

OCC (Sonning Common & Henley South) councillor's report

Shiplake – 14th September 2026

Oxford Traffic Filters

From Monday 28 September 2026, Oxford's traffic filters trial will replace the temporary congestion charge. (This had to be slightly **delayed** again - due to a gas pipe issue at the Botley Road bridge which is now scheduled to open on 20th September.)

From 28th September, car drivers will no longer have the option to pay the £5 congestion charge. If you drive through a filter while it is operating, you'll need a valid permit. For most people their congestion charge permit will automatically become a traffic filters permit without needing to reapply. All permit-holders will get an e-mail to confirm.

You can still drive to all parts of Oxford, but you may need to use a different route if you don't have a valid traffic filters permit.

Everyone in Oxfordshire gets 25 permit days per annum and those in the City get 100 p.a.

The filters were approved as a trial in 2022, but were delayed by the long-running Botley Road rail bridge works. Subsequently, as an interim measure, the temporary Congestion Charge was initiated.

In future a car (not commercial vehicles) passing through a filter point without a permit will trigger a £70 penalty (which can be reduced to £35 with prompt payment). For a six month period a first infraction will attract a warning letter, thereafter a penalty fine.

It is expected that the filters will improve the results of the temporary Congestion Charge scheme - that have themselves been positive. For this reason it is expected that receipts will fall sharply. Any such receipts must be spend on the operation of the scheme first, then any net surplus receipts must go on congestion-mitigation measures or appropriate post-trial costs.

The trial will run until no later than end March 2028, although it could be replaced by a permanent scheme by then after evaluation of consultation and results.

Any resident without a permit can **apply online**. Each person can have a permit with up to two vehicle registrations for each. Anyone who can't apply online can call by phone – **01865 519800**.

Find out more about permits, routes and what the changes could mean for your journeys; more **information is here:**

www.oxfordshire.gov.uk/trafficfilters

Devolution and LGR

For devolution UK Gov tried to force through a version in which Oxfordshire and Berkshire had to also include Swindon. (Buckinghamshire have vetoed being part of a Thames Valley FSA, although they are being encouraged to re-consider.)

UK Gov have decreed that the area for the Spatial Development Strategy will be Thames Valley **plus** Swindon. Councils have no power to block this; although the inclusion of Swindon is resented as not being part of the Thames Valley and relating more to Wiltshire and Wessex.

Under the Devolution legislation upper tier/unitary councils have a power of veto over devolution proposals. In the case of the Thames Valley the proposal has been vetoed – including by OCC and Windsor and Maidenhead. Other councils resent and reject Swindon but don't go so far as to veto the proposal. Far from the original MSA (Mayor with substantial funds from UK Gov) proposal all

that UK Gov have been only offering to Thames Valley an FSA (With no mayor, scant funding and very limited benefits and powers.) This latter point has also driven the vetoes. SODC and Vale of White Horse would have vetoed, but as Districts they did not have that power. It is not yet clear how UK Gov will respond, but there seem scant scope for the previous devolution proposal to proceed. OCC have called on the new Burnham Government to support an MSA proposal for the Thames Valley – with funding – and to exclude Swindon. Swindon has no historic cultural or current material economic links to the Thames Valley and belongs with Wiltshire. The new Prime Minister has indicated that he is supportive of real devolution – with MSAs – so we shall see.

LGR: Government confirms three new unitary councils for Oxfordshire and West Berkshire in 2028

On 16th July, the then government announced that Oxfordshire and West Berkshire's **seven** existing councils will be replaced by **three** unitary councils from 1 April 2028 as part of its plans for local government reorganisation (LGR).

The new councils will be:

- **Greater Oxford Council** – current Oxford City plus extended borders.
- o **Northern Oxfordshire Council** – covering most of the existing Cherwell and West Oxfordshire districts.
- o **Ridgeway Council** – covering most of the existing South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse districts, combined with West Berkshire.

Three proposals were presented to government in November 2025 by Oxfordshire and West Berkshire councils – a single county unitary, two unitary councils and three unitary councils.

These councils have been working together since the start of the year to plan and prepare for the future of council services, regardless of which option the government chose. This work has also been focused on ensuring services continue without disruption for residents.

LGR Oxfordshire and West Berkshire	Population in thousands					
	2024	Growth	Transfer	Revised		2040 ?
Oxford City to "Greater Oxford"	166	1	70	237		345
West Oxon DC & Cherwell DC to Northern Oxon	291	0	-26	265		370
SODC, VoWH and West Berks to Ridgeway	471	3	-44	430		545
SUM	928	4	0	932		1260
Oxford City council	166	4		932		
WODC	121					
Cherwell DC	170					
SODC	157					
VoWH	149					
Oxfordshire	763					
West Berkshire unitary	165					
SUM	928					

To Date

Cllr Maggie Filipova-Rivers, Leader of South Oxfordshire District Council, said:

“Today’s announcement by the Government to proceed with a three-unitary model for Oxfordshire is deeply disappointing.

“South Oxfordshire has consistently argued that a two-unitary model would provide the strongest foundation for the future of local government across the county. It would have delivered clearer accountability, reduced duplication, greater financial resilience and better value for residents.

“While we acknowledge the Government has made its decision, we remain concerned that the chosen model will not achieve the aims that local government reorganisation was intended to deliver. At a time when councils face significant financial pressures, creating three new authorities risks additional complexity, duplicated costs and reduced economies of scale, resources that should instead be directed towards protecting frontline services.

“We are particularly disappointed that the Government has chosen to disregard its own published assessment criteria. Throughout this process, we engaged constructively and presented a robust, evidence-based proposal. We believe our submission better reflected the Government's stated objectives and the long-term interests of Oxfordshire's and West Berkshire residents.

“We are especially concerned for those rural communities that will now be brought into a unitary authority dominated by Oxford City. This will impact over 21,000 residents across some twenty-five villages including Berinsfield, Garsington, Horspath, Sandford-on-Thames, Stadhampton and Wheatley to name a few.

“Many residents expressed clear concerns during this process about maintaining the distinct identity of South Oxfordshire's villages, protecting the Green Belt and countryside, and ensuring that decisions affecting rural communities are not overshadowed by the priorities of a large urban centre. Those concerns remain valid and deserve to be heard.

“Reorganisation alone is not a solution to the financial challenges facing local government. If these new councils are to succeed, the Government must provide adequate transitional funding and establish a fair, sustainable funding system that enables councils to protect the services residents rely upon.

“I also want to reassure our staff, who will understandably have questions about what this decision means for them. Your professionalism, dedication and local knowledge are among this council's greatest strengths. We will continue to support you throughout this process, communicate openly and ensure you are treated fairly and with respect.

“Although the Government has made its decision, our commitment to South Oxfordshire has not changed. Ultimately, our top priority remains to make sure we continue to deliver high-quality services to the people we serve for a smooth transition and beyond. We will continue to work closely, collaboratively and constructively with all the other councils involved to ensure we achieve the best possible outcomes for our communities under these circumstances.

“At the same time, we will continue to stand up for South Oxfordshire's communities, champion the interests of our towns and villages, and ensure that local voices remain central to the decisions that will shape our county for decades to come.”

The government ran a statutory consultation in February 2026 on the options with local stakeholders, residents and businesses invited to have their say. The government will publish the results of the consultation on its website soon.

Over the next two years, the existing councils will continue working together to prepare for the new arrangements, keeping people informed as plans develop ahead of April 2028.

The full details of the three-unitary proposal can be found on 3councils.org

SODC NOTES:

List of South Oxfordshire parishes that would become part of Greater Oxford under the reorganisation:

- Beckley and Stowood
- Berinsfield
- Clifton Hampden
- Cuddesdon and Denton
- Culham
- Dorchester
- Drayton St. Leonard
- Elsfield
- Forest Hill with Shotover
- Garsington
- Great Milton
- Holton
- Horspath
- Little Milton
- Marsh Baldon
- Nuneham Courtenay
- Sandford-on-Thames
- Stadhampton
- Stanton St. John
- Toot Baldon
- Warborough
- Waterperry with Thomley
- Waterstock
- Wheatley
- Woodeaton

The government has set out guidance on how the transition should progress:

Expected timeline

- **Proposals submitted:** 27 November 2025
- **Public consultation:** 5 February 2026 - 26 March 2026
- **Government's "minded-to" decision:** 16 July 2026

The minded to decision is the government's preferred, provisional decision before it's put into law through a structural changes order (SCO).

- **Structural changes order (SCO):** Expected autumn 2026.

An SCO is legislation that will officially end the existing two-tier county and district councils in Oxfordshire. We expect the legislation to be laid and agreed at this point but it won't come fully into effect until vesting day.

- **Elections:** May 2027.

After the elections shadow authorities will be created to plan the new councils, but they will not deliver services. It will focus on preparing for the future council.

- **Transition period:** Expected late 2026 - March 2028.
- **Vesting day:** New council begins 1 April 2028.

Vesting Day is the official go-live date when the new council takes over and legal powers, responsibilities and ownership transfers from the previous councils to the new one(s).

Leigh Rawlins – My (personal) comments :-

So, as a consequence of this decision by Government, Oxfordshire County Council will cease to exist in its current form from April 2028. It is quite likely that some residuary body will continue to exist and to administer any services thought appropriate and cost effective by the new 3 unitary councils. This is clearly going to be a very disruptive time for the staff involved. However, overall, because there are going to be 3 councils doing tier 1 type work it is likely that most staff continue to be employed in the new unitaries locally.

At the beginning Government said that this reorganisation was intended to provide fair Community Governance, better coordination with unitary councils and cost-effectiveness by requiring a guide-size of 500 thousand (500k) of population for each new unitary.

Since then it seems that partisan considerations on behalf of the Labour Party have predominated. Wherever an urban area has traditionally voted Labour it has been expanded to the point that it is hoped that power can be retained. Oftentimes the size of these falls far short of the 500k. So in an area like Gloucestershire where Labour does not have a significant representation in Gloucester and Cheltenham the decision has been to put some 700k into one unitary council. However in Warwickshire and Worcestershire – each with some 600k of population - the decision has been to split them each into North and South in what appears a step to help the Labour Party's representation and influence!

In the case of Oxfordshire the North of the county (West Oxon, Cherwell and Oxford City) had a starting population of 458k, it has been expanded by adding lands and population from SODC and Vale of White Horse to become 502k but then split into two unitary councils that are both too small to be financially viable!

Due to the sheer expansion of Oxford's borders, SODC will lose 25 parishes, Vale of White Horse 9 parishes and Cherwell 15 parishes. In total some 69 thousand of population will be forced into "Greater Oxford". Over a "harmonisation" period of 9 years, their council tax will go up to become as high as that in Oxford. Most of Oxford City does not have local parishes; residents thus have less representation - but do not have to pay a parish precept - all the more for the City council! However the transferred areas do have parishes and parish precepts to pay – another complication.

The thin pretext for the (Labour) Government's decisions are that they wish to enable "growth" by extending urban areas – to create more jobs and housing. Yet despite the fact that Oxford City is a medieval city which suffers from extensive gridlock and poor productivity, the City politicians are hell-bent on expanding jobs, population and housing. Sadly they do not in my view give enough emphasis to what businesses actually need to succeed.

In Oxfordshire there are far more resident-workers in the districts than jobs. Whereas the City has the reverse problem and so there is a mass of distance out-commuting from the districts and into Oxford and elsewhere. Yet all the larger market towns in Oxfordshire are within 50km of Oxford and are very capable of accepting employment sites! In this era of broadband and Zoom/Teams etc such a small physical distance from a City is no impediment – especially if it reduces wasted commuting, congestion and emissions!

A distance of 50km from New York, LA, Chicago, Houston, Phoenix, Philadelphia or Boston would simply not be a problem. Since the aim is in part to attract FDI (Foreign Direct Investment), one might think that such norms would be considered. Newbury in West Berkshire has a population of only some 40k and yet is host to the mighty Vodafone!!

Oxford City has a considerable housing cost and demand problem. The answer to that is not to go all out to pump up housing demand even higher! Despite all best past efforts, it has proven really

slow and challenging to build out the strategic greenfield sites around Oxford that all come with comprehensive and expensive infrastructure needs!

The mad-cap aims to expand Oxford are in my view crazy and not in the best interests of a better balanced Oxfordshire commuting pattern, productivity, nor of a levelled up UK economy which should fire on all the cylinders of its economic engine – across its regions!

Reading's bid to ask for three wards from West Berkshire including the Tilehurst and Purley areas had some merit in that they are already part of the built-up area of Reading. However the Secretary of State Steve Reed refused that bid for now. He noted that Ridgeway was below the 500k guide - a reason to keep up Ridgeway's numbers. However he also suggested that the bid was a matter for the Local Gov Boundary Commission for England. This may prove to become a deferred yes?

Overall, Ridgeway is of a financially viable size (430k population) and is undoubtedly of a coherent rural and market town character. It is, however, very sad to lose a lot of important areas that are NOT truly part of Oxford, The City has not swallowed Abingdon but Berinsfield, Clifton Hampden, Culham, Dorchester, Nuneham Courtney, Warborough and Wheatley – for example are not urban Oxford and should not be bricked into it!

The simple truth is that both Northern Oxfordshire (which without Oxford has no coherence) and "Greater" Oxford do not have enough scale for viability. In my view, they belong as one unified unitary council. I believe that a future central government will revisit the unduly partisan character of the LGR decisions right across England.

Breaking News – UK Government "pauses" LRG!

On the 7th September the UK Government announced that LGR as previously decreed is to be "paused". A number of Judicial Reviews had been set in train following earlier decisions and more were under consideration. The Government took legal advice on them. These cases would in all likelihood have required release of the advice that the Secretary of State (then Steve Reed) had received from civil servants. IF as suspected that advice ran strongly contrary to the decisions made then the situation would have been difficult and the Judicial Reviews may have been upheld.

Now councils have been instructed to cease further work on the particular decisions previously made by the Government. There will not now be shadow elections in May 2027. Instead elections due for previous authorities – in our case SODC will proceed.

The government and many others are saying that it is vital to make the "right" decisions on something as important as LGR. Moreover, they have indicated that they may prioritise moving ahead on Devolution and Strategic Authorities before moving to new unitaries.

This causes yet further costs for councils who have spent huge amounts of money on preparing both bids and transition work for LGR. They are asking the Government for help with these costs. Whilst saying that everything will be considered, ministers are not able to confirm anything ahead of a review and preparation for the Chancellor's Budget in October.

This is all an extraordinary situation. As part of the new Government Angela Rayner is back as Secretary of State for MHCLG and Jim McGovern is back as the Minister for Devolution and LGR. It would appear that they have concerns about what happened during the period that they were away?

Henley HGVs

Meetings have continued on the HGV issues and a report is expected to go to OCC's Cabinet meeting on 20th October at which it is hoped that a programme of options evaluation will be agreed with a view to progressing to action.

Council meeting 8th September 2026

At its council meeting on 8th September, OCC agreed 4 motions. They were all unanimously agreed :-

- A call for the Brodey Cancer Centre in Bicester to be moved to a refurbished building on the Horton Hospital site in Bicester.
- A call for UK planning to be revised to take account of missing infrastructure where all too often Statutory Obligations are misused to plan and force through sites which are not properly provided for; with particular reference to flooding risk, water, sewage and electricity capacity. (Labour councillors abstained.)
- A call for a renewed raft of actions following the summer of heatwaves and wildfires, noting the trend of Climate Change and the expected strong “El Nino” effect in the year ahead. Consideration of Fire & Rescue resources, action on prevention and to reduce risks in the countryside, verges and other land. Request to Government for more powers to restrain use of fires, BBQs, fireworks at times and in areas of particular risk.
- A call to support a new settlement on Social Care, engage in the “Big Conversation on Care” and to support action across political parties to prepare for progress in this arena, recognising the demographic forecasts.

[Leigh Rawlins](#)

County Councillor (Sonning Common & Henley South)