POETS

Planning Oxfordshire's Environment and Transport Sustainably

Whither Oxfordshire?

POETS look at the differing plans for unitary authorities

By Professor John Glasson and Tracey Dow

Reorganising local government is a matter that should concern us all as it affects so many vital services - roads, education, travel, social care, housing, employment and infrastructure, to mention but a few. So, it must be based on level-headed logic rather than political expedience. Central government is now asking local authorities to come up with proposals for unitary authorities (where one authority provides all major services). Existing councils in Oxfordshire must submit their proposals by November 2025, with a likely decision in 2026 followed by implementation in 2028. POETS (Planning Oxfordshire's Environment and Transport Sustainably), a voluntary thinktank of ex senior Oxford and Oxfordshire professionals and academics, strongly support such unitary government. This is particularly important for bringing planning, transport and housing together.

Of course, we have been here before. Back in 1969, the then government published the "Redcliffe-Maud" report that advocated new, primarily unitary, local authority areas based on 'city regions' with a focus on the vital interdependence of town and country. Just as 'no man is an island', no city is either. Each has its city-region – the area in which it interacts especially with its workers and shoppers. The 1969 proposals were widely welcomed, drawing local authority boundaries in a way that was particularly attractive for planning purposes. However, a change in government put an end to the proposals. What followed in 1974 was a re-jigging of boundaries but with most counties not greatly altered on the assumption that there was no need for upheaval, although there was one significant local boundary change in 1974 with Oxfordshire incorporating part of Berkshire as The Vale of White Horse, because Oxford was so close to the boundary of Oxfordshire and Berkshire. The outcome from the 1974 reorganisation has been the continuation to date of a two-tier county-district system and a disruptive split in planning functions.

We now have three sets of plans for a future local government system proposed by the different councils which cover all of the current Oxfordshire county area (five Districts), and with two proposals also including the current West Berkshire Unitary Authority.

- Oxfordshire County Council wants ***one*** *unitary authority* for the whole county
- Five district councils have backed a ***two*** *areas* solution covering Oxfordshire and West Berkshire, with the Vale of White Horse joining with South Oxfordshire and West Berkshire, and West Oxfordshire joining with Cherwell and Oxford.
- Oxford City Council proposes a ***three*** *areas* solution – including an expanded Greater Oxford, Northern (including parts of Cherwell and West Oxfordshire), and Ridgeway (including parts of the Vale and South Oxon and West Berkshire) authorities.

As noted by Redcliffe-Maud 50 years ago, local governance areas require a logical approach, for example in relation to the size of area and population and the geography of how people and businesses interact. How people identify with an area is also important. The analysis of journey to work patterns from the national censuses has enabled 'travel to work areas' (TTWAs) to be well defined for the whole country. Oxford's TTWA is bordered by TTWAs for towns such as Reading, Swindon, Warwick and High Wycombe. It is pretty close to the current Oxfordshire County boundary except for the Banbury area and an area north of Reading.

POETS have reviewed the proposals, thinking about linkages between areas (what 'makes them tick'). This is particularly important given the global climate emergency, a public health crisis, the need to plan housing and transport together to promote active travel, public transport, lower carbon and other emissions and to stop sprawl. Of the options proposed there are problems with all, but some more than others. The '*two area'* solution would bring back the problem of bisecting Oxford's hinterland very close to the city. Oxford City's *three areas* Greater Oxford Plan creates much too small an area to act as Oxford and its catchment area, with Witney, Abingdon, Didcot and Bicester being cut off from the city. It would place even more pressure on a creaking infrastructure and greatly threaten the Green Belt. Both the two and three area proposals also risk having identity problems. In addition, the TTWA data (see map) shows very little interaction between Berkshire south of the Lambourn Downs and Oxfordshire; very few people working at Harwell or Didcot travel over the Downs. The Oxfordshire one unitary proposal is the simplest, cheapest to reorganise and is probably the least contentious solution.

It seems that the current three sets of proposals all have an element of self-interested hope that the outcome will enable the promoting councils to gain the most. When local politicians talk of what the new areas could do, and offer sweeteners, remember that local party political governance changes quite rapidly. What actually happens in an area would depend on which Councillors get voted in – not to mention the fact that central government policy directs most of what local authorities can do.

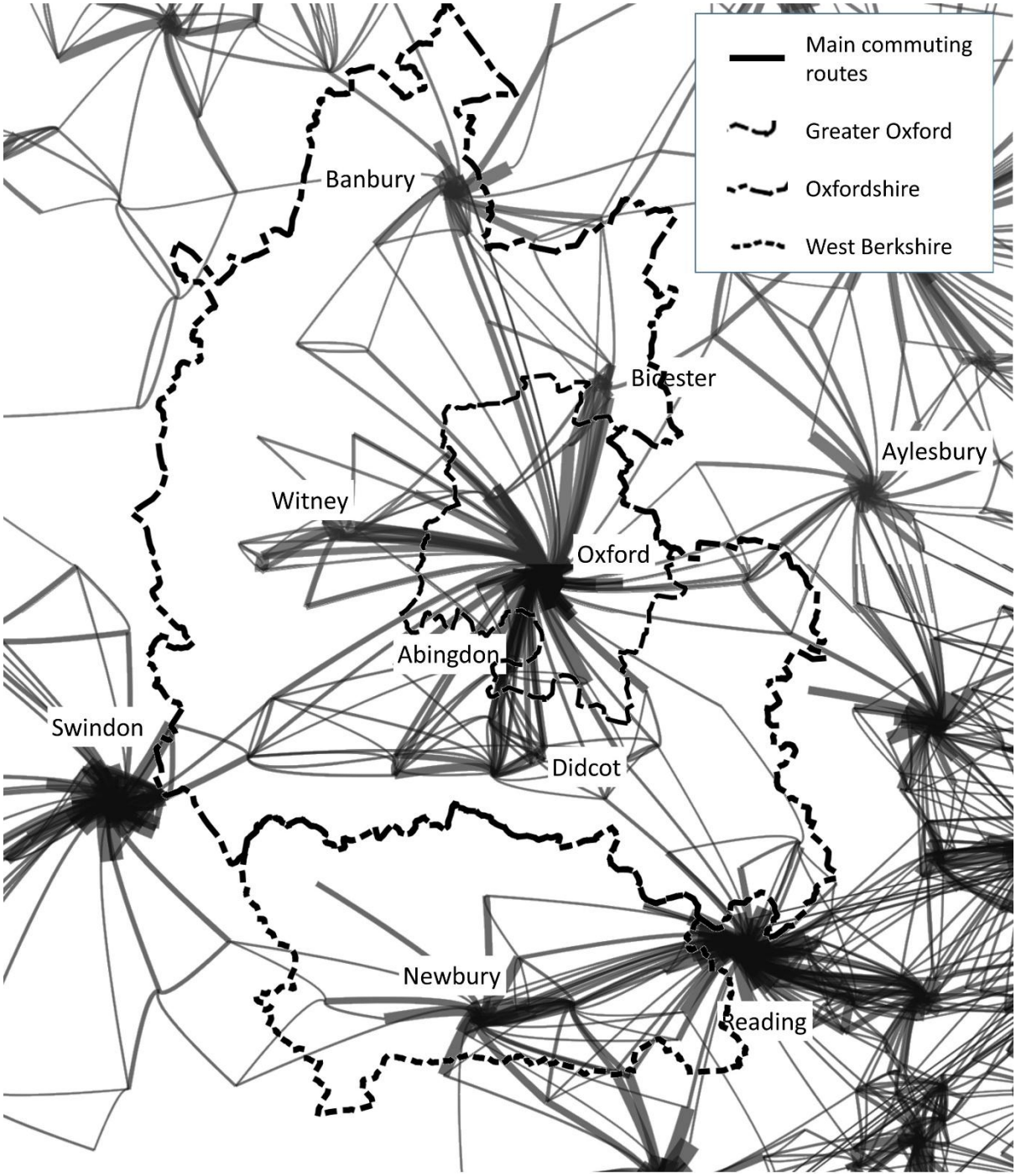
Of the proposals, the one that makes most sense to us is that of a single unitary, covering the County. It provides continuity for most services, it integrates planning and transport, has a clear identity and is the least disruptive change. It is also as close to an Oxford City Region as is likely to be on offer; indeed the *Oxford Times* might see it as mirroring their coverage as the paper for Oxford and Oxfordshire!

By POETS members:

- *Professor John Glasson, Professor Emeritus in Planning and Impact Assessment; Founding Director of Oxford Institute for Sustainable Development*
- *Tracey Dow, former Transport Director, Planning Manager and Consultant Planning Inspector*

On behalf of POETS
E: contact.poets@gmail.com www.poetsplanningoxon.uk

Oxford Travel to Work Area



Mapping using census data by Gordon Stokes, Visiting Research Associate at Transport Studies Unit, University of Oxford