

Better Oxfordshire briefing for parishes and town councils

Key points

- Proposal for unitary council offers increased local empowerment and influence
- 15-20 'area boards' offer local decision making with parish and town involvement
- Area boards could take decisions about a wide range of community services and influence county-wide decisions
- Increased support for neighbourhood planning
- The new council would prioritise the earliest possible adoption of emerging Local Plans, and its strategic plan would build on existing local plans

Introduction

Oxfordshire benefits from thriving local communities and a high level of engagement in politics and service delivery. A vibrant parish and town sector gives voice to local communities as well as, in many cases, providing important local services.

Better Oxfordshire is a proposal for a brand new unitary council that would build on these strong foundations to create a new model of localism and devolution to communities within an overall strategic framework.

The formal powers and status of parish and town councils and parish meetings would be unaffected by local government reorganisation but they would see real benefits including:

- A real voice for your community heard by the unitary council?
- Working with other partners and unitary councillors through the Area Executive Board
- Better support for neighbourhood planning
- The opportunity for more devolution of powers for those that want them

Unitary councillors

The new unitary council would be made up of between 100-125 new councillors. The unitary councillors would be elected to represent their community and be accountable for all the council services that are currently provided by the county and city / district councils. Representation would be simplified from the perspective of residents and there would be no need for hand-offs between district and county councillors when issues are directed at the 'wrong' councillor.

It is proposed that the first elections to the new council are conducted on the basis of retaining the current boundaries of existing county council divisions but electing two councillors to each unitary. (Special arrangements will need to be put in place for the two current two member divisions.) The

new council will then be subject to a full formal Boundary Review undertaken by the Boundary Commission and the following elections will be based on the outcomes of that review.

Area executive boards

Area executive boards would be established as committees of the new council that reflect the local communities with which most people identify. The boards will give communities a strong voice in local matters and ensure that local priorities are clear and addressed. The boards will:

- work in partnership with other organisations operating locally to identify and address local priorities
- provide a mechanism for local decision-making
- enable funding to be devolved to the lowest appropriate level
- strengthen the role of local councillors
- provide a new opportunity for local leadership

An extensive exercise will be required to identify the most appropriate geography for the new boards but comparison with other county unitaries operating similar models suggests that 15-20 areas would create a model for Oxfordshire that genuinely reflects local identity, building on the foundation of Oxfordshire's market towns, and the creation of several boards for Oxford city.

The exact number and boundaries of boards will depend on detailed consultation as well as further consideration of the powers that the boards will need in order to effectively deliver the needs of their local area.

Each board would be expected to develop a local area action plan and agree priorities with its partners and the community.

Area executive boards will have a formal consultative role in setting the overall policy framework for the council, including in areas such as the budget and Local Plan and other identified new plans and strategies. This will ensure that strategic decisions are informed by a strong local voice.

Boards would have funding and powers delegated from the unitary council in order to enable them to effectively fulfil their role.

Similar models for direct involvement of parish and town councillors have been adopted by Wiltshire, Cornwall and Durham, which all became unitary counties in 2009.

Parish and town councillor involvement in area boards

The area executive board membership would be made up of all the elected Unitary Councillors within the area who would carry the formal voting and decision-making responsibility on matters with the unitary council's control.

Special status would be given to town and parish council representation and key local stakeholders who would expand the local leadership role of the Board and enable it to operate effectively to fully identify and address local priorities.

Area executive boards would meet in public and would encourage public engagement and participation. They would incorporate mechanisms that would allow members of the public to raise any matters causing concern in their community.

Community services

Area management arrangements nationally tend to focus on environmental issues, often under the 'cleaner, greener, safer' banner. These issues will form the core work of Oxfordshire's area executive boards.

However, to properly serve the diversity and complexity of Oxfordshire's rural, urban and market town communities, these boards will also need a remit across social issues as identified by locally determined priorities. Areas for local decision-making and influence might include:

- Health and wellbeing –addressing local needs and join up local prevention activity
- Local highways – eg prioritising local road improvements schemes and maintenance
- Parking charges and provision – such as the extent of free parking schemes
- Business and economic development – local business partnerships and locally important sectors, such as tourism and farming
- Voluntary and community sector – such as local grant giving
- Young people's provision – ensuring that local need is provided for
- Community assets – such as taking decisions on prioritisation of investment
- Anti-social behaviour – such holding local agencies to account

Community hubs

Oxfordshire's existing councils and the wider public sector have considerable customer service assets across the county. However, these service points are unevenly distributed and access to one service all too often does not enable access to related services.

A network of shared community hubs based on existing assets like libraries, leisure centres, fire stations and health facilities would improve access to services and enable professionals to deliver more joined-up and appropriate interventions.

These hubs also have the potential to be the venues where customers who need more help are assisted to access digital services.

Neighbourhood planning

The national planning policy framework envisages a more significant role for neighbourhood planning at the very local level. Currently, there is inconsistent support available for the development of neighbourhood planning.

The proposal is for stronger support for neighbourhood plans with a better split between the strategic and the genuinely local. With an overall planning framework that is more robust, more weight can be given to current and future neighbourhood plans.

With a shift of emphasis of the new single plan to the strategic level, the opportunity will open up for neighbourhood planning to play a more significant role in Oxfordshire. Communities would be resourced to take forward the development of neighbourhood plans that can ensure that local people are able to have more of a say on the development that affects them.

Strategic plan and sustainable growth

Planning functions are currently split across Oxfordshire's councils with no definitive coordinating strategic body or overarching strategic plan at the level of the functional economic area.

One new unitary council for Oxfordshire will, in the medium-term, deliver a single strategic plan (the statutory "Local Plan"); integrating the planning of housing, employment, community and strategic infrastructure under a single set of elected councillors and officers.

This framework will take into account the identified housing and infrastructure opportunities and pressures across the whole functional economic area rather than focussing on housing land supply in isolation of other considerations.

An overall strategic plan for Oxfordshire will establish a shared vision for sustainable growth in the county covering social, environmental and economic development alongside infrastructure delivery.

The new council will prioritise a new strategic local plan but this could take 3-4 years to complete. (Separately, work has been on a joint spatial plan commissioned by the Oxfordshire Growth Board, which is made up of the leaders of the county, districts and city councils, and the local enterprise partnership.)

In the transition, the new council will therefore prioritise the earliest possible adoption of existing emerging Local Plans to ensure development is being proactively planned and five year supply maintained.

A county-wide spatial approach will:

- provide a long-term platform for the planning of coherent, balanced and connected development that leads to more equal and sustainable communities
- provide local areas with a framework for their development and maintenance of specific local plans including area master plans and neighbourhood plans with strategic clarity for the overall story of growth
- elevate the relevance of and support to neighbourhood plans
- contribute to a more transparent and equitable approach– articulating and challenging the reality of development and ensuring that everyone plays by the rules
- ensure that individual decisions are taken in a broader strategic context – e.g. in relation to the green belt and housing need
- take a strategic view of sensitive landscapes and environmental infrastructure to both maintain environmental protection where it is most needed and increase equality of access to green spaces

Planning committees

Initially, the new council would establish planning committees based on the boundaries of the current Local Plan footprints to ensure continuity of decision-making during the early period of the new arrangements.

Local Plans will remain in force until planning policy across Oxfordshire is unified in a new strategic plan that will be agreed by the new unitary council. As the new strategic plan is developed, boundaries and scale for the planning sub-committees will be reviewed.

A mechanism will be developed to assess the strategic/local nature of development incorporating criteria including scale, community, environmental and economic impact.

Further information

You can read the full proposal and supporting information at www.betteroxfordshire.org

To contact the project team, email better@oxfordshire.gov.uk