

Council

25 November 2025



Reading
Borough Council
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Title	Proposed modification to the 'Ridgeway' Local Government Reorganisation proposal for Oxfordshire and West Berkshire
Purpose of the report	To make a decision
Report status	Public report
Executive Director/ Statutory Officer Commissioning Report	Jackie Yates, Chief Executive
Report author	Gavin Handford, Assistant Director, Policy, Change & Customer Services
Lead Councillor	Cllr Liz Terry, Leader of the Council
Council priority	Ensure Reading Borough Council is fit for the future
Recommendations	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. That Council note the contents of this report, the significant activity undertaken to inform it, and the data which underpins the case presented.2. That Council note the challenges in obtaining the data required to fully inform the service and financial modelling and the inherent risks associated with that.3. That to protect Reading's future interests, Council agree to submit to the Secretary of State, a modification to the Oxfordshire Local Government Reorganisation 'Ridgeway' proposal, such that the following Wards: Tilehurst Birch Copse, Tilehurst & Purley and Tilehurst South and Holybrook are transferred to Reading Borough Council, as set out in Appendix 1.4. That, subject to the Secretary of State's decision, the Chief Executive be authorised to establish the necessary project team and resources to implement the proposal.5. That Council reserves its right to make subsequent representations to the Secretary of State regarding the Borough boundary or Local Government Reorganisation in the future.

1. Executive Summary

- 1.1. In December 2024 Government invited all two-tier areas of local government to develop proposals to reorganise, replacing existing County and District Councils with Unitary Authorities.
- 1.2. Interim proposals submitted in March 2025 for Oxfordshire, included two options that would also see West Berkshire Council merged with Vale of White Horse and South Oxfordshire District Council's to create a new 'Ridgeway Council'. Final proposals are due to be submitted to Government by 28 November 2025.

- 1.3. At its meeting on 21 July 2025, Policy Committee agreed that a formal request be made to Government for a modification of the boundary between Reading and West Berkshire. The initial proposal presented to Policy Committee covered five West Berkshire wards: Pangbourne; Theale; Tilehurst Birch Copse; Tilehurst & Purley; and Tilehurst South & Holybrook.
- 1.4. This report sets out the work undertaken to inform the proposed modification and seeks approval for the modification as set out in Appendix 1 to be submitted to the Secretary of State.
- 1.5. Significant work has been undertaken to evidence and develop the proposal. This has included a wide-ranging engagement programme, service modelling, budget modelling, and wider research.
- 1.6. A comprehensive data request was sent to West Berkshire Council to inform the modelling. Their response largely pointed to publicly available data which does not provide sufficient granularity. Subsequent FOI requests did provide some data for demand led services, but officers still have questions outstanding. Consequently, the margin for error in our modelling, particularly in relation to financial costs is greater than desired.
- 1.7. As set out in the report and attached proposal, the data demonstrates a good case for including Pangbourne and Theale in the modification and moving these Wards into Reading. However, the strongest case is for the three Tilehurst Wards, and that is therefore the recommended final proposal.
- 1.8. It is important to recognise the significant limitations that the Government's approach has placed on Reading. Reading, like other Berkshire councils, has not been invited to submit proposals. We are limited to proposing an amendment to proposals from Oxfordshire. This makes it difficult to demonstrate the benefits of a comprehensive Greater Reading area, as we are only able to consider our western boundary with West Berkshire.

2. Policy Context

- 2.1. The Government set out plans for Local Government Reorganisation (LGR) in the English Devolution White Paper published in December 2024. In February, the Government issued a formal invitation inviting all two-tier areas to submit proposals to reorganise. No Berkshire authority received an invitation to reorganise as they are all already unitary authorities.
- 2.2. The deadline for final detailed local government reorganisation proposals from most areas (excluding Surrey and the Devolution Priority Programme areas which had an earlier deadline) is 28 November 2025.
- 2.3. The Government's indicative timeline for LGR suggests that following submission of the proposals it will carry out consultation, as required by the legislation, between January and June next year. Decisions by the Secretary of State are expected in Summer 2026. The Structural Change Order required to bring changes into effect would then be prepared for Parliamentary approval in late 2026, with elections to shadow authorities in May 2027, followed by new authorities going live in April 2028.
- 2.4. Importantly, it should be emphasised that the final decision on any proposal rests with the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities, and Local Government. In making his decision, the Secretary of State has the power to implement the proposal(s) as written, implement with modifications, or not to implement the proposals.
- 2.5. In inviting proposals for LGR, Government has set out the following criteria:
 - A proposal should seek to achieve for the whole of the area concerned the establishment of a single tier of local government.
 - Unitary local government must be the right size to achieve efficiencies, improve capacity and withstand financial shocks.

- Unitary structures must prioritise the delivery of high quality and sustainable public services to citizens.
- Proposals should show how councils in the area have sought to work together in coming to a view that meets local needs and is informed by local views.
- New unitary structures must support devolution arrangements.
- New unitary structures should enable stronger community engagement and deliver genuine opportunity for neighbourhood empowerment.

2.6. Full criteria, with sub criteria are detailed in Appendix 3 attached.

2.7. Oxfordshire submitted their interim proposals on 21 March 2025. Final proposals have since been published and at the time of writing are going through their respective Councils' approval processes. They comprise three options, which are summarised in the table below. Two of the options include West Berkshire Council as part of the Ridgeway option:

Table 1: Summary of Oxfordshire LGR proposals

Option	West Berkshire	Proposed Councils	2028 population
Single county unitary	Yes	Oxfordshire	791,000
Two unitary councils	Yes	Oxford City, West Oxfordshire, Cherwell	472,000
		Ridgeway	457,000
Three unitary councils	Yes	Greater Oxford	234,000*
		Northern Oxfordshire	259,000*
		Ridgeway	419,000*

*Current population

2.8. Reading's border with West Berkshire was set over 100 years ago. Since then, the town has expanded significantly beyond this boundary, resulting in a situation where thousands of households in the Reading urban area fall under West Berkshire Council. The Ridgeway proposal exacerbates this historical anomaly further by proposing to move these parts of the Reading urban area into what would be a much larger rural authority. This directly conflicts with the Government's criteria that proposals should be for a sensible economic geography and results in a missed opportunity to align local government structures with where people live and work.

2.9. The Government's guidance on LGR has said that existing districts should be the building blocks for proposals, but where there is a "strong justification" more complex boundary changes would be considered. The issues identified above can only be rectified by amending the boundary and there is therefore a clear and strong justification for the proposed modification.

3. Our proposal to Government

Our initial proposal

3.1. At its meeting on 21 July 2025, Policy Committee agreed to develop a formal request to Government for a modification to the boundary. An initial area of focus was agreed, covering the five West Berkshire Wards of: Pangbourne; Theale; Tilehurst Birch Copse; Tilehurst & Purley; and Tilehurst South & Holybrook.

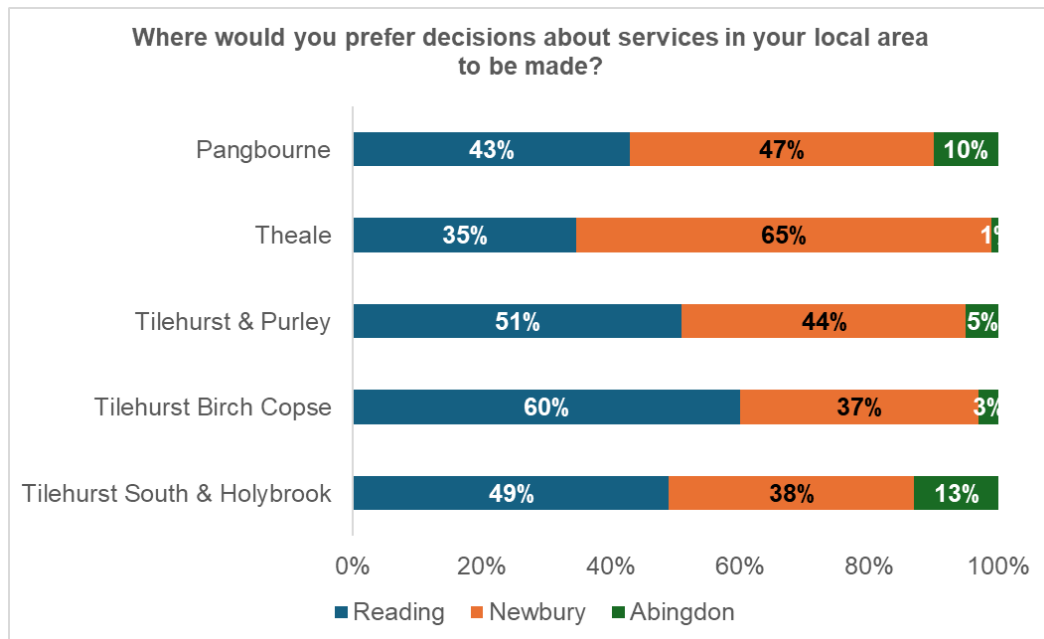
- 3.2. These five areas were included on account of their close geographical proximity to Reading and their strong economic ties to the town. All five wards fall within the Travel to Work Area of Reading, demonstrating that economic activity, and patterns of work and commuting, centre on Reading, not the economic centres in the proposed area of Ridgeway. The Government has been clear that proposals for LGR should reflect a sensible economic geography; based on this criterion there is a strong and evidence-based case for all five of the wards named above to be part of Reading, not Ridgeway.

Development of the proposed modification

- 3.3. Following the decision of Policy Committee in July, the following work was undertaken to inform a proposal to submit to Government:
- LG Futures were commissioned to undertake an independent assessment of the financial implications of the proposed change, modelling the share of resources and costs for the five West Berkshire wards to produce a forecast of the expected financial impact.
 - A data gathering exercise took place to understand the current picture of service delivery, existing contracts, assets, and service spend in the five Wards. However, requests to West Berkshire have provided very limited granular data despite numerous requests.
 - An extensive programme of engagement was undertaken, both in-person and online. As part of this an independent survey was carried out by DJS Research with a representative sample of 739 residents across the five Wards.
- 3.4. The data and hence financial modelling has been based on the information currently available, which has been restricted due to limited data sharing by West Berkshire Council. As a result, our analysis has relied largely on publicly available information, which carries inherent limitations and will include some margin of error. In addition, where data has been shared, we have some reservations regarding its accuracy.

Wards to be included in the proposed modification

- 3.5. On the basis of the Government's criteria for LGR and the evidence gathered since July, there is a good case for moving Pangbourne and Theale into Reading. However, the strongest case is for the three Tilehurst Wards.
- 3.6. The two key reasons for this are:
- **Geography:** The Tilehurst Wards are urban, and part of the Reading Built Up Area as defined by the ONS; whereas Pangbourne and Theale are designated as rural and therefore different in character to other parts of Reading.
 - **Local identity and views:** Our representative survey found strong support from residents in the Tilehurst wards for decisions about local services being made in Reading. Residents in Pangbourne and Theale, however, expressed a clear preference for decisions to be made in Newbury or Abingdon (the current administrative centres for West Berkshire and Vale of White Horse District Council respectively). The chart below shows responses from our representative survey on this question.



- 3.7. For these reasons, our case for a modification to the Ridgeway proposal is likely to be stronger if it is focused on the Tilehurst Wards only. It is therefore recommended that the proposed modification to the Secretary of State is that if he is minded to agree the creation of a new Ridgeway Council, he does so only with a modification to transfer Tilehurst Birch Copse, Tilehurst & Purley, and Tilehurst South & Holybrook from West Berkshire into Reading at the point that the new Ridgeway Council is established (April 2028).
- 3.8. The rationale for the recommendation and proposed modification as set out in Appendix 1 attached, centres on three arguments:
- 1) **Geography:** The current boundary is over 100 years old and cuts across residential streets and through back gardens. It does not reflect the contiguous built-up area of Reading, commuting patterns as defined by Travel to Work Areas, or the area local people identify as Reading. West Berkshire's own Local Plan describes the three Tilehurst Wards as "urban" with "a close functional relationship with Reading" and benefitting "from the facilities and services it provides." The illogical nature of the current boundary was almost universally recognised by those who took part in our public engagement.
 - 2) **Economy:** Reading's economic success means that the Borough boundary no longer reflects our economic footprint. The result is fragmentation of decisions on housing, transport and infrastructure across boundaries creating higher costs and missed opportunities for delivering growth.
 - 3) **Alignment with Government criteria:** The Ridgeway proposal as currently written fails to meet the criteria for LGR set out by the Government, whereas our modification proposal does. Most significantly:
 - The geography of Ridgeway bears almost no relation to functional economic areas. Our modification rectifies this by aligning boundaries with the economic geography of Reading.
 - The current Ridgeway proposal fails to address the fragmented nature of service delivery across Tilehurst. Amending the boundary would rectify this issue and enable integrated service delivery across the urban area.
 - Residents in the West Berkshire Wards experience a democratic deficit – they use services provided by RBC yet pay Council Tax to West Berkshire and have no say over how those services are run. The only way to address this is through a boundary change.

- 3.9. A full options appraisal against the Government criteria, where relevant, is set out in Appendix 3.
- 3.10. Like West Berkshire, Reading Borough Council was not invited by Government to submit a proposal for LGR. Our submission to Government is therefore only a representation to the Secretary of State that he should amend the Ridgeway proposal if he is minded to approve it. It is not a full-scale proposal for LGR.
- 3.11. A significant portion of the urban area of Reading extends across Reading's historic boundary with Wokingham Borough Council. Our submission to Government makes no proposal to change the boundary with Wokingham. Wokingham is not involved in any current proposals for LGR, hence there is no basis on which to suggest a similar modification to that which is being proposed with West Berkshire. However, the Council should acknowledge its right to make subsequent representations to Government about changes the Borough boundary or LGR in the future should it wish to do so.

Transition

- 3.12. This modification proposal differs from other LGR initiatives as it does not create a new council but instead seeks to amend a boundary. Because of this, the financial and administrative costs are significantly lower than full-scale LGR.
- 3.13. However, the boundary change, if supported by the Secretary of State, will still require a significant and well-managed transition process.
- 3.14. A dedicated transition programme board underpinned by several key workstreams will need to be set up to oversee and manage the planning, delivery, and reporting to senior leaders and councillors. Communication and engagement activities will ensure residents, parish councils, and partners remain informed and involved. Contracts for both place-based services (such as waste and leisure) and people-based services (such as care and SEND) will be reviewed and transferred to ensure seamless service continuity. External support may also be required to ensure the successful transfer of assets, data and finances. It should be noted that RBC has recently undertaken significant governance transition work with success, including bringing Children's Services back in house from Brighter Futures for Children Ltd and outsourcing leisure services to GLL.

4. Options

- 4.1. The following options are set out for consideration:
- **Option 1: Do nothing (not recommended).**
This would mean making no submission and awaiting the formal consultation period to make representations regarding the boundary. Under the legislation the Secretary of State needs to consult prior to deciding on LGR proposals. However, consent of the councils affected is not required, and waiting to make our case until this point risks missing the opportunity to influence the Government's final decision.
 - **Option 2: Submit the proposal to Government for a modification to the Ridgeway proposal as written (recommended).**
This is recommended for the reasons set out above and it allows us to take proactive and positive action to make our case to Government for a more rational boundary with the proposed Ridgeway Council area. Submission by 28 November would enable the request to be considered alongside the final reorganisation proposals from Oxfordshire.
 - **Option 3: Submit an alternative proposal to Government to conduct a full review of the boundary of Reading (not recommended).**
This would not be supported by neighbouring Councils and therefore unlikely to be agreed. In addition, it could significantly disrupt partnership work to bring forward proposals for a Strategic Authority, which would delay the benefits from devolution being realised locally.

5. Contribution to Strategic Aims

- 5.1. This proposal supports the strategic aims set out in our Council Plan 2025-28, in particular, our priority to 'Secure Reading's economic and cultural success' through ensuring that local government structures reflect a sensible economic geography that supports economic growth and housing delivery that meets the needs of Reading.

6. Environmental and Climate Implications

- 6.1. There is significant potential for an expanded administration over the urban area to support investment in sustainable transport infrastructure, enabling the delivery of projects that promote modal shift, reduce congestion, and enhance connectivity. This proposal therefore has the potential to deliver a positive impact on the environment.

7. Community Engagement

- 7.1. Extensive engagement was undertaken across the five West Berkshire Wards, including:
- Six in-person drop-in events at local community venues, which collectively engaged approximately 300 residents.
 - An online/paper survey, which received 1,111 responses from across Reading and West Berkshire, including 716 responses from residents of the five Wards.
 - An independent survey conducted by DJS Research based on a mixture of telephone and face-to-face interviews with a representative sample of 739 residents in the five Wards.
 - Targeted stakeholder sessions with key local groups, including: Parish Councils, schools, and businesses.
 - A dedicated communications campaign to engage stakeholders and residents across the five Wards – aimed at raising awareness of the proposed boundary change, fostering community pride, and promoting hyper-local storytelling. This achieved over 900,000 impressions across multiple channels.

8. Equality Implications

- 8.1. An equality impact assessment has been completed and this is appended. It is considered that the proposal has a positive impact on equality of opportunity by giving residents in the three Tilehurst Wards affected access to Reading Borough Council's more inclusive and accessible services.

9. Legal Implications

- 9.1. Sections 1-7 of the Local Government & Public Involvement in Health Act 2007 provide the statutory powers for the Secretary of State to undertake local government reorganisation to move from two-tier to single tier local government.
- 9.2. Under the Act, the Secretary of State can invite proposals for reorganisation. This took place in January 2025, when letters were sent to Councils in two -tier areas. These letters set out the Government criteria for reorganisation and Oxfordshire submitted its interim proposals on 21 March 2025.
- 9.3. On 3 June 2025, Government wrote to the Chief Executives of the six Oxfordshire Councils to provide feedback on the interim proposals. This confirmed that final detailed proposals must be submitted to Government by 28 November 2025.
- 9.4. After receiving reorganisation proposals, the Act allows for the Secretary of State to:
- Implement a proposal as proposed;
 - Implement a proposal with modifications; or
 - Not implement the proposal

- 9.5. The recommendations set out above facilitates the Council making a request to the Secretary of State, for a modification to any reorganisation proposal submitted by Oxfordshire involving West Berkshire Council, based on a revised boundary between Reading and West Berkshire.
- 9.6. The Secretary of State is required to consult before making a decision. Feedback from MHCLG has confirmed this will include affected Councils and neighbouring Councils, which in this scenario, would include Reading. It is anticipated that the consultation will also include other government departments and key stakeholders. The consultation will likely run for 6 – 8 weeks. The timing is as yet unclear.
- 9.7. It is also important to note however, that the Secretary of State is not required to secure consent from the affected Councils to implement a proposal.

10. Financial Implications

- 10.1. The financial modelling required for this proposal is extremely complex and it was always likely that we would not have the degree of confidence in the modelling that we would want prior to submission of any LGR proposal to the Government. The difficulties have been compounded by the fact West Berkshire Council are having to utilise exceptional financial support to deliver their services and the lack of data sharing by the authority.
- 10.2. The financial modelling is set out below, but as can be seen, there is wide variation in the figures depending on the assumptions used. However, it should be noted that only taking on the 3 Tilehurst Wards would result in an initial cost pressure to the Council which would need to be mitigated over time through efficiencies.
- 10.3. Modelling of the financial implications of the proposal were initially carried out by the Council's financial planning advisors, LG Futures, utilising primarily publicly available data.
- 10.4. The following process was used to forecast funding projections:

a) Split of the 2025/26 baseline position

To establish the resources projection of the proposed Ridgeway unitary, the existing baseline positions for West Berkshire, Oxfordshire Country Council and its districts were split out. This was done using data including Office for National Statistics (ONS) population data and the National Non-Domestic Rates (NNDR) and Revenue Outturn (RO) returns as appropriate.

b) Settlement funding and the impact of the Fair Funding Review

These areas were re-run through LG Futures' Fair Funding Review (FFR) model, covering current and subsequent years. Adjustments were made based on the taxbase share from the Council Tax Requirement return and an assessment of needs based on key population drivers in each Parish.

c) Council Tax income growth and grants

Maximum use of Council Tax flexibilities of 4.99% were used across all three years. All grants outside core spending power are assumed to be cash flat after 2025/26.

d) Establish resources of the new proposed Reading and Ridgeway areas

To establish the resources projection of the new proposed Reading area, the resources of West Berkshire were apportioned to sub-council areas. For the purposes of the analysis, the Pangbourne area, Theale area and Tilehurst area groupings were looked at separately.

- 10.5. Budgeted cost data for 2025/26 was used to establish a high-level estimate of service costs. In general, unit costs in West Berkshire were lower than Reading's, as would be expected, as the West Berkshire funding base is lower than Reading's.
- 10.6. However, it should be noted that West Berkshire is currently reliant on Exceptional Financial Support (EFS) to fund its current service costs. West Berkshire Council currently has a General Fund Reserve of just over £10 million, which has been built utilising previously requested EFS from central government. Their Quarter 2 2025/26 forecast will reduce the General Fund Reserve by £6.8 million, taking the fund under the level recommended by their s.151 officer as being financially sustainable.¹ West Berkshire Council's budgeted costs for 2025/26 used in this modelling may therefore not be an accurate reflection of the actual costs required to run their services.
- 10.7. The following table shows the projected surplus or deficit for the five wards using the West Berkshire cost base with the caveat that we know West Berkshire's actual spend is higher than the budgeted cost data used in this table. This shows that the estimated financial impact of the proposal would be a surplus of £1.6 million for all five wards. If Pangbourne and Theale are excluded, this becomes a deficit of £0.8 million for the remaining Tilehurst wards. There is insufficient understanding of the West Berkshire expenditure profile to produce any meaningful expenditure forecasts beyond 2025/26.

Table 2: Initial financial projections using West Berkshire cost base

Area 2025/26	Share of West Berkshire Resources	Share of West Berkshire Costs	(Surplus)/Deficit
	£m	£m	£m
Pangbourne	(6.5)	4.7	(1.8)
Theale	(4.3)	3.7	(0.6)
Tilehurst	(29.8)	30.6	0.8
Total	(40.6)	39.0	(1.6)

- 10.8. The most significant cost driver for differing levels of spend between local authorities is the comparative level of deprivation of the populations served. This is reflected in the national funding formula for the distribution of funding between local authorities. If we use unit cost data that is more in line with the demographic profile of Reading, rather than West Berkshire, then the surplus shown in Table 2 would become a deficit, potentially in excess of £3m, depending on the number of Children Looked After and their associated costs.
- 10.9. Given that a significant proportion of the costs relate to Children's Social Care, a Freedom of Information request was submitted to West Berkshire Council regarding the number of Children Looked After (CLA) in each ward area. The response received stated that there are currently only 9 and that they are all based in Tilehurst which was significantly lower than assumed initially using the total numbers of CLA in West Berkshire.
- 10.10. Table 3 below shows a revised projection based on the 9 CLA advised rather than the 36 used above and average placement costs using the West Berkshire cost base. The estimated financial impact of this proposal is a surplus of £4.5 million for all five Wards, and if Pangbourne and Theale are excluded, a surplus of £1.3 million for the Tilehurst Wards.

¹ [6. Q2 Fin Perf Report Revenue Capital - Exec Final.pdf](#)

Table 3: Updated financial projections using West Berkshire cost base with revised CLA figures

Area 2025/26	Share of West Berkshire Resources	Share of West Berkshire Costs	(Surplus)/Deficit
	£m	£m	£m
Pangbourne	(6.5)	4.2	(2.3)
Theale	(4.3)	3.4	(0.9)
Tilehurst	(29.8)	28.5	(1.3)
Total	(40.6)	36.1	(4.5)

- 10.11. In light of the inherent uncertainty with the data provided by West Berkshire, it is likely that efficiency savings will be needed. These will be incremental rather than transformational. Nevertheless, the proposal identifies potential for efficiencies through joining up urban services across a single continuous area (e.g. street cleansing), spreading central fixed costs, and planning and commissioning of services across a wider geography. Based on our analysis of West Berkshire's share of costs for the five Wards, we estimate that spend on central services is in the region of £2.9 million, of which £2.3 million relates to the Tilehurst Wards. There is therefore potential to deliver savings within the scope of this figure.
- 10.12. The one-off transition costs to implement this proposal have been estimated at £2.45 million. This covers the budget needed to cover programme governance, ICT integration, workforce transfer, contract novation and service harmonisation activities. In line with government guidance on restructuring, combined with limited revenue reserves, the funding will be secured through the Flexible Use of Capital Receipts, not revenue funding, in accordance with the current statutory direction. Should eligible costs exceed the level of available receipts or fall outside the scope of the Direction, we will consider applying to MHCLG for a Capitalisation Direction to ensure prudent and compliant financing of transition costs.
- 10.13. West Berkshire will have incurred debt relating to the proposed transferring Wards, including through their use of Exceptional Financial Support. There is a risk that Reading Borough Council may be required to take on a proportion of this debt. It has not been possible to estimate what these financial implications might be.
- 10.14. Both Ridgeway and an expanded Reading will be made up of predecessor authorities which will have different levels of Council Tax in 2027/28. Therefore, there will be a need to harmonise Council Tax rates so that all residents are ultimately paying the same amount for the same Council Tax band.
- 10.15. Band D Council Tax bills in Reading are currently 10.2% higher than in West Berkshire. Council Tax levels in Oxfordshire districts are also up to 7.9% higher than in West Berkshire. It should also be noted that Council Tax rates in West Berkshire are currently insufficient to meet the cost of running its services and that the Council is reliant on Exceptional Financial Support from the Government to fund day-to-day expenditure.
- 10.16. Council Tax harmonisation could be achieved in a single year or over multiple years. Carrying out harmonisation over a longer period of time would result in residents paying different amounts of Council Tax over a longer period for the same services.
- 10.17. If the Secretary of State is minded to agree to our proposal, further work would be undertaken to inform a decision by RBC on the timeframe for harmonisation.

11. Background Papers

- 11.1. There are none.

Appendices:

Appendix 1: LGR submission

Appendix 2: LGR submission equality impact assessment

Appendix 3: Full LGR criteria and guidance

Appendix 4: Full options appraisal for original Ridgeway proposal and our amended version

Appendix 3: Full LGR criteria and guidance

- 1) A proposal should seek to achieve for the whole of the area concerned the establishment of a single tier of local government.
 - a. Proposals should be for sensible economic areas, with an appropriate tax base which does not create an undue advantage or disadvantage for one part of the area.
 - b. Proposals should be for a sensible geography which will help to increase housing supply and meet local needs.
 - c. Proposals should be supported by robust evidence and analysis and include an explanation of the outcomes it is expected to achieve, including evidence of estimated costs/benefits and local engagement.
 - d. Proposals should describe clearly the single tier local government structures it is putting forward for the whole of the area, and explain how, if implemented, these are expected to achieve the outcomes described.
- 2) Unitary local government must be the right size to achieve efficiencies, improve capacity and withstand financial shocks.
 - a. As a guiding principle, new councils should aim for a population of 500,000 or more.
 - b. There may be certain scenarios in which this 500,000 figure does not make sense for an area, including on devolution, and this rationale should be set out in a proposal.
 - c. Efficiencies should be identified to help improve councils' finances and make sure that council taxpayers are getting the best possible value for their money.
 - d. Proposals should set out how an area will seek to manage transition costs, including planning for future service transformation opportunities from existing budgets, including from the flexible use of capital receipts that can support authorities in taking forward transformation and invest-to-save projects.
 - e. For areas covering councils that are in Best Value intervention and/or in receipt of Exceptional Financial Support, proposals must additionally demonstrate how reorganisation may contribute to putting local government in the area as a whole on a firmer footing and what area-specific arrangements may be necessary to make new structures viable.
 - f. In general, as with previous restructures, there is no proposal for council debt to be addressed centrally or written off as part of reorganisation. For areas where there are exceptional circumstances where there has been failure linked to capital practices, proposals should reflect the extent to which the implications of this can be managed locally, including as part of efficiencies possible through reorganisation.
- 3) Unitary structures must prioritise the delivery of high quality and sustainable public services to citizens.
 - a. Proposals should show how new structures will improve local government and service delivery and should avoid unnecessary fragmentation of services.
 - b. Opportunities to deliver public service reform should be identified, including where they will lead to better value for money.
 - c. Consideration should be given to the impacts for crucial services such as social care, children's services, SEND and homelessness, and for wider public services including for public safety.
- 4) Proposals should show how councils in the area have sought to work together in coming to a view that meets local needs and is informed by local views.
 - a. It is for councils to decide how best to engage locally in a meaningful and constructive way and this engagement activity should be evidenced in your proposal.
 - b. Proposals should consider issues of local identity and cultural and historic importance.

- c. Proposals should include evidence of local engagement, an explanation of the views that have been put forward and how concerns will be addressed.
- 5) New unitary structures must support devolution arrangements.
 - a. Proposals will need to consider and set out for areas where there is already a Combined Authority (CA) or a Combined County Authority (CCA) established or a decision has been taken by government to work with the area to establish one, how that institution and its governance arrangements will need to change to continue to function effectively; and set out clearly (where applicable) whether this proposal is supported by the CA/CCA /Mayor.
 - b. Where no CA or CCA is already established or agreed then the proposal should set out how it will help unlock devolution.
 - c. Proposals should ensure there are sensible population size ratios between local authorities and any strategic authority, with timelines that work for both priorities.
- 6) New unitary structures should enable stronger community engagement and deliver genuine opportunity for neighbourhood empowerment.
 - a. Proposals will need to explain plans to make sure that communities are engaged.
 - b. Where there are already arrangements in place it should be explained how these will enable strong community engagement.

Appendix 4: Full options appraisal for original Ridgeway proposal and our amended version

Criteria	Option A: Oxfordshire / West Berkshire 'Ridgeway' proposal		Option B: With Reading's modification to 'Ridgeway' proposal	
	Assessment	Score (1-5)	Assessment	Score (1-5)
Achieves a single tier of local government	Delivers a single-tier structure but fails to align with functional economic geography, especially in the three wards which are integrated with Reading.	3	Delivers a single-tier structure and fully aligns with the functional economic geography of Reading, improving coherence and service delivery.	5
Right size to achieve efficiencies, improve capacity, withstand financial shocks	Meets population threshold; however, includes areas with limited economic integration, reducing potential efficiencies.	3	Ridgeway still meets population threshold; better aligns services and economic areas, enabling modest efficiencies and future-proofing for Berkshire-wide reorganisation.	4
Enables high quality and sustainable public services	Fragmented service delivery across urban areas; residents in the three wards use Reading services but pay Council Tax to West Berkshire.	2	Enables integrated service delivery, improved access, fairness, and sustainability across the urban area.	5
Shows councils in the area have sought to work together in coming to a view that meets local needs and is informed by local views	Limited engagement in affected wards; lacks robust evidence of local support or collaboration with Reading.	2	Extensive engagement with residents and stakeholders; clear evidence of local support and of local views informing the proposal.	5
Supports devolution arrangements	Including parts of Reading in a rural authority artificially constrains the influence of the Reading urban area in any future Mayoral Strategic Authority.	3	Supports Reading's leadership in Thames Valley devolution; aligns with strategic authority plans and complements Ridgeway's rural focus.	5
Enables stronger community engagement and deliver genuine opportunity for neighbourhood empowerment	Residents in three wards experience a democratic deficit; limited influence over services and decision-making.	2	Strengthens local democracy by aligning governance with service use; retains and enhances Parish Councils; improves neighbourhood engagement.	5
Conclusion	While the Ridgeway proposal meets basic structural requirements, it fails to reflect the functional urban geography and local needs of the three wards.	15/30	The amended proposal better aligns with economic and service geographies, improves public service delivery, and supports future devolution and community empowerment.	29/30