

"Minded-To" decision on Oxfordshire Local Government

Reorganisation: Government signals support for three-unitary model

Executive Summary

Government has announced that it is 'minded to proceed' with the creation of three new unitary councils across Oxfordshire and West Berkshire, replacing the current seven councils from April 2029. At the same time, the Thames Valley has been selected to develop proposals for a Mayoral Strategic Authority, potentially bringing new powers and investment relating to transport, skills, housing, infrastructure and economic growth.

For adult social care providers, the proposed local government reorganisation raises significant questions about how services will be commissioned, funded and governed in future. While the stated aim is to simplify local government, there is a risk that the care sector could experience increased fragmentation where a single county-wide system currently exists.

Particular concerns include the potential emergence of multiple commissioning arrangements, differing contract frameworks, separate quality assurance processes and divergent approaches to provider engagement, market sustainability and fee setting. Providers operating across Oxfordshire may find themselves dealing with several councils instead of one, increasing administrative burden and complexity.

The proposals also raise concerns regarding ordinary residence and cross-boundary care arrangements. Residential placements frequently involve individuals living outside their home authority area, while domiciliary care services often operate across local authority boundaries. The creation of three separate councils could increase the likelihood of disputes over funding responsibility, delays in decision-making and inconsistencies in commissioning practice unless robust joint arrangements are established.

Home care providers may be particularly affected if differing policies emerge around fees, travel time, reporting requirements, contract management and service specifications, despite delivering care within the same wider Oxfordshire market.

There are also concerns about potential duplication of existing county-wide systems, including commissioning functions, safeguarding arrangements, workforce programmes and provider engagement structures. Fragmentation of these arrangements could create additional costs for both providers and councils without delivering clear benefits for people who draw on care and support.

By contrast, the proposed Thames Valley Mayoral Strategic Authority may present opportunities for the sector. Greater local influence over skills, housing, transport and economic development could help address some of the fundamental challenges facing adult social care, particularly around workforce recruitment and retention.

OACP's position is that any reorganisation should be judged by whether it improves outcomes for people who use services, supports a sustainable care market and reduces rather than increases bureaucracy. As the proposals develop, it will be important that new council structures maintain consistency wherever possible, minimise fragmentation and recognise that the adult social care market operates across administrative boundaries as a single interconnected system.

Full briefing

Government has announced that it is '**minded to proceed**' with plans to replace the seven existing councils across Oxfordshire and West Berkshire with **three new unitary councils**.

This is not the final decision. A further period of representations from councils, MPs and stakeholders will now take place before ministers confirm their final position, expected before Christmas.

Under the proposal:

- **Greater Oxford Council** would cover Oxford and surrounding communities, including Kidlington, Botley, Kennington, Cumnor and several villages currently within South Oxfordshire and Cherwell. Some villages, such as Wheatley and Nuneham Courtenay, have been moved into the proposed Ridgeway Council from the previous plans
- **North Oxfordshire Council** would cover most of the existing Cherwell and West Oxfordshire districts.
- **Ridgeway Council** would bring together most of South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse with West Berkshire.

If approved, elections to new shadow authorities would be held in **May 2028**, with the new councils becoming operational from **1 April 2029**.

Alongside local government reorganisation, the Government has also announced its intention to progress plans for a **Thames Valley Mayoral Strategic Authority**, covering Berkshire, Oxfordshire and Swindon. The new authority would have responsibilities relating to transport, economic development, skills, employment support, infrastructure and housing, with mayoral elections anticipated in 2028.

Much of the public debate has focused on council boundaries and local identity. However, for adult social care providers, the more significant issue is whether a system that currently operates through a single upper-tier authority in Oxfordshire could become fragmented into multiple commissioning and governance arrangements.

Adult social care is already under considerable pressure from workforce shortages, funding constraints, increasing complexity of need and rising demand. Providers will understandably be concerned that reorganisation does not create additional bureaucracy or divert resources away from frontline services. While there may be benefits from stronger local place leadership and closer alignment between housing, planning and care services, there are also significant risks that require careful consideration.

Fragmentation of current county-wide systems

At present, Oxfordshire's adult social care system largely operates through a single county council structure.

Providers work within broadly consistent arrangements relating to:

- Commissioning and contract management
- Quality assurance
- Provider engagement
- Market sustainability work
- Workforce initiatives
- Safeguarding partnerships
- Discharge planning and system coordination

Moving to three separate councils raises the possibility that these systems could gradually diverge.

Even where councils begin with similar approaches, experience elsewhere suggests differences can emerge over time in priorities, policies, funding decisions and commissioning models.

Providers could ultimately find themselves dealing with multiple:

- Contracting teams
- Procurement processes
- Quality frameworks

- Data returns
- Fee negotiation arrangements
- Provider forums

This risks creating additional administrative burden without improving outcomes for people who use services.

Providers may also be concerned that the sector's voice becomes diluted across multiple commissioning organisations. Current engagement arrangements largely allow providers to raise strategic issues through a single county-wide structure. Under a three-unitary model, care providers could be required to engage with multiple sets of provider forums, partnership boards and consultation processes.

Ordinary residence and cross-boundary commissioning

One of the most significant concerns relates to **ordinary residence**. Many individuals live in care homes outside the area in which they previously lived. Others move between council areas for specialist services, family reasons or because of local bed availability. Under the proposed arrangements, Oxfordshire providers could increasingly find themselves supporting people funded by multiple successor authorities.

This creates risks around:

- Disputes over funding responsibility
- Delays in placement approvals
- Delays in package reviews
- Uncertainty regarding specialist placements
- Increased administrative burden on providers

The current arrangements already involve complex negotiations between councils in some circumstances. Introducing additional commissioning authorities will inevitably increase the number of organisational interfaces involved in funding decisions and therefore risks creating more disputes, delays and administrative burden unless common arrangements are maintained across the successor authorities. Providers will rightly want assurance that residents are not left caught between authorities when decisions about funding responsibility arise.

The Oxfordshire **home care market** does not naturally follow local government boundaries. Many domiciliary care providers organise their services around practical travel routes, workforce availability and local demand rather than district boundaries. A provider based in one locality may support people living across what could become two or even three separate councils. This raises the possibility of variations in:

- contract specifications
- rates and payment mechanisms

- electronic call monitoring requirements
- reporting arrangements
- quality assurance processes
- approaches to travel time payments
- commissioning priorities

The effect could be to make care delivery more complicated and less efficient at a time when workforce pressures remain acute. The sector will be concerned that organisational boundaries do not create barriers to delivering seamless care.

A further question is whether Oxfordshire's current **safeguarding arrangements** remain aligned or become separated across multiple authorities. Providers currently benefit from established safeguarding pathways, common training approaches, shared learning from safeguarding reviews and consistent escalation procedures across Oxfordshire.

If separate safeguarding structures emerge, providers may need to work with different procedures and expectations depending on where services are delivered. Given the importance of safeguarding adults at risk, the sector will want strong assurances that existing collaboration and learning are preserved regardless of future governance arrangements.

Perhaps the greatest long-term risk is the emergence of different funding approaches across neighbouring councils. Over time, separate authorities are likely to take different views on:

- Annual fee uplifts
- Cost-of-care methodologies
- Contracting models
- Inflation assumptions
- Market sustainability funding
- Quality premiums
- Workforce investment

Providers operating services across Oxfordshire may therefore face different rates and conditions for identical services depending solely on which side of an administrative boundary they operate. This could create market distortions, make future investment decisions more difficult and contribute to uneven availability of care services across Oxfordshire.

The financial resilience of the proposed Ridgeway Council will be a particular area of interest for providers. Adult social care providers have a direct interest in the financial sustainability of commissioning authorities, as financial pressures can influence fee levels, market sustainability initiatives and investment in preventative services.

Providers will want assurance that reorganisation strengthens rather than weakens the long-term sustainability of local government finances, as financial pressures on councils ultimately influence social care commissioning and provider fee levels.

The transition itself will also require significant management capacity over several years, and providers will be keen to see continued focus on frontline service delivery throughout the reorganisation period.

Thames Valley Mayoral Strategic Authority

Alongside local government reorganisation, the proposed Thames Valley Mayoral Strategic Authority may ultimately have a more direct impact on some of the wider challenges facing the care sector. For providers, the mayoral authority may ultimately have greater practical significance than council boundary changes if it succeeds in attracting additional investment into workforce development, transport infrastructure and affordable housing.

The authority is expected to focus on:

- Economic growth
- Skills and workforce development
- Employment support
- Transport
- Strategic infrastructure
- Housing investment

These areas are highly relevant to adult social care.

For example additional devolved skills funding could support:

- Care workforce recruitment
- Apprenticeships
- Leadership development
- Career pathways
- Sector-specific training initiatives

Greater influence over housing delivery may help address workforce recruitment and retention challenges, particularly in areas where housing affordability acts as a barrier to employment.

Improved regional transport planning could benefit both care workers and people drawing on care services, particularly in rural communities where travel remains a significant challenge.

OACP comment

The adult social care sector should approach these proposals with cautious interest rather than assuming reorganisation will automatically deliver benefits.

There may be advantages from stronger local leadership and closer integration between housing, planning and health and care services. Equally, any benefits will depend on maintaining a coherent county-wide care market and avoiding unnecessary fragmentation of commissioning and governance arrangements. However, providers will rightly be concerned about the potential fragmentation of arrangements that currently operate on a county-wide basis.

The care market functions as a single ecosystem. People move between areas, staff travel across council boundaries and providers often operate services across multiple localities. Any future arrangements should reflect this reality.

As discussions continue, **OACP** will advocate strongly for county-wide consistency wherever possible in commissioning, safeguarding, workforce planning, market engagement and provider relationships. Local government boundaries should not create barriers to the delivery of care, nor result in unnecessary duplication of systems, processes or governance arrangements. The success of any new structure should be judged not by organisational diagrams but by whether people who draw on care experience better outcomes, whether providers can operate sustainably, and whether the system remains simple and effective for those delivering and receiving support.

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