

1. Why has WBC sought out Oxfordshire authorities when there was no directive for Berkshire? What benefits and “rewards” justify the risks?

The Government signalled that one of the aims of Local Government Reorganisation was to address areas with two tiers of local government, such as in Oxfordshire, and replace them with unitary authorities. It is also seeking to have unitary councils serve around 500,000 residents or more. This would require West Berkshire Council - which covers around 170,000 people - to merge with neighbouring councils.

While Berkshire councils were not invited to submit proposals, Oxfordshire councils were. South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse district councils approached West Berkshire to collaborate on a proposal that meets Government criteria and delivers better services for residents.

West Berkshire, South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse have strong demographic and economic similarities and significant historic ties. For around a thousand years, Berkshire's northern boundary was defined by the River Thames, which flows through the heart of both the Vale of White Horse and South Oxfordshire, taking the historic county as far north as the edges of the city of Oxford.

Today we continue to have much in common and not least our rural landscapes and thriving market towns and a rural tapestry of villages and hamlets. We want to make clear that our aim is to secure a better future for local services and deliver the best option for West Berkshire. This means recognising the demographic and geographic similarities across the proposed Ridgeway area, while also being honest about the challenges of providing services across a mix of rural and urban communities such as Reading and Wokingham if we were to look eastwards for reorganisation. It's for this reason that we can show why some options – like a Greater Reading may be less favourable and why choosing the right structure now is essential for long-term resilience and quality of services.

2. If we go under Ridgeway, what will happen with bus services?

Transport services, including bus services, would transfer to the new unitary authority. The proposal for a new Ridgeway Council emphasises continuity of essential services during transition, with existing contracts and service levels will be honoured. Future improvements will be considered as part of Ridgeway's integrated transport strategy.

In addition, a parallel programme from the Government to devolve more responsibilities to communities would potentially see a new strategic mayoral authority with greater powers to deliver transport and infrastructure on a regional basis.

3. Pressures on Theale Medical Centre due to housing developments

The proposal for a new Two Councils model recognises that population growth and new housing developments will increase demand on local health services, including GP practices like Theale Medical Centre. The new unitary councils will work closely with the NHS and Integrated Care Boards to ensure that infrastructure planning aligns with housing growth - just as West Berkshire Council does at the moment.

The proposed Ridgeway and Oxford and Shires two-unitary councils approach includes strategic planning for health and community infrastructure, with a focus on prevention, locality-based service delivery, and partnership with health providers. It also highlights the importance of aligning local plans and infrastructure investment to support sustainable growth and meet the needs of expanding communities.

4. Waste collection and recycling – Padworth Household Recycling Centre and Veolia contract

All long-term contracts, including waste collection and recycling, will be honoured. Padworth Household Recycling Centre will remain operational, and Veolia's contract will continue under the new authority until its term ends. Future arrangements will be reviewed to ensure efficiency and service quality.

5. Where would the centre of power be within Ridgeway? Will it lean towards Oxfordshire?

No decisions have been taken with regards to where any headquarters would be. It's anticipated that community hubs would still be required for staff – particularly for locality teams working in specific areas. In seeking to reorganise local government, central Government emphasises the need for good representation and strong links with local communities.

There would initially be around 96 councillors across the Ridgeway Council area which is modelled on Government criteria that there should be fewer than 99 councillors per council. At the moment, there are 142 county, unitary and district councillors. The future councillor numbers will be determined in consultation with the Local Government Boundary Commission for England, aiming for effective representation and alignment with best practice in similar rural-urban areas. Whole council elections every four years are proposed, with a reduction in overall councillor numbers to improve efficiency while maintaining local accountability.

6. Will Ridgeway need expensive consultants like in the 1990s?

Transition costs are estimated at £30.4m, with savings projected to repay this within just over three years. Independent financial modelling shows annual savings of up to £59.8m across the two-unitary model. While specialist advice will be required, the approach is designed to minimise costs and deliver long-term savings.

7. What will happen about wood-burning stoves?

Policies on environmental issues, such as wood-burning stoves, will be reviewed by the new council.