to implement any proposal.

Invitation for representations

Relevant councils and other interested parties are invited to make representations on the provisional conclusions and reasoning set out in this letter. I note the interest in potential modifications to the boundaries of the proposed Ridgeway Council, including the boundary between Reading and West Berkshire, and welcome representations on these matters through this process.

Representations should, where possible, address the provisional conclusions and any specific requests for information identified in this letter. We are grateful for the time already given to prepare and submit proposals, views and supporting evidence. There is no need to reproduce material submitted previously or repeat points that have already been made: that material will remain available to the Secretary of State when reaching the final decision.

The previous decision

The Secretary of State has today decided to withdraw the decision announced on 16 July 2026 concerning local government reorganisation in Oxfordshire.

That earlier decision is not being treated as determining the outcome of the present reconsideration. The Secretary of State is considering the proposals afresh and will reach a new final decision after considering the representations invited by this letter and any other relevant matters.

Statutory process

The Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007 provides the statutory framework for local government structural change. The statutory process permits the Secretary of State to implement a proposal with or without modification following the required consultation.

If, following the further consideration described in this letter, the Secretary of State decides to implement a proposal, the structural changes would need to be provided for in a structural changes order under section 7 of the 2007 Act, subject to the applicable Parliamentary procedure.

This letter does not itself establish any new council, alter any existing local government boundary or otherwise implement structural change.

I am copying this letter to your Chief Executives, MPs, Chief Fire Officers and the Thames Valley Police and Crime Commissioner.

Capacity funding and other matters

I recognise that councils have already incurred costs associated with preparing for local government reorganisation and have committed significant time, resource and leadership to this work.

I am pleased to confirm that Oxfordshire will be paid 50% of the £900,000 per new unitary transition support funding. This is equal to £1.35 million. Grants will be paid in November to these previously confirmed recipient authorities.

When final decisions are made, we will pay any remaining balance of the £900,000 transition support per each new unitary, taking account of funding already paid to its area, as well as £150,000 of supplementary funding per new unitary for Leadership Capacity and Continuity in Children's Services, Adult Social Care and Public Health.

We are setting out further detail in the Written Ministerial Statement on city status and ceremonial matters, and the transition from the committee system.

I am copying this letter to your Chief Executives, MPs, Chief Fire Officers and the Thames Valley Police and Crime Commissioner.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Jim McMahon." The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, looping initial "J".

JIM MCMAHON OBE MP

Minister for Local Government, Devolution and Regional Growth

Annex A: Parishes included in Oxford City Council's formal request for modification

The decision letter on 16 July 2026 described Greater Oxford as including 15 parishes from Cherwell, 25 parishes from South Oxfordshire and nine parishes from Vale of White Horse. We have identified that this did not reflect the parish schedule in Oxford City Council's formal request for modification. That schedule identifies 15 parishes from Cherwell, 17 parishes from South Oxfordshire and nine parishes from Vale of White Horse. For the purposes of this fresh assessment, we have assessed the modification contained in Oxford City Council's formal request, comprising the 41 parishes identified in its submitted schedule, shown below.

Vale of White Horse (current)	South Oxfordshire (current)	Cherwell (current)
Appleton with Eaton	Beckley and Stowood	Begbroke
Besselsleigh	Berinsfield	Bletchington
Cumnor	Cuddesdon and Denton	Charlton on Otmoor
Kennington	Dorchester	Fencott and Murcott
North Hinksey	Drayton St Leonard	Gosford and Water Eaton
South Hinksey	Elsfield	Hampton Gay and Poyle
Sunningwell	Forest Hill with Shotover	Horton cum Studley
Wootton	Garsington	Islip
Wytham	Horspath	Kidlington
	Little Milton	Noke
	Sandford on Thames	Oddington
	Stadhampton	Shipton on Cherwell and Thrupp
	Stanton St John	Wendlebury
	Toot Baldon	Weston on the Green
	Warborough	Yarnton
	Waterperry with Thomley	
	Woodeaton	
9 parishes	17 parishes	15 parishes