

LOCAL GOVERNMENT REORGANISATION (LGR)

There are sweeping changes coming to local government in our area, and in July the Government announced their decision on the structure of the new system. As of 1st April 2028, Oxfordshire's District Councils and County Council will be abolished, and will be replaced by three new "unitary authorities" (UA) (see letter from the Minister, attached, titled "Oxfordshire 160727").

The three new councils which the Government has decided upon have disappointed everyone (see letters from SODC leader and OCC leader, attached) apart from Oxford City Council, which proposed the three-council model and have achieved their aim of a Greater Oxford, taking in most of the Oxford Green Belt.

The four District Councils, plus the existing unitary of West Berkshire Council, had proposed two UAs: one would have been Oxford City plus Cherwell and West Oxfordshire, and the other, "Ridgeway", would have been the whole of South Oxfordshire, Vale of the White Horse, and West Berkshire. This would have created two strong UAs, using existing boundaries, and with population sizes compliant with government guidelines of 500,000. Meanwhile, the County Council wanted a whole Oxfordshire unitary, which also would have made logical sense, though rather large.

Instead, what we got was three unitaries (see: 3councils.org) all of which are below the government's own guidelines for population: Greater Oxford Council with 240,000, North Oxfordshire Council with 265,000, and Ridgeway Council with 430,000. In addition, this solution involves lots of chopping up of previous administrative boundaries.

Ridgeway Council will be made up of the larger part of South Oxfordshire and of VWH, plus West Berkshire. 25 parishes are being removed from SO to become part of Greater Oxford, as well as 9 parishes from VWH. However our ward, Woodcote and Rotherfield, will all fall within the new Ridgeway Council. Our ward will cease to exist, and the new areas, which will also be called wards, will be the same as the current County Divisions: Goring and Woodcote; Watlington and Rotherfield; and Henley, which includes Rotherfield Greys.

There will be elections for councillors to these new divisions in May 2027, although these will remain shadow councils until Vesting Day in April 2028.

COMMENT ON LGR

It is difficult to feel any enthusiasm for these changes. The Minister's letter speaks of "replacing the inefficient two-tier system", and of the need for reform in preparation for devolution:

"We won't achieve effective devolution or enable effective place-based public services with outdated and misaligned structures that slow down delivery, fragment public services, hamper housebuilding and slow down important decision making. We need to make sure that new councils are grounded in place and are genuinely connected to their communities."

Well I am glad we cleared that up. At best this is misleading waffle, but is straight out of the Government's playbook of blaming local councils for the lack of growth in the economy. In particular, they have created a narrative that Planning Authorities are the main reason for the slow rate of housebuilding and therefore need reform, of which more below. I do recommend reading the Minister's letter as a fine example of Doublespeak.

While councils may vary in efficiency, the two-tier system works well in Oxfordshire. The logic is that some functions, such as Planning, are best suited to the more local District size, while others, such as Highways and Social Care, work better at a larger County scale. Unitary Authorities have often fallen between these two stools, arguably being too large for some functions and frequently too small for many others, leading in many cases to financial crisis. Since the functions that OCC currently has will be divided between three authorities, it seems likely that this will be less efficient rather than more. Planning Authorities, meanwhile, will cover much larger areas which means councillors will have less direct knowledge.

The idea that having two levels of local councillor is somehow inherently “inefficient” also does not make sense. Councillors are paid “allowances” on an estimate of how many hours the job should involve. Since someone has to do that work at each level, the new councillors will have to be paid to do the work of both levels. Exactly the same applies to council employees; the same amount of work will need to be done by someone.

As for devolution, it is by no means certain yet whether this will actually increase local democratic decision-making or reduce it. Given the savage attack on local planning committees, it is clear that this government’s direction of travel is centralising, rather than devolving.

To add insult to injury, the perverse decision to create three smallish unitaries with chopped up boundaries has made the very worst of a bad job. According to your choice of phrase, it is either a dog’s dinner or a sow’s ear, possibly both (again, see letters from our council leaders).

Residents can make up their own minds about the Government’s real reasons for LGR, but for our councils and the thousands of employees this is a massively disruptive process leading to no obvious benefit of any kind; think Brexit on a slightly smaller scale.

PLANNING REFORM

On 30th October there will be a fundamental change to the Planning system, mandated by the Government. At present there is one small but crucial influence available to both parishes and district councillors, the power of call-in. This means that, although the vast majority of applications are determined by officers under delegated powers, if there is strong local feeling about an application, as well as potentially material considerations, there is a right to call in the application to be heard by the Planning Committee. This allows councillors, objectors, and supporters to make their case in person. The Committee only hears about 40 cases per year, but as both your councillors are long term members of Planning, we can attest that the Committee takes its responsibilities very seriously, and in a significant number of cases have overturned the officer recommendation. Most of these have been upheld at subsequent appeal, meaning that the Committee has been justified in its decision. This is democracy in action at the most local level: parishes and district councillors.

Call-in is now to be forbidden by law. Councils have no discretion on this. In addition, virtually ALL applications are forbidden to go to committee at all (those in Schedule 1). The remainder, known as Schedule 2, which includes larger developments and a few oddities such as Listed Building consents, can in theory go to committee, but the Government has rigged it so that they almost never will. The way this works is that certain Schedule 2 applications can be “flagged” (by someone as yet undetermined, see below), and can then go forward to a “Gateway Test”. This involves just two nominated people, usually the Chair of Planning and the Director of Planning, examining the

application. If it raises at least one issue of significant environmental, economic or social concern, or a significant planning issue, it can be referred to the Committee, but ONLY if both persons agree. This means that the planning department has a complete power of veto over any application ever going to committee.

The SODC constitution is currently being rewritten to comply with these changes and your councillors are working hard to ensure that we retain as much influence as we can after this hatchet job.

All of this comes under the innocuous title of the “National Scheme of Delegation” (NSD), and is being presented as merely a kind of administrative tidying up so that all councils are working to the same rules. In this context, I would like to quote the opening words of the Government’s response to their “consultation”, published on 1/6/26:

“Planning committees play a critical role in maintaining public trust and ensuring local democratic oversight within the English planning system. Planning committees remain central to transparent, consistent, and high-quality decision making.”

What fine words! At that exact moment – in the very same document drop - the Government issued its orders to planning authorities in which it destroyed the role of those planning committees. So the statement above is, in fact, a lie. Planning committees will still exist on paper, but they will almost never be allowed anywhere near “high-quality decision making”.

The only good news at all is that the additional protections due to all our parishes being in the Chilterns National Landscape remain in place. However it would be better still to have a Neighbourhood Plan, and we continue to urge our parishes to consider this most seriously.

BRIEFING ON NATIONAL SCHME OF DELEGATION

All parishes should have received an invitation to a Briefing on the National Scheme of Delegation, being held via Teams at 5.30 – 7.30pm on Thursday 10th September.

MAPPING UPGRADE

The new interactive mapping system is live and available on the council’s website. It can be used to search for publicly available data including planning applications, tree preservation orders, council-owned land, and much more.

COUNCILLOR COMMUNITY GRANT SCHEME

The annual CCGS is now open, which allows applications for grants with a public benefit within your parishes. Feel free to discuss any ideas with either of your councillors, or direct with the Grants Team at SODC. Your councillors have £15,000 available for our ward.

Councillors Jo Robb and James Norman, Woodcote and Rotherfield Ward.