POETS

Planning Oxfordshire's Environment and Transport Sustainably

Jim McMahon OBE MP
Minister for Local Government, Devolution and Regional Growth
2 Marsham Street
London SW1P 4DF

09 November 2026

Dear Minister,

Re Local Government Reorganisation (LGR) in Oxfordshire

I am writing on behalf of POETS (Planning Oxfordshire's Environment and Transport Sustainably) -- a voluntary think tank of professionals providing analysis, commentary and ideas on sustainable planning and transport for Oxfordshire – in relation to your current provisional view on Oxfordshire LGR (29 October 2026). We welcome the opportunity to provide a response and also your openness to consider and to implement a different proposal as appropriate in relation to views received and reconsideration of analysis against criteria. Our serious concerns leading to a preferred alternative proposal are contained in the following points (a –e).

a. **Criterion 1: a single tier of local government for the whole area concerned**. Only the One County Unitary meets this criterion. It is also the only proposal that fits the economic geography of the Oxford City Region which stretches far beyond the boundary of the proposed Greater Oxford Unitary (please see attached figure). The alternative proposals cut across business and research interactions and journey to work patterns.

b. **Criterion 2: the right size to achieve efficiencies, improve capacity and withstand financial shocks.** Only the One County Unitary has the population size to deliver the desired economies of scale for the critical Oxfordshire economic area. The Two and Three Unitary proposals have authorities with populations well below the guiding threshold of 500,000. In addition, and of particular importance, the two and three authority proposals will lead to more fragmentation and duplication of the provision of vital local services (for example adult social care and SEND). There will be major financial shocks and substantial deficits under the two and three authority proposals and the local residents will have to pick up the bill with considerable hikes in Council Tax. In the middle of existing cost of living pressures this will be an extra and unnecessary economic burden for local people which will have political implications.

c. **Criterion 5: new unitary structures must support devolution arrangements.** The whole of Oxfordshire related local government is in a state of flux with the inter-relationships between the various future organisations currently unclear. In addition to the unitary LGR, Oxfordshire will also be part of a Strategic Authority and will have a Development Corporation for central Oxfordshire. The unitary reorganisation is only part of a wider reorganisation and the local and strategic should have been looked at together from the start. However, it is pleasing to note

that the Strategic Authority will now be a Mayoral Authority, but the functional relationship with a unitary authority does need detailing. The Mayoral Authority would benefit from a limited number of similar size members with no county area having the ability to dominate through extra seats at the table. A Mayoral Authority of Oxfordshire, Berkshire and Buckinghamshire (with or without Swindon) meets this concern much better than the Two or Three Unitary Oxfordshire options.

The proposed Oxford Development Corporation raises another set of issues especially in relation to the proposed Greater Oxford Unitary (GOU). What will be the functional split, what will be the governance relationships and will they have the same boundary – to mention only a few of the issues? There is considerable scope for confusion and conflict. A much more logical and efficient governance model bringing together all these changes is:

-- A strategic level of Mayoral Authority (Oxon, Bucks, Berks –and Swindon?)

-- A single Oxfordshire Unitary and

-- A Greater Oxford Development Corporation (but with a more sensible boundary than the proposed Greater Oxford Unitary). This would have the power, resources and government support to achieve the stated aims of the proposed GOU.

d. **Criterion 3 (must deliver high quality services), Criterion 4 (councils have sought to work together in coming to a view that meets local needs) and Criterion 6 (new unitary structures should enable stronger community engagement etc).** We do not find these criteria particularly helpful in discriminating between the options, but the arguments advanced in the paper indicate that one unitary is as effective, or indeed more effective, across these criteria than the other options.

e. **Underlying evidence from Government Departments.** No doubt MHCLG approached other Government Departments for their views and analysis of the relative merits of the options for Oxfordshire LGR. It would be very helpful for the local authorities and for interest groups such as POETS if that information could be made available as soon as possible. We are particularly interested in responses from the Treasury, as we see relative efficiencies and cost arguments as quite critical for decision making. We presume that central government must have done some modelling of the likely financial implications under the different options. Other relevant Departments include, for example, Education and Health.

In light of the above points we cannot see the case for the Three Unitary Option. **In contrast we can see a very clear case for the One Oxfordshire Unitary.** We appreciate the opportunity to make these points to you. We have kept them brief as you will have many responses but although brief we believe they are powerful and cover the fundamental points in this important decision making process. Local Government Reorganisation is a once in a lifetime event. We cannot risk getting it as badly wrong again as in the 1970s when a rational Redcliffe-Maud unitary city region proposal was lost to a two-tier county-district system.

We look forward to your revised proposal—one in the best interests of the residents, businesses and all other stakeholders in this important (for the whole of the UK) and most innovative county.

Yours Sincerely,

John Glasson

Professor John Glasson On behalf of POETS
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Oxford Travel to Work Area

