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Submission to *Proposals for local government reorganisation in Oxfordshire*

I am making this submission to the consultation on *Proposals for local government reorganisation in Oxfordshire* on behalf of the Association of British Counties (ABC), an unincorporated association which promotes the importance of the 92 historic counties of the UK to our nation's heritage and culture. We are delighted that the Government shares our view of the importance of the historic counties to our history, culture and sense of community^[1].

The main threat to the identities of the historic counties is their confusion with local government. Hence, although ABC has no views on the structures of local government, we firmly believe that local government terminology and council names should be chosen so as to draw a clear distinction between local government and the historic counties.

Given these concerns, our response addresses Item 4(d) of the consultation's *Criteria for unitary local government*:

"Proposals should consider issues of local identity and cultural and historic importance."

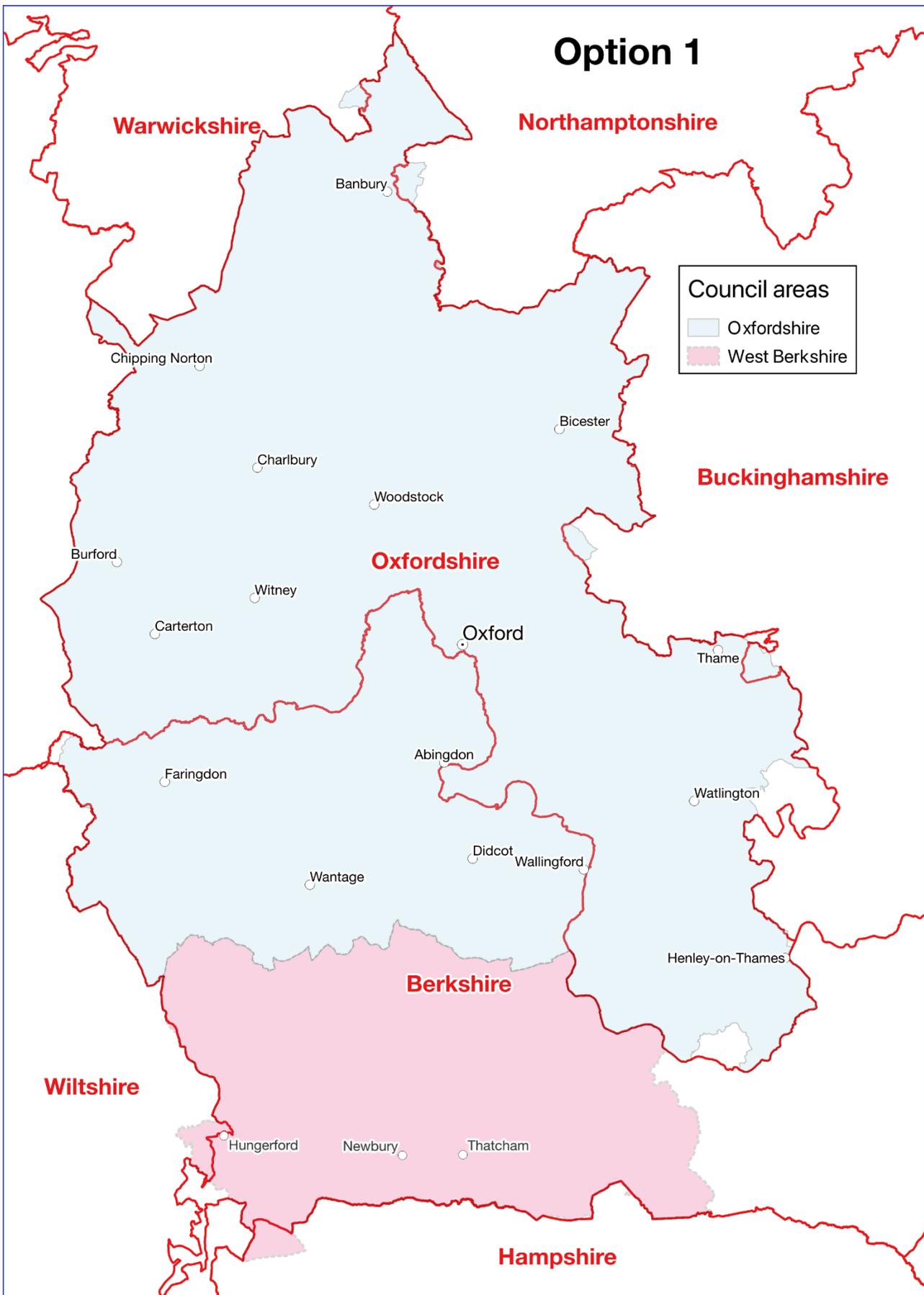
None of the 11 consultation questions refers specifically to Item 4(d). Hence, our response most accurately lies within the *"any other comment you have on this proposal"* of Question 9.

ABC considers that the first of the three proposed unitary local government set-ups presented by the consultation document does not adequately consider issues of local identity and cultural and historic importance, in that it proposes the name *"Oxfordshire Council"* be used for a council with an area that includes a huge area of northern Berkshire. This would be in direct conflict with the historic county identity of the area concerned. We are happy with the proposed council names in the other two options.

The use of the unqualified name *'Oxfordshire'* to describe the current Oxfordshire County Council area and the *'Oxfordshire'* lieutenancy area has long been a source of confusion and irritation, since this area includes over 250 square miles of north-west Berkshire - including the Berkshire Downs, the Vale of the White Horse and the county town of Abingdon. This confusing and regrettable situation stems from the Local Government Act 1972 and the *"counties"* it created.

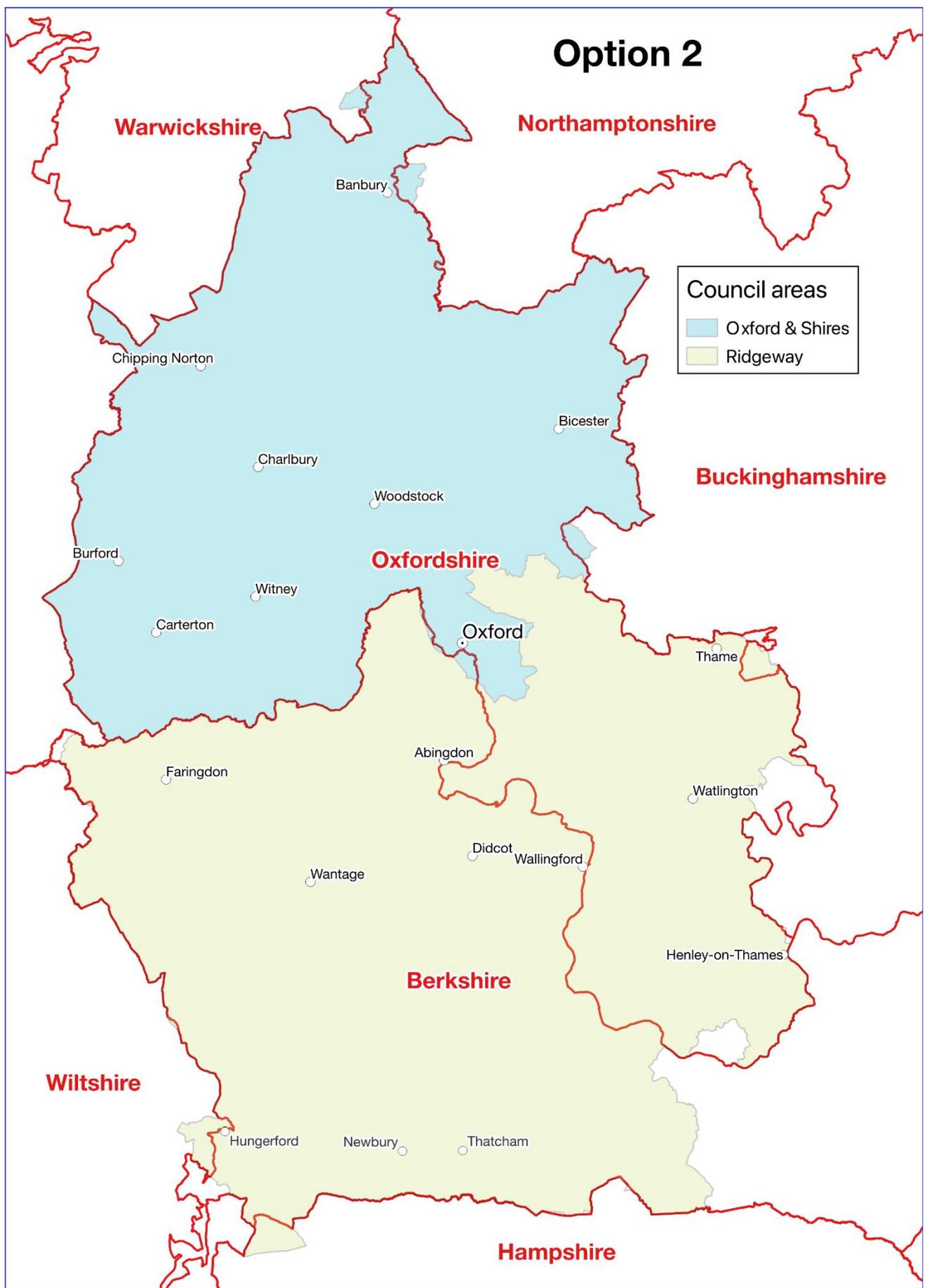
The current local government reorganisation provides a great opportunity to finally deal with this misapplication of the *"Oxfordshire"* name to administrative areas which include a huge part of Berkshire. This can easily be done by choosing names for the new councils which properly reflect the local identities and culture of these areas. The Oxfordshire and Berkshire lieutenancies should be returned to being based on the historic counties.

We make suggestions below in relation to all three of the options presented in the consultation.



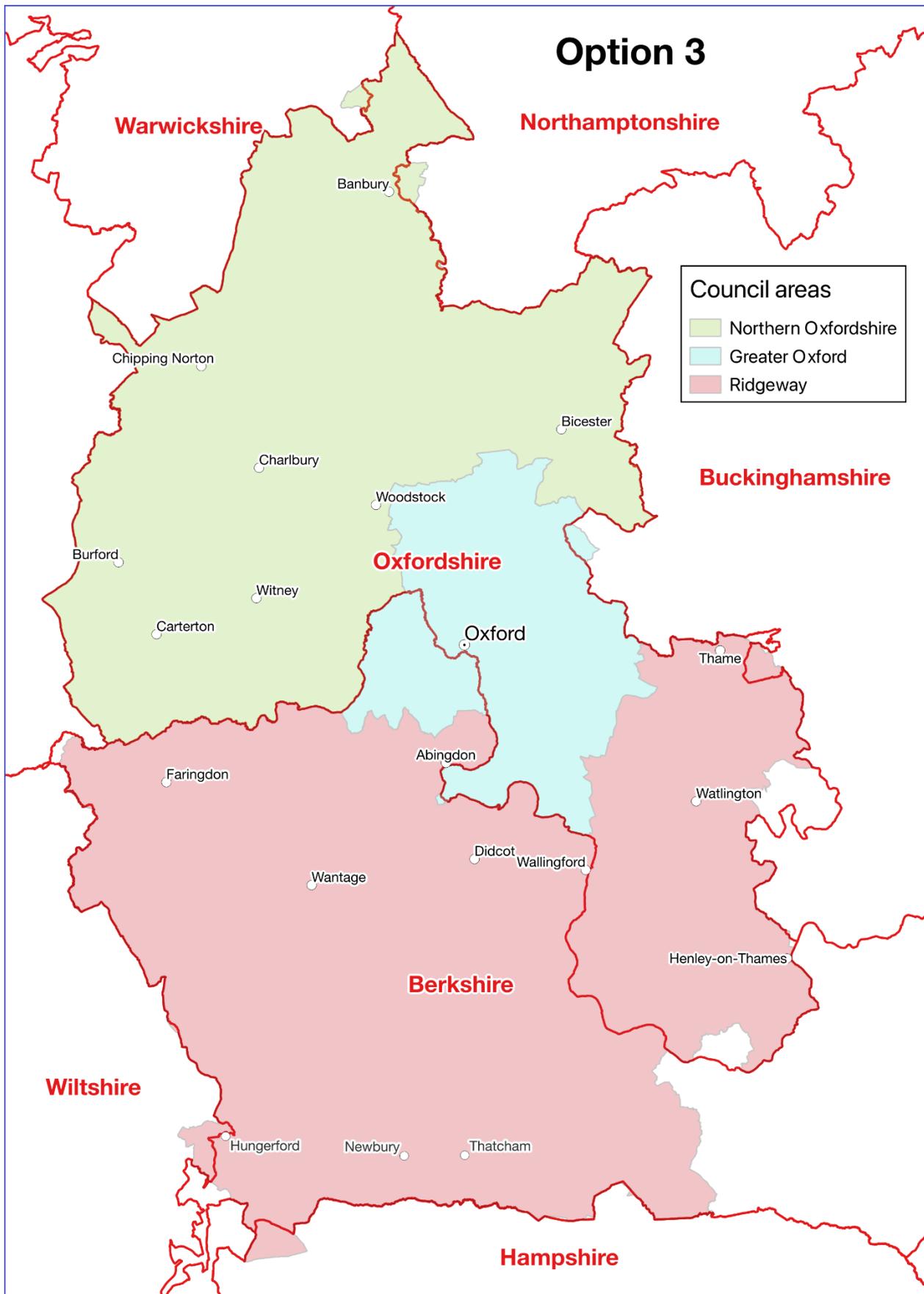
The council areas proposed in Option 1 compared to the historic counties

Option 1 is for the current Oxfordshire County Council area to become the basis for a new unitary council, to be called "*Oxfordshire Council*". A unitary council based on the current Oxfordshire County Council area is not a problem to ABC, but this proposed name is. Any such council should be named "*Oxfordshire and North Berkshire Council*".



The council areas proposed in Option 2 compared to the historic counties

ABC has no issues with the council names proposed in Option 2. The name “*Ridgeway Council*” is a sensible name for a council area which lies partly in Berkshire and partly in Oxfordshire. We are not sure what the “*and Shires*” part of “*Oxford and Shires Council*” is referring to, though this name does not misuse a historic county name. However, we suggest that “*Oxford and North Oxfordshire Council*” or just “*North Oxfordshire Council*” would make more sense to the public.



The council areas proposed in Option 3 compared to the historic counties

ABC has no issues with the council names proposed in Option 3. As with Option 2, “*Ridgeway Council*” is a sensible name for a council area which lies partly in Berkshire and partly in Oxfordshire. “*Greater Oxford Council*” lies in both counties but sensibly avoids using either county’s name. “*Northern Oxfordshire Council*” is a perfect name for a council which covers the northern part of Oxfordshire.

The consultation notably makes no mention of the Government's intentions in relation to the *Oxfordshire* lieutenancy. The opportunity should be taken to recast the *Oxfordshire* and *Berkshire* lieutenancies to cover the historic counties of these names. This should be done as part of a wider move to re-appoint the lieutenancies to the historic counties throughout the UK (see below).

As part of this reorganisation, Government should replace the terms 'county' and 'county council' within local government terminology and parlance with 'council area' and 'council', as used in Scotland. Council names should take the form "*Ridgeway Council*". This would ensure that local government has an identity distinct from the historic counties.

Clearing the confusion with local government could be backed up by two further measures to strengthen official recognition for the importance of the historic counties:

- Including a definition of 'historic county' within the Interpretation Act 1978 would ensure the consistent use of the historic counties across Government, its agencies and within the heritage sector. The definition used by the Office for National Statistics is ideal^[2,3].
- Appointing the lieutenancies of England^[4] to the historic counties, as are many lieutenancies in Scotland^[5] would be a suitable official recognition of the importance of both the historic counties and the office of lord lieutenant.

Our *Historic Counties of the United Kingdom Bill*^[6] details the small legislative changes which would be necessary to implement these measures.

Many thanks for giving us the opportunity to express our views on the ongoing local government reorganisation. We trust that you will give these views your due consideration.

Yours sincerely

Peter Boyce

Peter Boyce
Chairman, Association of British Counties

NOTES

[1] Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, 2019, *Celebrating the historic counties of England*

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/celebrating-the-historic-counties-of-england/celebrating-the-historic-counties-of-england>

[2] Office for National Statistics, 2024, *Index of Place Names in Great Britain*

<https://geoportal.statistics.gov.uk/datasets/208d9884575647c29f0dd5a1184e711a/about>

[3] Historic Counties Trust, 2022, *Historic Counties Standard*,

https://www.historiccountiestrust.co.uk/Historic_Counties_Standard.pdf

[4] Association of British Counties, 2022, The lieutenancies of England and their relation to the historic counties

https://gazetteer.org.uk/ABC_Fact_Sheet_Lieutenancy_Areas_England.pdf

[5] Association of British Counties, 2022, The lieutenancies of Scotland and their relation to the historic counties

https://gazetteer.org.uk/ABC_Fact_Sheet_Lieutenancy_Areas_Scotland.pdf

[6] Association of British Counties, 2025, *Historic Counties of the United Kingdom Bill*

https://gazetteer.org.uk/ABC_Historic_Counties_of_the_UK_Bill.pdf