POETS

Planning Oxfordshire's Environment and Transport Sustainably

LOCAL AUTHORITY PROPOSALS FOR UNITARY LOCAL GOVERNMENT IN OXFORDSHIRE

This paper provides some analysis and arguments underpinning the POETS' previous opinion piece on the various proposals for the reorganisation of local government in Oxfordshire.

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Introduction

1. The English Devolution and Community Empowerment Bill[1] includes proposals for two layers of local government across England.

    a. Unitary authorities (where they do not currently exist) performing the existing functions of both county and district authorities but excluding the responsibilities of the proposed strategic authorities, once established. Exact responsibilities are yet to be determined but are likely to include amongst others:
        - local highways management and maintenance
        - education
        - social services
        - local planning and development management
        - public/environmental health & licensing
        - waste collection and disposal
        - homelessness and local housing
        - museums and records
        - registration of marriages, births and deaths
        - cemeteries.

    b. Strategic authorities (mainly Mayoral authorities) effectively combining counties/new-unitary authorities, created to tackle regional issues and capitalise on issues affecting a significant geographical area, such as an integrated transport network. These authorities will have the ability to perform functions in the following areas:
        - transport and local infrastructure
        - skills and employment support
        - housing and strategic planning
        - economic development and regeneration
        - environment and net zero
        - health, wellbeing and public service reform
        - public safety.

    At present, which authority would deal with a particular issue remains unclear, for example, whether green belt review would be a strategic level responsibility or a unitary responsibility, and the threshold for strategic planning applications which would be determined by the strategic authority.

2. **This paper concentrates mainly on the unitary proposals in Oxfordshire** which the Government advises should have a 'target' population of around 500,000, once reorganised. Proposals from the existing councils are to be submitted to the Government by 28th November 2025 with a likely decision in 2026, followed by implementation in 2028. Hopefully there will be public consultation on the decision. The councils currently plan to use common data so that the proposals can be assessed on a like-for-like basis. This includes demographic information and potentially set-up and running costs / cost savings. It is understood that the proposal for a strategic authority will also be submitted to Government by existing Oxfordshire authorities at the end of 2025.

[1] English Devolution and Community Empowerment Bill: Guidance - GOV.UK

3. The county council currently provides roughly 80% of all services in Oxfordshire, with district and parish/town councils providing the remainder.

4. So far, three different plans for unitary authorities are proposed by different councils in Oxfordshire which cover the whole Oxfordshire County area (5 districts), while two of these also include West Berkshire Unitary Authority.

    - Oxfordshire County Council proposes **one unitary authority** for the whole county (map 1).
    - Four district councils and West Berkshire Unitary have backed a **"Two Area"** solution covering Oxfordshire as well as West Berkshire (map 2). The Vale of White Horse would join with South Oxfordshire and West Berkshire, while West Oxfordshire, Cherwell and Oxford City would form the other unitary authority.
    - Oxford City Council proposes **three authorities** for the same area, including an expanded "Greater Oxford" which includes parts of Cherwell, Vale of White Horse and South Oxfordshire, but none of West Oxfordshire (map 3).

5. The current proposals for a new strategic 'Thames Valley' authority would cover Oxfordshire, Berkshire, and possibly Swindon. Although the reorganisation will dictate the boundaries, numbers of councillors and the sectors of governance, it will not dictate the political make-up of the councils, or their policies. As before, these will be decided in elections.

Some issues to consider when choosing geographical areas:

6. *Size of area chosen* – there is a balance to be had between the economies of scale of larger authorities and democratic representation. Smaller areas can potentially be more accountable as relative to population size they may have a larger number of councillors, although this is likely to be more costly to the public purse. Under the proposals, the number of councillors representing any given area is likely to reduce.

7. *Economic and social interdependencies and geography* – some industries require close social and geographic links. R&D, health, pharmaceuticals and motorsports are examples in the Oxfordshire area where co-operation has been encouraged by local authorities. The interdependence between a town or city and its hinterland is also of importance, with networks both of industry-linked supply chains and of social activities. People travel to city/town centres in sub-regions for many activities, especially for work but also importantly for shopping, entertainment and health/hospital appointments.

8. *Relationship of unitary to a new strategic (possibly mayoral) authority* – as a strategic authority is to be created there is a need to keep new unitaries simple, as the strategic authority will add complexity (in the same way that the existing two-tier system does). It will be important for strategic authorities to be relevant to the geographic area they cover, for example in respect of transport, housing, economy and health issues.

9. *Cost of reorganisation* - There may be problems around the implications of inherited local authority financial positions and debt, with some more challenging than others.

10. *Contractual arrangements* – councils will have to determine how existing contracts with suppliers are to be dealt with, which could prove complicated. For example, the county

council's ten-year, multi-million-pound highways contract has recently been renewed. If contracts are not honoured there could be significant financial implications for the new council(s). The councils also need to ensure continuity of service through these contracts.

11. *Disruption to services* – any changes to boundaries and splitting or amalgamation of areas will carry costs and potentially lead to the disruption of services. Splitting areas can be especially problematic, due to splitting officer teams and skill sets. Bedding-in of new authorities will take time with staff facing uncertainty about their jobs and management potentially focussed on new staffing arrangements and service structure, rather than service delivery. Electronic systems, processes and procedures also need to be agreed and integrated. This can be expensive and time consuming to do.

12. *Linkages between services* - some services are highly dependent on one another. For example, planning and transport are intrinsically linked and well suited to integration. Currently transport is dealt with by the county council and planning by the districts and city council. Joining up these services would enable better planning and earlier identification of important infrastructure requirements, amongst other things. Likewise in determining developer contributions, moving planning closer to wider service provision currently outside district council control (social care, education etc), might nurture better understanding of the wider infrastructure and service needs of extended and new communities. However, planning and transport would still be split under the proposals, with 'strategic' planning and transport going to the strategic authority.

13. *Equitable services and duplication* – there is a need to ensure that the services provided in different parts of Oxfordshire are equitable. If areas and services are disaggregated, this could lead to different levels of provision in different parts of the county, for example, between the north and the south. Likewise, there is a need to avoid duplication of services if efficiency and best value is to be achieved and savings made. Potentially, a larger authority may also be better able to manage inherited debt.

14. *Links with the voluntary sector* – some county and district services work closely with voluntary organisations which tend to rely on relationships and trust built up over time. The need to manage aggregation and disaggregation of these services has to be considered.

15. *A sense of community, place and belonging* – this can be strong or weak. People may or may not feel they belong somewhere. Reorganisation and drastic boundary changes can break down people's established sense of place and spatial identity. For example, people living in Henley may feel affinity to Oxfordshire rather than Reading. People living in South Oxfordshire and the Vale of White Horse districts may not have associations with West Berkshire. People living in Oxford City may have more city than county affiliations or vice-versa, for example, with the Oxford Civic Society, Oxford Preservation Trust, Oxfordshire county-wide teams and environmental bodies.

16. *Flooding, environment and biodiversity* - are arguably best dealt with across a wider area. The natural environment and landscape are not confined to district or county boundaries. Clearly sensible boundaries have to be drawn which may split areas of biodiversity importance or landscape character but if this can be avoided, it should. Likewise mitigating flooding problems in Oxford and elsewhere is heavily dependent on catchment management upstream e.g. in the Evenlode.

17. *Diversity* - the democratic issues of ensuring diverse people and areas are properly represented in policy making need to be addressed in new arrangements. For example, under the Greater Oxford proposals, the majority of the population would live in the city but there would be a significant rural population living in surrounding villages in the green belt, as well as in places like Kidlington. If the Greater Oxford proposal were to go ahead, care would need to be taken to ensure that the rural voice is not lost. Likewise, if the Oxfordshire-wide proposal goes ahead, it would be important to ensure that the more diverse communities of Oxford continue to have adequate representation.

Suitable geographic areas for local government

18. Besides the population size of an area the geography of settlements is important. It makes sense for local authority areas to be based around cities or large towns. Every city has its hinterland or 'city region' – the area that the city interacts with, where its shoppers, workers, and cultural visitors travel to and from. This is usually a much larger area than the built-up area and its environs. Just about everywhere in England can be regarded as being within the hinterland of a town or city.

19. "Travel to Work Areas" (TTWAs) have been (in practical terms) the best indicator of how urban systems work – readily available census information has data on origins and destinations of homes and workplaces. Even in the world of more working from home, these are probably the most logical areas for local governance, since they mark the effective hinterlands of cities. The 2011 travel to work areas definition (map 4) has Oxford's TTWA as somewhat like the county area, but stretching a few more miles towards Aylesbury, while missing out the Chilterns and the area around Banbury which has its own zone. Planning and transport are probably the fields of governance where geography is most important and travel to work areas fit planning of urban development and local transport best.

20. TTWAs reflect suggestions by the 1969 "Redcliffe-Maud report" which proposed 61 areas for England based around large towns and cities. It said that "the areas must be based on the interdependence of town and country". The proposals would have put most of Oxfordshire in "Area 45", roughly as Oxfordshire is now but with areas close to Reading omitted and the Brackley area added. When local government was reorganised in 1974 by a different government the two-tier system of county (or metropolitan areas) and districts was introduced. Only some aspects of the Redcliffe-Maud approach were used, with "Shire Counties" generally seeing little change.

21. But Oxfordshire was changed with parts of Berkshire moving to Oxfordshire, mostly to the Vale of White Horse and some to South Oxfordshire. The boundary had been so close to Oxford City (using the Seacourt Stream) that change was needed. Oxfordshire ended up with the county and districts that we still have now, with part of Berkshire added to Oxfordshire, making Oxford more central geographically for governance.

Pros and Cons of the different reorganisation proposals in geographical terms

Oxfordshire County (Single Area)

22. This would be the simplest, cheapest to reorganise and probably least contentious and least disruptive solution. Most parts of Oxfordshire look towards Oxford as their 'centre'. A few parts, including Banbury and the areas near Reading, look elsewhere but they are exceptions. The Lambourn Downs form a barrier to movement (Map 5), so using the county would be more logical than including West Berkshire. Using the same area as now for education, social services and other services carried out by the county would mean saving costs of setting up new councils to do the same tasks. The area would be a lot larger than the 'goal' of 500,000 population, at 780,000. There would be a clear spatial identity with Oxford as the administrative centre of the city region. Bringing together of local planning, development management and transport would improve the future planning and management of major growth (jobs, homes, infrastructure and services). Concerns about access to local councillors, officers and services could potentially be addressed by sub-offices in other towns in Oxfordshire (see for example such an approach in the established neighbouring Buckinghamshire unitary).

Ridgeway and Oxford Shires (Two Areas)

23. Regarding the Government's aim that new authorities should have a population of around 500,000, the two areas proposal makes sense, as the current population of Oxfordshire and West Berkshire is around 935,000 and will grow over the lifetime of the arrangement. However, it leaves Oxford at the southern edge of the Oxford Shires proposed unitary, with the boundary with Ridgeway passing through the built-up area of Oxford. In this case the notion of 'interdependence of town and country' would be stretched, whilst creating a sense of spatial identity could be challenging.

Greater Oxford, Ridgeway and Northern Shires (Three Areas)

24. The City Council's proposed "Greater Oxford" is an area with a boundary replicating Oxford's Green Belt as closely as possible, using parish council areas as its building blocks. While this boundary has *a* logic, it results in strange anomalies. It omits Abingdon and Radley but stretches to the boundaries of Woodstock and very close to Bicester - although stopping short of the location for a new town at RAF Upper Heyford recently recommended by the New Towns Taskforce, in part on the basis of its connection to Oxford. It would be far smaller than the travel to work area. Both Ridgeway and Northern Shires would have three competing focal towns (Abingdon, Didcot and Newbury – and Banbury, Bicester, and Witney). Abingdon would lose its administrative links to Culham and Wootton which are very close. This option raises the question of why use the green belt as a boundary?

Population projections

25. The Oxfordshire wide proposal says nothing about expected populations for the county area, but the difference in projections by the Two Area and Three Area proposals are marked. The Two Area proposal (Ridgeway and Oxford Shires) gives two forecasts, one based on the Office for National Statistics (ONS) population projections, and the other on

the government housing targets (for this parliament's lifetime). The city council's Three Area /Greater Oxford proposal has one forecast.

26. Table 1 summarises the population forecasts/ projections[2]. The table is complicated by the Two Area proposal forecasting from 2023 to 2050 (27 years) while the Three Area/Greater Oxford proposal uses 2025 to 2040 (15 years). Also, of less importance but significant, the population related to different housing numbers would depend on the percentage of housing occupied, and numbers of people per household achieved.

Table 1 – Projected and forecast population for the Two Areas and Three Areas proposals

Two Areas proposal	*Pop 2023*	*Pop 2050 (demographic)*	*Pop 2050 (housing targets)*	*% increase (demographic) 27yrs*	*% increase (targets) 27yrs*	*%/year (demo-graphic)*	*%/year (housing targets)*
Oxford and North	451k	509k	601k	12.9%	33.3%	0.5%	1.2%
Ridgeway	463k	524k	658k	13.2%	42.1%	0.5%	1.6%
Total	914k	1033k	1259k	13.0%	37.7%	0.5%	1.4%

Three Areas/Greater Oxford proposal	*Pop 2025*	*Pop 2040*	*% increase 15yrs*	*%/ year*
Greater Oxford	240k	345k	43.8%	2.9%
North Oxon	265k	340k	28.3%	1.9%
Ridgeway	430k	545k	26.7%	1.8%
Total	935k	1230k	31.6%	2.2%

27. It is striking that while the Two Areas proposal envisages growth of 0.5% per year based on ONS projections, and 1.4% on housing targets (figures in blue), Oxford City Council's proposal envisages a 2.2% per year increase for the whole area, and 2.9% for Greater Oxford (figures in red). Calculations from the ONS and published targets for districts show the Two Areas figures fit well with official statistics, while in the Greater Oxford proposal they are increased in all cases. Oxford City Council says that they aim to build 40,000 houses within Greater Oxford by 2040 to accommodate the population growth, roughly 20,000 of which are already included in local plans. This would imply an average of 2.63 people per household, higher than the regional average of 2.43.

28. Oxford City Council is proposing that the population of both Oxford (Greater Oxford) and the other two unitaries would grow very much faster than the housing targets. Many local authorities have expressed concern that the housing targets are already too high, or indeed, unrealistic. The city council's suggestion may therefore be seen as a policy rather

[2] Figures are taken from the March 2025 "Interim Proposal" for Local Government Reorganisation and Devolution jointly by Oxfordshire County Council and the district councils. The Two District proposal is described in "Annex 3 – Option 2" while the Three Area proposal is described in "Annex 4 – Option 3". All proposals and the joint letter to government are found at https://www.oxfordshire.gov.uk/council/local-government-reorganisation-and-devolution/interim-proposal

than a forecast and risks confusing acceptable local and strategic governance solutions with the decisions of future councils, the political make-up of which is not known.

Potential effects of Oxford City Council's position on population growth

29. The city council's proposal is that the population of Greater Oxford will grow from 240,000 in 2025 to 345,000 in 2040 – an increase of 43% (or 2.9% per year). The population of Oxford City is currently 170,000, and the population of the other areas that would become part of Greater Oxford is about 70,000. To take one extreme scenario, if growth within current Oxford City boundaries is limited to zero, it would mean that the population of the areas outside Oxford City in the green belt, could grow from around 70,000 to 175,000 –an increase of 250% or 10% per year. Of course, this would not be the case as some development would probably be within currently built-up Oxford given that the city has said it is reviewing housing densities and looking again at green belt sites within the existing city boundary, but the growth outside (and in the green belt) would still be very large indeed.

30. Oxford City Council currently argues that this would require building on no more than 2.6% of the green belt, but this figure seems difficult to justify in the absence of fuller information as to how it was derived and whether existing site allocations contributing to the 40,000 homes have been taken into account. An earlier suggestion (now dropped) was that 1% would be built on, implying a very high density of 120 houses net per hectare which seemed implausible. If all the extra housing was within the green belt, the 2.6% land take figure would imply a density of 40 dwellings per hectare. While 40 dwellings per hectare net is typical for modern housing in non-central areas, this would not include the major roads, schools and other facilities, or any employment related to it. Development would generally be lower density outside built-up areas. However, higher density development in locations very well served by public transport would be preferable to urban/rural sprawl.

31. In the paper written in March 2025 (see footnote 2) describing the Three Area proposal, it is apparent that other areas were considered for inclusion in Greater Oxford, ranging in populations from 217,000 to 333,000. It is not known exactly what areas these would have covered and why they were not chosen.

32. In addition, the city council has stated that it wishes to grow commercial space within Greater Oxford by between 8M and 12.8M sq. ft. This will also add significant development pressure on the green belt. It also raises the question of what the number of proposed new homes and jobs would do to the existing Oxford City housing/jobs imbalance. If the imbalance between housing and employment remains or grows, there will be continuing pressure to build yet more housing.

Summary points and Conclusions

Oxford's proposal for a Greater Oxford and two other councils

33. Oxford City Council's proposal for a "Greater Oxford" (currently 240,000 people) is not large enough to serve Oxford and its hinterland. To be a true Greater Oxford it would need to be much larger, covering most of the county, an area similar to the Oxford Travel to Work Area which has a population of about 500,000.

34. The closeness of the boundary to the green belt is a curious choice. It is a strange logic that says that a city and its green belt are a sensible area for planning and governance,

extending much further in some directions than others, and excluding Abingdon, Bicester Radley and the green belt in west Oxfordshire. Abingdon would also lose much of its hinterland such as Culham and Wootton.

35. Oxford City Council's suggestions for population growth are extremely high. These growth suggestions differ greatly from those in the "Two Area" solution. The growth per year for the whole area would be 2.2% (compared with 0.5% or 1.4% suggested by the "Two Areas"). Greater Oxford would apparently grow at 2.9% per year.

36. With Greater Oxford population growing at 2.9% per year and with Oxford City unable to increase very much at all within current boundaries, the area outside the current city boundaries (mostly green belt) could grow at approximately 10% per year if Oxford City's population remained static.

37. The Three Council option is the most complicated and disruptive of all the proposals, potentially leading to disaggregation and possibly, duplication of county-wide services, teams and skill sets.

38. Potentially there could be greater democratic representation of the population under this option but it would be more expensive to set up and run.

Two areas, proposed by 4 district councils and West Berkshire Unitary Council

39. The Two Area plan proposed by 4 district councils and West Berkshire Unitary has the merit of producing councils of near to the Government's desired 500,000 population.

40. Geographically, Oxford would be located at the southern extreme of the proposed Oxford Shires unitary, and areas close to the city in the south would be disconnected from it in administrative terms, making service and infrastructure provision more difficult.

A unitary Oxfordshire Council

41. The proposal for a unitary Oxfordshire Council is the simplest and most pragmatic option. There would be no need to set up new organisations to manage most council functions, so continuity of service would be stronger.

42. The current Oxfordshire County Council area, while not a perfect match with Oxford's hinterland, is close enough to be acceptable, with a history of 50 years in this form.

43. The economic and transport linkages between Oxford, Didcot, Harwell, Culham, Witney, Bicester and Abingdon would be more easily maintained, as would important links to the Integrated Care Board for county-wide health (although health may go to the new strategic authority).

44. A county-wide authority can potentially better address issues such as biodiversity, landscape, flooding, climate change and the county's heritage. It can also better address the provision and management of new development and the issue of defining grey belt which has significant implications not only for Oxford but also the towns and villages beyond the green belt.

45. A bigger authority could benefit from efficiencies in scale for service delivery and back-office support, because of reduced duplication of process. It could also potentially offer greater skill specialisation and expertise, as well as the ability to attract and retain staff through a more differentiated work offer and better promotion prospects within the new council.

46. It would be a larger authority with fewer councillors than under the other proposals. Representation of all residents might be harder to achieve.

Including West Berkshire – or not?

47. Two of the proposals suggest joining with West Berkshire. This would help the city and districts' proposals in respect of population targets, but there are very few links between West Berkshire and Oxfordshire as the Travel to Work Area maps show. The logic of the south of the county amalgamating with West Berkshire is unclear. Economic, social and physical affiliations with West Berkshire are somewhat limited. Important economic research and development ties between Harwell, Milton Park, Culham and Oxford University would be diluted.

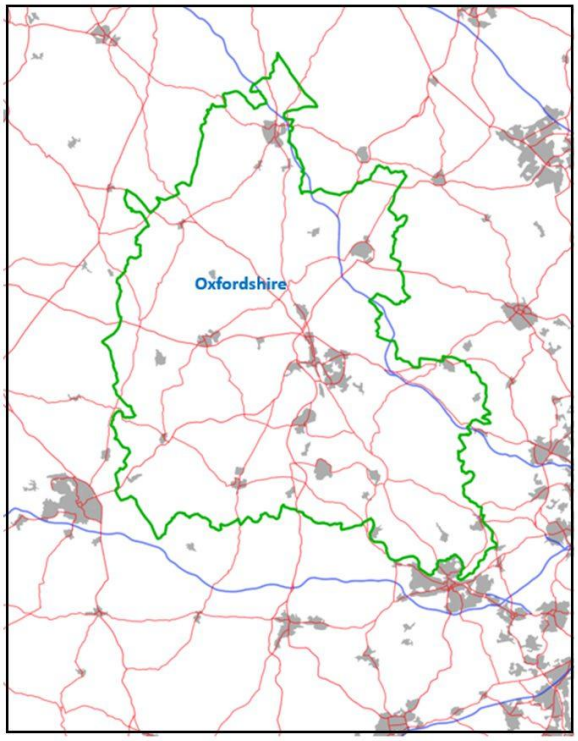
Overall conclusion

48. All the proposals talk about the capabilities that their suggestions would allow. The City Council's statements about Greater Oxford imply policies, both for Greater Oxford and the other new areas. However, policies will be determined following elections, over which current councils have no control. Current high housing targets are presumably not intended to last forever but help to solve the affordable housing crisis.

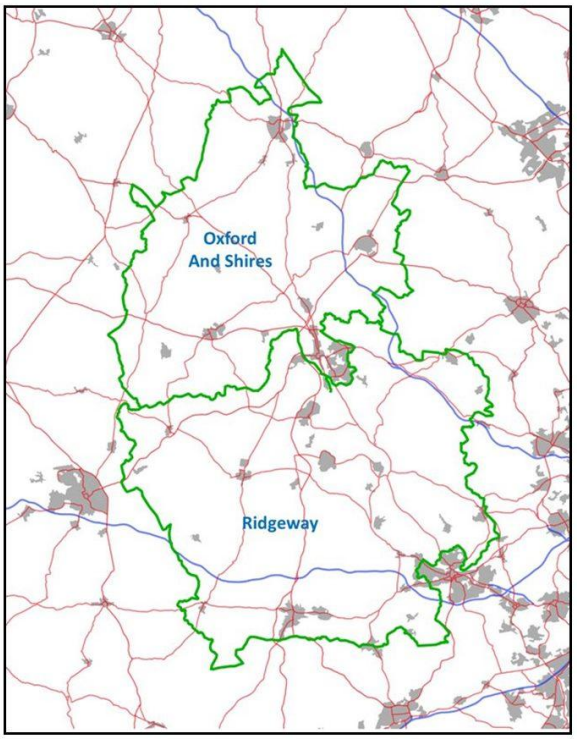
49. It is apparent that Oxford's infrastructure is already creaking, as has been made very clear by the attempt to expand the station and replace the Botley Road rail bridge. Most current and expected expansion of employment is in East Oxford and on the fringes of the city (currently West Oxford and North Oxford Gateway), in areas that are not easily served by public transport to a wide population base. How the city council's Greater Oxford proposal could increase its population by 50% and function well is not clear. There are also of course many other infrastructure constraints including, for example, water and drainage.

50. Areas for local governance should be based around logic of cities/ towns and their hinterlands while taking account of maintaining existing governance areas. Of the proposals, the one that makes most overall sense is for a single unitary council covering the county. It provides continuity for most services, and a clear identity which is as close to a functional Oxford City Region as is likely to be offered.

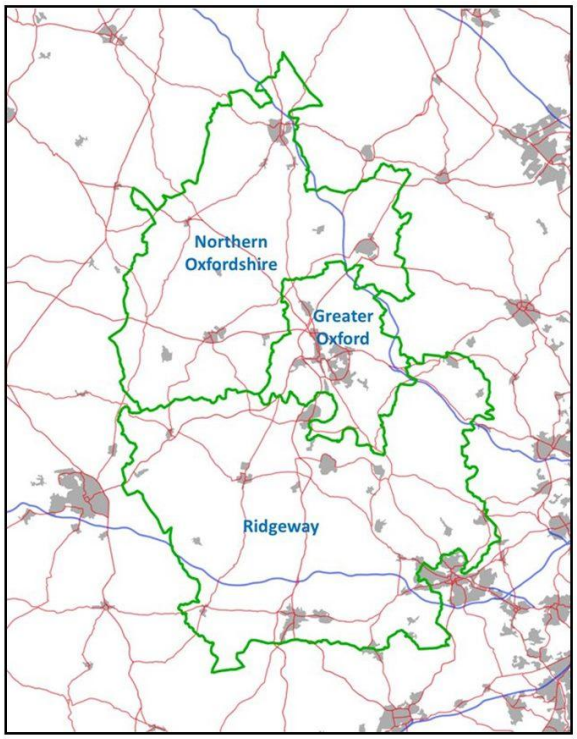
Maps 1-4 – The proposals for new administrative areas, plus Travel to Work Areas



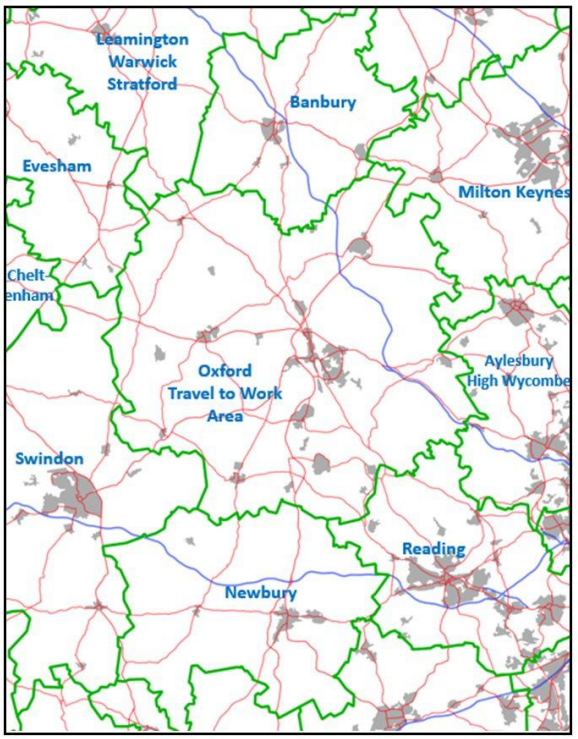
1 County Council proposal



2 Districts' "Two Area" proposal

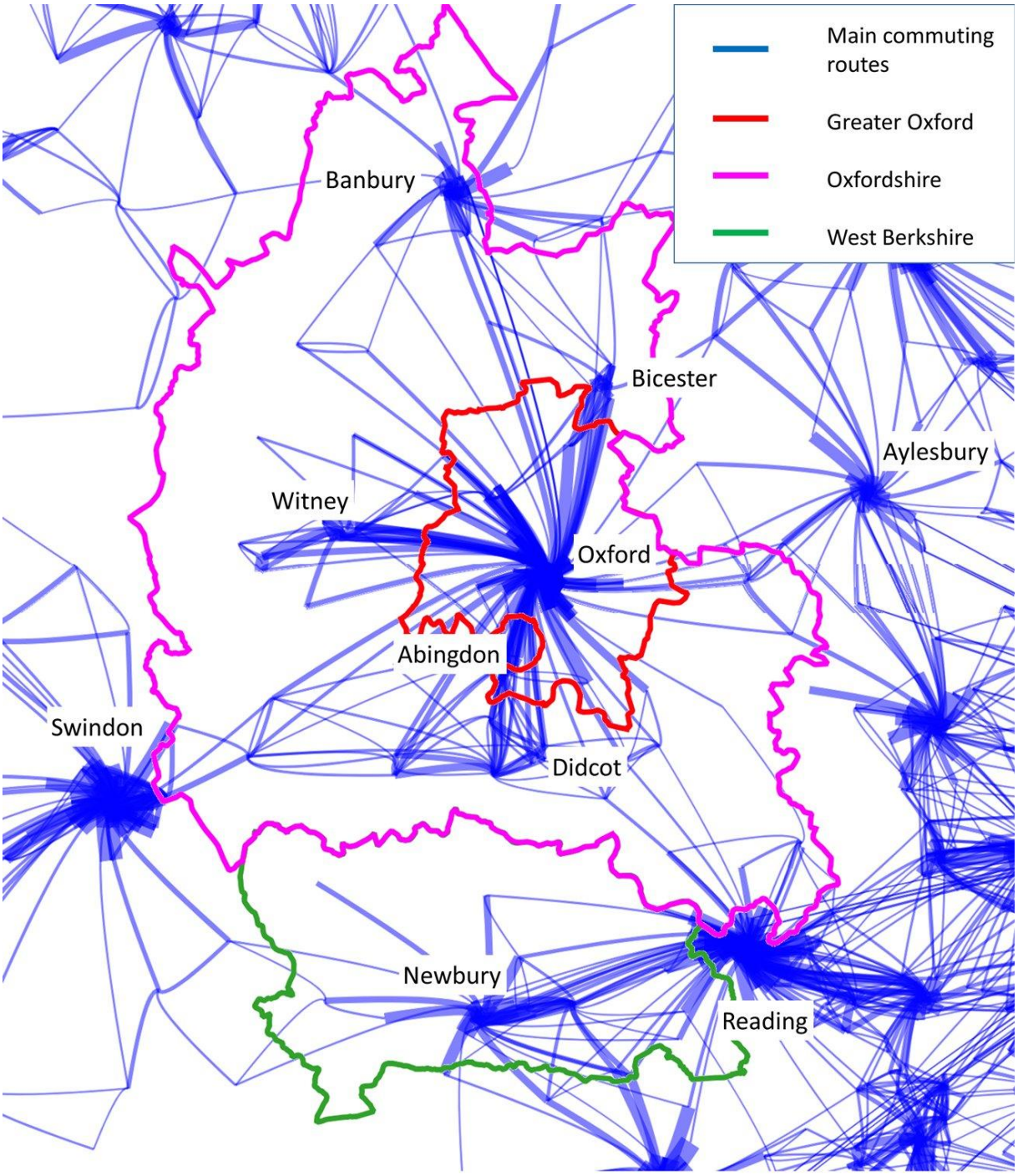


3 Oxford's "Greater Oxford" proposal



4 Oxford's Travel To Work Area, 2011

Map 5 – Main travel to work flows in and around Oxfordshire (2011 census data)



(2021 census data is not regarded as reliable for analysis due to pandemic related restrictions, though, in fact the patterns for 2021 travel are similar to those for 2011 and would show a very similar pattern).