

REPORT TO PARISH COUNCILS DEC 2024 FROM CLLR KEVIN BULMER

GENERAL OCC REPORT UPDATE

Local Government Reorganisation

By now most will have heard the government's plans for reorganising local government given the 10th Jan deadline for priority places which was only announced in late December this does look rather rushed. Given in normal times this would involve discussions between the districts and county never easy at best of time (previous unitary discussion going back at least a decade have gone nowhere) never mind under this deadline (herding cats comes to mind).

Not aware this reorganisation directly effecting Parish Councils or Town Council apart from the obvious, like who's responsible for what (planning etc).

This news is by far the most important thing for local government and all other announcements by OCC are effected by this to either a greater or lesser degree. The day to day business of council should proceed as normal but all other policy stuff may or may not happen depending on the final look of the LA and who ends up in charge.

The speculation this is driven by governments desire to avoid a crushing defeat in the coming local elections or to save money ill leave to the various political parties to make cases for, ill just content myself with saying the speed of these proposals does raise eyebrows given the importance of the matter in question and that the result will leave a lasting effect on local government for generations.

What this means for the coming election is rather up in the air at the moment, the election may be postponed or go ahead but with rather short lived councils to be re-held again with whatever the final look of the LA council organisation in oxfordshire turns out to be (my uninformed bet would be unitary if saving monies a requirement).

Finally I was holding off a report hoping to have something more firm to report, but I've just heard a general briefing won't be given to backbench cllrs till the end-of Jan and I've no info on how detailed or informative that will be.

So going with what I know at this point as sparse as it is.

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By email

**The Leader's Office
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Councillor Liz Leffman
Leader of the Council

10 January 2025

Dear Minister,

Congratulations to you, your teams and officials on the publication of the White Paper. It has been considered in great detail locally and we are delighted to see such close alignment among Oxfordshire with the government's position on structural reform to local government and devolution.

This great county requires the governance structures necessary to optimise the ambitions of its current and future residents, businesses, investors and institutions. A county that brought the world one of the first Covid-19 vaccines is operating at the cutting edge in its thinking and its actions, but we recognise that in order for this county to continue to flourish we need to embrace governance change.

This letter serves as a response to your letter of 16 December 2024. We wish to state clearly at the outset that we wish to join a 'fast track' in which to accelerate our local government reorganisation ambitions that will enable us to unlock devolution.

Devolution

All Oxfordshire Councils are committed to progress at pace towards devolution which we recognise will lead to the creation of a Mayoral Strategic Authority. Whilst we are not yet in a position in which to agree a deal, we will continue to engage positively with our partners across the Thames Valley.

Oxfordshire understands the importance of the Thames Valley to the government and we want to state our commitment very clearly to work with you and partners to enable a Mayoral Strategic Authority to cover this vital sub region. We will work tirelessly to make this happen. Conversations are progressing with relevant authorities and our next meeting has been scheduled for 31 January. Brought together, this area will cover a serious group of councils and key strategic geographies and institutions across health, police and fire and rescue services. We are in no doubt that it will leverage the full benefits of such a Strategic Authority that will amplify and accelerate economic, social and cultural objectives for this place and the places that sit within it.

Oxfordshire is one of only a handful of places in the country which makes a net positive contribution to the Exchequer and sits within the South East, which remains one of the highest performing economic regions. But neither the county nor the region have the optimal governance, powers and influence needed to deliver inclusive, sustainable economic growth locally, regionally, nationally and internationally at the pace that is essential for the UK.

Local Government Reorganisation

Oxfordshire County Council has held conversations about this element of the White Paper with its Cabinet and all Leaders of its political groups. There is total support for reorganisation at pace.

The county council has had, and will continue to have the benefit of the clearest direction and support from government, conversations with the Leaders of each district council (Cherwell, Oxford City Council, South Oxfordshire, Vale of White Horse and West Oxfordshire). The District Councils of Cherwell, South Oxfordshire, Vale of White Horse and West Oxfordshire have agreed to work together to seek to identify the best approach to unitarisation across Oxfordshire. We will continue to work positively with Oxford City Council as this is a shared endeavour.

The councils of Cherwell, South Oxfordshire, Vale of White Horse and West Oxfordshire have shared correspondence outlining support for reorganisation in line with the ambitions clearly set in the White Paper.

All our councils have fifty years of dedication to the place and places of Oxfordshire, but all governance systems work to a point. We collectively believe there are benefits to be gained from unitarisation and recognise how unitary local government complements the work of a strategic authority. To that end, we are strongly encouraged by the government's position.

Making Progress Now

Oxfordshire authorities have delivery plans for sustainable growth that show how immediate investment can accelerate the delivery of high-quality jobs, environmental investment, housing and economic growth in the next two to three years.

We have the structures and ambition to deliver this now. With the support of government, we can be in the best possible position to transition this active sustainable growth programme into new structures. We would therefore welcome a cross-departmental discussion on our position and our offer in tandem with reorganisation and devolution ambitions.

Resources

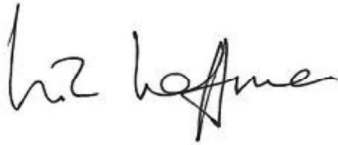
With regard to resources to move this ambitious programme of work forward, we recognise the government's intent to offer secondments. We welcome this and wish to enter formative discussions on how we can practically take this forward. We and our local authority partners will be having conversations throughout January and beyond to understand and plan the necessary workforce requirements and budgetary implications – we would wish to build a collective team based on the talents of all councils to progress this extensive work.

Elections

The postponement of ordinary elections is a significant concern. Our commitment to reform at pace is absolutely clear, but we strongly believe democracy is best served by the public having clarity over when and what elections will take place.

To that end, we would be seeking commitment from government that elections to a shadow authority/authorities would take place in May 2026 if a postponement of county council elections in 2025 is essential. This would mean a new authority/authorities would 'go live' in 2027 or 2028.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Liz Leffman', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Cllr Liz Leffman
Leader, Oxfordshire County Council
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REPORT TO PARISH COUNCILS JAN 2025 FROM CLLR KEVIN BULMER

GENERAL OCC REPORT

Local Government Reorganisation

Followup to last months briefing note

Statement on devolution and a strategic mayoral authority

Read the statement on the [Oxfordshire County Council website](#) or below:

*In response to calls from [South Oxfordshire](#) and [Vale of White Horse](#) district leaders for **Councillor Liz Leffman, Leader of Oxfordshire County Council**, to confirm the council's geographical preference for a mayoral strategic authority, **she said**:*

There is clear consensus among all Oxfordshire councils in wanting to move at pace towards [devolution](#) and we have communicated this ambition and commitment in our [letter](#) to government. The county council is committed to continuing to work closely with all our partners, in Oxfordshire and beyond, to identify the best approach to both devolution – and the creation of a strategic mayoral authority – and unitarisation, for the best interests of all our residents across the county.

I have been holding constructive conversations with leaders in Berkshire and Buckinghamshire for several weeks. My preference is for us to be able to form a strategic mayoral authority with those councils, but we have not yet reached an agreement.

The geography of what a strategic mayoral authority could look like is one we will be discussing together at a meeting on 31 January in Oxford.”

Not sure *unitarisation* is a word but clearly means setting up a unitary authority which includes Berkshire and Buckinghamshire. Oxfordshire isn't big enough by its self especially if Oxford city goes it alone as a new mayoral authority.

Can't say if the statement about a consensus is accurate or not as I'm not party to the discussion and have to await the public statements which for some reason seem to be issued to cllr's after the media 🤖 (not how its supposed to work but the age we live in 🧑🏽) but I note only two out of the 5 district councils are mentioned above both of which are liberal controlled.

There are the possibility of significant savings for example in Oxfordshire alone you'd save over a million pounds in salaries to 5 CEO who are no longer required, obviously not quite as simple as that as you'd need to have a new management structure for the enlarged area but you get the idea. Also hardly need 5+ sets of district council offices etc

Had a general briefing on what the local government reorganisation may mean (say may as its very early days) on the 28th.

My takeaway points are:-

How has the cabinet achieved a formal delay to elections by a decision of Cabinet?

Oxfordshire County Council cabinet has not achieved a formal delay. The Government holds the power, not local councils, to delay or postpone elections.

OCC have asked for commitment from government that elections to a shadow unitary authority/authorities would take place in May 2026 if a postponement of county council elections in 2025 is deemed essential. We are currently awaiting the Government's response to OCC letter.

We are hoping for a final decision on if May elections will happen or not on Monday, just to repeat this is a government decision

Shadow authority is the initial temporary authority responsible for the reorganisation and setting up the new unitary.

What votes did other political parties have on this matter?

None, current decision (letter about fast track) is a cabinet only matter.

What has been decided? Unitary or devolution.

No decisions have been made in respect of the form of local government reorganisation or the geography for any strategic authority. Early views have been made known by the Cabinet but formal decisions will need to be made in due course. However the front runner is a tie up with Berkshire, Buckinghamshire & Oxfordshire.

How will rural places be represented?

These are matters that need to be discussed and actioned as part of future work. Basically this relates to concerns over any reduction in democracy and people feeling disenfranchised and ignored. In reality there's only a small amount of evidence this may occur and it's hardly universal. Something along the lines of area committees is one solution that would answer this concern and many proposals for unitary local government include proposals for this.

Can local authorities opt out of the unitary train

Short answer is no, while legislation requires consultation like all consultation it's not binding on the government and it's government who decides. Whatever local Cllr or councils (Of whatever tier) say the ultimate arbiter of this process is government.

What will happen if council don't come forward with proposals

Simple answer secretary of state will come forward and force them to comply, they seem to be pretty serious about this and there's a lot less room for manoeuvres and options than in the past

Why the emphasis on Mayors

Best guess is that want to only talk to 30 odd individuals to get something done, rather than the large raft of councils they currently have to liaise with.

What is the governance and decision-making process around submitting proposals for new unitaries by OCC and who represents the official view of the Council?

We are awaiting the Government's response to the letter of 10 January which will set out the legal route the Government wishes to take to initiate and receive proposals. The white paper states, in respect of reorganisation,

We will also consider which governance models available to local authorities across the sector will best support their decision making.

It is hoped the response to the white paper strengthens our understanding on what this means in practice.

Once we have this information, we will work with Political Group Leaders to propose a route/s that work which includes the governance route for decision making.

What is the process, criteria (of applicants) and timescales around any submission of (and further comment) unitary proposals to the UK Government?

We are awaiting the Government's letter which will set out the legal route the Government wishes to take to initiate and receive proposals. It is our assumption at this stage that only Councils can submit proposals.

The white paper set out timescales for those on the fast track (high level proposals by the end of March 2025 and final proposal/s by the end of May 2025) and all other Councils (final proposal/s by Autumn 2025).

Has the government given any steer about whether it wants to have a unified approach across the country for Unitary Authorities for cities of population 100-300k?

The messaging in the white paper is that new councils need to be a min 500,000 population or more in size with exceptions on a case-by-case basis.

This is a fast moving issue and further answer or information is hoped for over the coming days but this is my best review of current situation

The council has set up a £5m budget for work relating to this

How would the shadow authorities work

Although shadow authorities have been set up in the past the exact size make up and procedures will depend on the final look of the unitary/mayoral authority and could be in excess of 150 cllrs responsible for the vesting and setting up of the new authorities

Statement from Councillor Jane Hanna, Chair of Oxfordshire Joint Health Overview Scrutiny Committee, following the decision by the Department for Health and Social Care (DHSC) not to intervene in the restructure of Buckinghamshire, Oxfordshire and Berkshire West Integrated Care Board (BOB ICB):

While we are disappointed that the DHSC has decided not to intervene in the restructure of BOB ICB, which will bring massive centralised changes to their operating model, we are pleased that our emergency action and ongoing scrutiny has retained vital funds for Oxfordshire, as well as a joint funded position to ensure continued place-based working.

Representatives from Oxfordshire Joint Health Overview Scrutiny Committee (JHOSC) will continue to work with BOB ICB on resolving any important outstanding concerns.

This will be further discussed at this week's meeting of JHOSC (Thursday 30 January) where consideration will be given as to whether the offer of local meetings between the NHS England Director for the South East with local parties, including the ICB and MPs, needs to take place

Included this statement as this scrutiny committee which I've sat on and chaired in the past is an important committee and part of public health and NHS scrutiny which is an important issue to all. Anyone wanting to know more can visit the OCC website for more detailed information.

Network Rail provides new timeline for reopening Botley Road in August 2026

Read the story on the [Oxfordshire County Council website](#) or below:

Network Rail has revealed its plans to complete the redevelopment of Oxford Station, following a series of delays which has seen Botley Road closed to through traffic for nearly 22 months.

The [new programme](#) will see Botley Road reopen in August 2026, while improved access for pedestrians and cyclists will be introduced this summer.

The £161 million project, which began in April 2023, was due to be completed in October 2024 – including the replacement of the Botley Road railway bridge.

However, Network Rail was unable to keep to this schedule due to the discovery of an inverted brick arch under the surface. It also failed to reopen Botley Road between October 2023 and March 2024, as previously planned, because of the same problem.

Another obstacle was the proximity of sewerage to clean water, preventing it working on both at the same time as initially planned. Thames Water has now found a solution to diverting the water supply and the main sewer, which has been built into the new programme.

Councillor Andrew Gant, Oxfordshire County Council's Cabinet Member for Transport Management, said: *The residents and businesses in the Botley Road area have suffered nearly two years of disruption because of this project.*

They have been left in limbo since July 2024 when the most recent delays to the scheme were announced. Network Rail has told us it is confident its revised plan is deliverable and we hope that this time it can stick to its timetable.

Spatial Development strategies is another white paper I'd draw your attention too, relates to how government want planning to work in the new situation

Flood Alerts

I haven't seen any flood alerts but given the almost continuous rain over the last 3 days I'd expect some degree of flooding to occur, remember it can take a few days for water to flow down from the hills to the various watercourses.

Just to reassure that council business will continue as normal while we transition into the new authority whatever its final look is.

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