

A new council for a
BETTER
Oxfordshire

A guide to proposed changes to council services in Oxfordshire

The proposal

Oxfordshire County Council and South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse District Councils have developed a joint proposal for a new council for Oxfordshire. The 'Better Oxfordshire' proposal is to replace the county council and the district or city council in your local area with one 'unitary' council providing all services.

The proposal has now been sent to the Secretary of State for Local Government for consideration.

Why change?

Unless there is change, Oxfordshire's councils will find it harder and harder to manage the growing demand for public services with less central government funding.

We think a unitary council would be simpler, deliver better services, be more locally accountable, and cost less to run.

This guide provides information about the benefits of the proposal.

Your views

The proposal was developed with help from residents and other local organisations as part of an engagement exercise involving public meetings, library drop-in sessions and promotion through local papers and online. Thanks to everyone who shared their views, many of which have been incorporated into the final proposal.

Final feedback

Before the Secretary of State makes his final decision, it is expected that residents and local organisations would be given another chance to have their say. Please check the Better Oxfordshire website for updates.

www.betteroxfordshire.org

How services are run now

Oxfordshire has six main councils - one county council, four district councils and a city council. There are also more than 300 parishes and town councils.

Each council provides different services and has separate local councillors.

Your city or district council services include: environmental health, housing, leisure and recreation, planning applications and waste collection.

Your county council services include: children's services, support for schools, fire and rescue, libraries and museums, roads, social care, trading standards and waste disposal.

The need for change

Unless local government changes, services will be under more pressure in the future.

Central government has reduced funding for the county, districts and city council. Soon, council services will mainly be paid for locally from council tax and business rates, as well as charging for some services.

At the same time, the population is ageing and growing, which puts pressure on services.

Two independent studies found that by creating a single 'unitary' council for Oxfordshire at least £20m could be saved every year. This is after the one-off cost of reorganisation.

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Better Services
Simpler
Lower Cost
More Local

Better Services

- Savings could be used to improve local maintenance, including roads
- One council is responsible for all the environmental services such as street cleaning and road maintenance in your area
- Joining up social services, housing and benefits improves support for people who need extra help



Simpler

- One website, one phone number, one contact for all your council services
- Other public services such as the NHS and police could work better with one council rather than several
- Businesses have a single point of contact for services such as trading standards, licensing and planning



Lower Cost

- No duplication – one council costs less to run than six, with fewer councillors and senior managers
- One council saves £20m each year, which can be used to deliver better services and protect them from future cuts
- Keeps council tax down



More Local

- One local councillor representing your community who is accountable for all council services in your area
- Parishes and town councils have more influence over decisions for their own communities
- Your councillor takes local decisions on an 'area board' and for the whole county



How it will work

All six of Oxfordshire's councils will be replaced by a new 'unitary' council responsible for delivering all your council services. Most of the staff providing services would transfer to the new council.

Services will be joined up and be more cost effective. For instance, it makes sense for the same council to collect your bin and dispose of the rubbish. Services such as housing and social care would also work closely together.

Most people in England (over 60%) already live in an area served by unitary councils. Wiltshire became a unitary council in 2009, and Buckinghamshire also recently submitted a bid to become a unitary council.

Council tax

Council tax consists of payments to the county council, district or city council, Police and Crime Commissioner, and parishes or town councils in most areas.

The unitary element of council tax would replace the county and district/city payments, and would be 'harmonised'. The council tax bands for payments to the new council would be the same across Oxfordshire.

The proposal shows residents could expect to pay no more for the services than they would under the current system. Ultimately council tax will be decided by councillors of the new council. Parishes and town councils will still raise a precept to pay for community services, as will the new Oxford council.

A new council for Oxfordshire that will sustain our county as a great place to live, work and bring up families.

More local democracy

The new council will have around 125 local councillors elected by residents.

Major decisions such as planning for roads will be taken at a county level, with local planning decisions taken by five area planning committees based on the existing district and city boundaries. This is important so that existing Local Plans stay in place when the new council is first established.

There will be between 15–20 local 'area boards' responsible for issues such as parks, anti-social behaviour, parking and support for the community and voluntary sector.

The local area boards would be made up of councillors for that area. There would also be representatives from parishes and town councils, and other public service organisations such as the police.

The local area boards would also give communities a stronger voice in decisions affecting the whole county.

Oxford

The Better Oxfordshire proposal includes creating a new, autonomous local council for Oxford to manage community assets, provide grants to community groups, and provide social and environmental services. The new Oxford council would also be able to raise a precept (local tax).

There would be several area boards for different parts of Oxford, giving communities more power and influence.

Sustainable growth

Joining up the planning system for housing, transport and jobs would ensure that growth was properly managed. The proposal includes a locally controlled investment fund to pay for infrastructure, such as roads, so Oxfordshire would be less reliant on government funding.

One website, one phone number for all services



15 - 20 local area boards with delegated budgets to spend on local priorities



More influence and a voice for local communities on countywide plans

Joined-up planning, transport and housing to support economic growth

£20 million savings each year to improve services and keep council tax down

Better, joined-up services to benefit individuals and communities



What happens next?

The Better Oxfordshire proposal has now been sent to the Secretary of State for Local Government for consideration. Before finally deciding, he will consult with all councils affected, and residents and local organisations are expected to be given another chance to have their say.

If the Secretary of State agrees to the proposal, representatives from all six councils in Oxfordshire would be asked to work together to manage the transition to a new council.

No date has been given for a decision, but it is unlikely to be before the county council elections on 4 May 2017.

More details are available on the Better Oxfordshire website or in your local library.

www.betteroxfordshire.org

Alternative formats of this leaflet are available on request including large print, audio and easy read.
Please call 01865 792422 or email better@oxfordshire.gov.uk