

CABINET

14 July 2026

THAMES VALLEY SPATIAL DEVELOPMENT STRATEGY (SDS) DEVELOPMENT AND GOVERNANCE

Report by the Director of Economy and Place

RECOMMENDATIONS:

The Cabinet is recommended to:

- a) **Approve the establishment of a partnership with the councils covering Oxfordshire and Berkshire, including Swindon in the initial pre-inception period of the statutory Spatial Development Strategy (SDS) for the Thames Valley area and pending agreement by Government on geography.**
- b) **Note the funding and resource allocations for the pre-inception programme.**
- c) **Agree that Bracknell Forest Council will act as the accountable body for funds held on behalf of the partnership and will host any staff appointed for the Thames Valley SDS programme.**
- d) **Agree the high-level interim governance and oversight, monitoring and assurance arrangements set out in this paper, covering the arrangements for the period before a statutory Strategic Planning Board (SPB) is established through secondary legislation.**
- e) **To delegate the detail of the agreement and working arrangements for pre-inception development of the SDS to the Director of Economy and Place in consultation with the Head of Legal and Governance and Deputy Monitoring Officer.**

Executive Summary

1. This paper seeks Cabinet approval to participate in, and help lead, a joint Thames Valley partnership with councils covering Oxfordshire, Berkshire including Swindon whilst the geography is being confirmed by Government summer/autumn 2026, to progress the pre-inception phase of work for a Thames Valley Spatial Development Strategy (SDS). The SDS is a new strategic planning statutory requirement and is intended to provide a high-level spatial framework setting the scale and distribution of growth, investment opportunities and supporting Place infrastructure across multiple local planning authority areas. Where devolution arrangements are not in place, new Strategic

Planning Boards (SDS) are to be established to provide joint-governance for the SDS process.

2. Work to date has focused on establishing a shared understanding of the SDS requirement, engaging with Government on the emerging geography as in the consultation in February 2026 and legislative timetable and developing early programme outputs (including a pathway/statement of readiness and a strategic spatial baseline). Government grant funding has been made available to the Thames Valley area to support this early work, alongside defined expectations for transparency and quarterly monitoring and evaluation reporting.
3. The statutory instrument to form the SPB for the Thames Valley is expected to be established in Autumn 2026. There will be formal Government consultation on the statutory instrument in early Autumn 2026 where the Strategic Authorities allocated in the SDS geography will be able to comment, including on the proposed geography. Interim governance is required to provide clear decision-making, financial accountability and programme oversight during the pre-inception period. This paper proposes a joint partnership model with agreed monitoring, assurance and dispute resolution arrangements, with Bracknell Forest Council (on behalf of all authorities) as the accountable body and host authority for any dedicated staff resource.

Background

4. The Planning and Infrastructure Act 2025 introduces a duty on designated strategic planning authorities to prepare a Spatial Development Strategy (SDS). SDSs are intended to be high-level strategic plans which set out, amongst other matters, the scale and broad distribution of development and associated infrastructure across multiple local planning authority areas. The Government is targeting all areas of the country to have an examined SDS in place by mid-2029.
5. Government consultation on SDS geographies has indicated a preferred Thames Valley SDS area including Bracknell Forest, Reading, Oxfordshire Slough, West Berkshire, Windsor & Maidenhead, and Wokingham and including Swindon, with the final geography to be confirmed in Autumn 2026. Government has also indicated that bespoke secondary legislation will establish a statutory Strategic Planning Board for the Thames Valley, with consultation expected in Autumn 2026 and the board intended to take on formal functions once established.
6. Partner authorities include Bracknell Forest, Reading, Oxfordshire Slough, West Berkshire, Windsor & Maidenhead, and Wokingham and Swindon initially. The option is there for Buckinghamshire to join but Buckinghamshire Council has indicated that it does not want wish to be included in the geography. The partner authorities have progressed preparatory work to ensure the sub-region is ready to move quickly once the statutory framework is in place. Key activity has included:
 - engagement with Government on the emerging Thames Valley SDS geography and the anticipated timetable for secondary legislation;

- submission of an expression of interest for SDS preparation funding and agreement in principle to quarterly monitoring and evaluation reporting;
- early development of draft governance and operational framework proposals for a shadow Strategic Planning Board, including work on a draft constitution and operating model;
- scoping of key pre-inception outputs, including a “Pathway to the Thames Valley SDS” (statement of readiness, programme plan and timetable) and a strategic spatial baseline (including mapping of planned growth, constraints and opportunities). Noting the programme plan and timetable is indicative pending clearer direction through further legislation and firming up governance arrangements, including the statutory Strategic Planning Board;

Key benefits of partnership

7. Undertaking pre-inception work ahead of the statutory SDS duty will ensure the Thames Valley partnership is ready to mobilise at pace once secondary legislation establishes the Strategic Planning Board. By agreeing the programme plan, workstreams, decision points and engagement approach in advance, partners can reduce lead-in time, make early commissioning decisions efficiently and avoid duplication of effort across authorities.
8. Early joint working will also create a shared baseline and narrative for the SDS, including a statement of readiness and an initial strategic spatial baseline (“spatial portrait”). This provides a common understanding of what the SDS is intended to do, how it relates to local plans, and the key issues, opportunities and constraints across the area, supporting alignment between partners and clearer communication with communities and stakeholders.
9. Finally, collaborative pre-inception activity enables proportionate interim governance, financial accountability and assurance arrangements to operate transparently during the grant-funded period, including quarterly monitoring and evaluation reporting. Establishing these working arrangements now will strengthen relationships, improve risk management and provide an auditable platform for transition to the statutory board when it is constituted.

Proposed joint partnership (Oxfordshire, Berkshire authorities and Swindon)

10. The partnership is proposed to comprise the strategic planning authorities across Oxfordshire and the Berkshire authorities and to include Swindon Borough Council initially while Government decides the SDS geography (together, “the Partner Authorities”). For the avoidance of doubt, the expectation is to co-opt district councils (where relevant) up until Local Government Reorganisation in Oxfordshire has been completed. Moreover, other external stakeholders may also be engaged through co-opted or consultative arrangements.

Objectives and deliverables for the pre-inception period

11. The partnership will oversee delivery of the pre-inception programme, including (subject to further scoping and agreement with Government):
 - a) a programme plan and timetable for development of the SDS, including workstreams, decision points and engagement approach;
 - b) a “Pathway to the Thames Valley SDS” / statement of readiness describing what the SDS is, why it is needed, governance arrangements, how it relates to local plans, and how it will be prepared and kept under review;
 - c) a Thames Valley growth vision and strategic spatial baseline (“spatial portrait”), including mapping of planned growth, constraints, opportunities and relationships to other strategies (e.g. infrastructure, economy, nature recovery);
 - d) draft governance and operating model proposals to inform the statutory secondary legislation and to enable a shadow SPB to operate effectively in advance of the statutory board;
 - e) procurement and commissioning activity needed to support the above (e.g. baseline mapping, specialist technical support), in compliance with procurement law and each authority’s governance.

Governance, monitoring and assurance arrangements

Proposed governance model (pre-inception period)

12. During the interim pre-inception period (prior to establishment of the statutory Strategic Planning Board), it is proposed that governance is provided through a shadow partnership structure that mirrors the expected statutory arrangements as far as practicable, while remaining proportionate to the pre-inception scope. The model comprises:
 - Thames Valley SDS Partnership Board: with Leader representation from each Partner Authority and those co-opted, responsible for oversight of the direction, endorsing the work programme and budget, and making recommendations within the scope of the pre-inception interim arrangements.
 - The Chief Executive group made up of all constituent authorities along with the Place Directors of all councils to oversee the programme, delivery, manage risks and ensure alignment with each authority’s governance.

- Programme Management Office / Strategic Planning Unit (hosted): the operational team responsible for day-to-day delivery, commissioning and coordination.
 - Workstreams: time-limited workstreams (e.g. governance/legislation, spatial baseline/evidence, engagement/communications, programme planning), each with a lead authority/officer.
 - Interim Accountable Body arrangements to hold regional funds granted by MHCLG to support this interim development phase and commission on behalf of the region.
13. Where decisions require formal authority (e.g. entering into contracts above delegated thresholds, committing expenditure, appointing staff, or approving material changes to scope), these will be agreed by the interim governance arrangements for the SDS prior to a formal Strategic Planning Board. The accountable authority will ensure these decisions and procurement comply with the accountable Authority's constitution and decision-making arrangements, supported by a clear recommendation and audit trail from the partnership bodies.
 14. The interim arrangements will be in place until the formation of the legislated Strategic Planning Board. The Strategic Planning Board will become the Strategic Planning authority for the Thames Valley area on a geography set out by Central Government.
 15. If a Foundation Strategic Authority (FSA) is established, the Strategic Planning Board will be dissolved and its legal responsibilities will pass to the FSA.
 16. If the geography of the SDS area and FSA footprint are misaligned, joint working and governance arrangements will be put in place.

Monitoring, performance reporting and evaluation

17. The partnership will operate on a transparent "open book" basis for the use of Government grant and partner contributions. Monitoring and reporting in the interim period and formal arrangements will include:
 - a) Quarterly reporting on progress against agreed milestones, key risks/issues, and a summary of expenditure;
 - b) Interim updates between quarters where required (e.g. where Government requests updates, or where material risks emerge);
 - c) Expenditure records maintained by the accountable body and made available to partner authorities for assurance purposes;
 - d) Evaluation returns as required by Government, including completion of any end-of-grant evaluation summarising outcomes and expenditure.

Roles, responsibilities, funding and resourcing

Accountable body and financial administration

18. Funding has already been received from the Ministry of Housing Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) of £764,000 to fund the pre-inception work to develop governance and working arrangements for the next stage. Oxfordshire County Council is currently acting as the accountable body and holding the first tranche of funding. MHCLG has indicated that there will be further tranches of funding and a 3-year settlement to fund the development and production of the SDS, which includes resources, evidence and studies.
19. Oxfordshire councils are subject to the current round of local government reorganisation and it is therefore recommended that a council not subject to these reforms takes on Accountable Body status for the next phase. Bracknell Forest Council has agreed to undertake this role if agreed by partner councils and will act as the accountable body for funds received/held on behalf of the partnership for the Thames Valley SDS programme. This will include responsibility for receiving grant and/or partner contributions, maintaining proper accounting records, administering payments in accordance with the agreed programme and budget, and providing the required financial and performance monitoring returns to Government and to partner authorities. This will be reviewed on an annual basis through the Strategic Planning Board.
20. Further funding sources are expected to include Government SDS preparation grant funding and where required, partner authority contributions (monetary and/or in-kind). An outline draft budget, will include the proposed allocation by workstream and the basis for partner contributions, which will be negotiated once final guidance is issued and all costs are known. It should be noted that this may be subject to change as the final SDS legislation and guidance has not yet been issued.

Programme resourcing and hosting of staff

21. To date Oxfordshire County Council has provided the majority of resource to develop the programme and fund strategic advisors with assistance from a core team of senior staff from Oxfordshire, Berkshire and Swindon authorities.
22. Going forward the partnership will require dedicated officer capacity to manage and deliver the pre-inception programme (including programme management, strategic planning and technical support). It is proposed that any dedicated staff funded through the programme will be jointly recruited and hosted by Bracknell Forest Council as accountable body. Staffing may be delivered through direct recruitment, secondment, or inter-authority arrangements, subject to agreement by the partner authorities and compliance with each authority's HR, finance and governance requirements (see Annex 1 & 2).

Working arrangements and data sharing

23. The SDS pre-inception programme requires regular data sharing among authorities, including local plans, growth projections, constraints, opportunities,

infrastructure, and demographic, economic, and environmental datasets. Data will be shared based on necessity and proportionality, with aggregation used where possible. The partnership aims to establish unified data and digital standards for a common evidence baseline and efficient updates.

24. Partner Authorities are asked to agree to the principle of data sharing and joint use of data. An inter-authority agreement will detail the use and management of data and compliance with the Freedom of Information Act 2000 and the Environmental Information Regulations 2004. When processing personal data, partners will conduct Data Protection Impact Assessments and adhere to the UK GDPR and the Data Protection Act 2018.

Financial Implications

25. The financial implications of participating in the partnership fall into three categories: (i) receipt and use of Government grant funding (where applicable), (ii) any partner authority contributions (cash and/or in-kind), and (iii) staffing and commissioning costs required to deliver the pre-inception outputs.
26. Any financial commitments by the Council will be subject to approval through the Council's normal financial governance and will be captured within the formal inter-authority agreement(s) including provisions on payment schedules, treatment of underspends/overspends, liabilities, audit access and exit/termination arrangements, which will be presented through the existing budget monitoring process.
27. Whilst Oxfordshire County Council has been the responsible recipient of the initial funding for the SDS programme, ongoing subsequent funds will eventually be transferred to the Host Authority (Bracknell Forest), alongside additional subsequent funding contributions of the partners, to an expected value of circa. £50,000 per authority (subject to outcomes of the budget setting process, once agreed).
28. It is largely unknown, at this moment in time, the exact amount needed for funding and resourcing the SDS. The council has received £764,000 and any additional funding received, will be transferred to the Host Authority once agreements are in place.
29. Any costs incurred by the council in supporting the development of the SDS prior to the establishment of the Host Authority will be recovered. Once established, responsibility for ongoing resourcing and associated costs will transfer to the Host Authority (Bracknell Forest Council) in accordance with funding and governance arrangements to be agreed.

Filipp Skiffins (Finance Business Partner)

Filipp.Skiffins@Oxfordshire.gov.uk

Legal Implications

30. Under the Local Government Act 1972 and S1 of the Localism Act 2011, local authorities have the power to enter into joint arrangements with other local authorities, delegate functions to other local authorities and do anything that individuals may generally do (the general power of competence).
31. This is reflected in Part 3.5 of the Council's Constitution (Agency, Partnership and Joint Arrangements) which sets out that the Council or the Cabinet, in order to promote the economic, social or environmental wellbeing of its area, may enter into arrangements or agreements with any person or body; co-operate with, or facilitate or co-ordinate the activities of, any person or body; and exercise on behalf of that person or body any functions of that person or body. The Cabinet may make arrangements with any other local authority (or the executive of that authority if it is operating executive arrangements) whereby that other authority (or executive) will exercise executive functions of the Council. Under Part 8.2 of the Constitution (Financial Procedure Rules), the Cabinet is responsible for agreeing any strategic partnerships for the County, monitoring the performance and governance and ensuring that partnerships are improving the wellbeing and outcomes for residents of Oxfordshire.
32. The interim partnership is intended to enable collaborative programme delivery and joint oversight during the pre-inception period. The legal mechanism(s) to give effect to this may include a memorandum of understanding, a collaboration agreement, and/or arrangements under the Local Government Act 1972/Local Government Act 2000 for the discharge of functions (including the establishment of a joint committee) where needed. The chosen mechanism will reflect (i) whether any functions are being formally delegated, (ii) the extent of decision-making powers required during the interim period, and (iii) the anticipated transition to a statutory Strategic Planning Board established by secondary legislation.
33. As set out above, any redundancies that arise as a result of Bracknell Forest Council employing/hosting staff for the purposes of the programme and related costs that arise as a result of this, will be shared by all parties and this will be set out in any MOU/Agreement.

Jayne Pringle (Legal)

Jayne.Pringle@Oxfordshire.gov.uk

Staff Implications

34. The SDS obligations and work are over and above what is currently resourced by the councils, this is putting pressure on strategic authorities to reprioritise time and resource. Currently resources from Oxfordshire County Council, Bracknell Forest and Swindon are being utilised to develop the programme. Once the permanent resource is recruited, there may be a change in staff attribution and responsibility. It is agreed that staff time will be given as work in kind to lead and develop areas of the SDS along with aligning with Local Plan evidence and development.

35. To augment officer capabilities and capacity, the SDS development will also require support from strategic advisors and consultancies with past senior regional planning experience to support the plan and develop the evidence base.

Equality & Inclusion Implications

36. The pre-inception phase is primarily programme set-up and evidence development. Equalities considerations will be embedded in the design of the SDS programme and engagement approach, including ensuring inclusive consultation and assessing impacts as the SDS content develops. Further equality and inclusion assessments will be developed alongside the development of the SDS.

Sustainability Implications

37. Sustainability considerations will be embedded through the SDS programme, including early agreement of sustainability objectives and the approach to assessment (including any statutory sustainability appraisal and related environmental assessment requirements), and through ongoing engagement with relevant partners and evidence holders. As the SDS content is developed, further detail will be provided on how proposed strategic approaches are expected to contribute to local and national climate and environmental commitments, and how potential adverse impacts will be avoided, mitigated or compensated.
38. The SDS is intended to provide the strategic framework to integrate housing and economic growth with the delivery of supporting infrastructure, climate mitigation and adaptation, and environmental enhancement across the Thames Valley. Developing and delivering the SDS therefore has positive sustainability implications by enabling partners to plan for sustainable patterns of development (including prioritising locations that support public transport, walking and cycling), set strategic expectations on energy efficiency and carbon reduction, and coordinate cross-boundary measures for green infrastructure, biodiversity and nature recovery.

Risk Management

39. The key risks for the pre-inception programme for the SDS and the risks for the partnership are set out in the table below:

Risk	Impact	Mitigation
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Uncertainty in final SDS geography and statutory arrangements	Partnership is based on draft structure and partnership may change	maintaining flexibility in programme scope, continued engagement with Government, and ensuring interim governance can adapt.
Lack of off sign up to the partnership arrangements	Lack of joined up working, sight and information available for the development of the SDS	Understanding the issues in each authority, sharing information and working with senior officers.
Delays in establishing interim governance / agreements	Delays in progress of programme and oversight	early legal/finance input, clear decision timetable, and use of standard inter-authority templates where possible.
Insufficient capacity or recruitment delays	Stretched resources, not being able to make progress on the programme	early scoping, use of secondments, and prioritisation of critical-path activities.

Engagement and consultation

40. Engagement with authorities has been integral to development of the SDS pre-inception programme and will continue once the partnership is formalised. There has been close working with Government on the emerging SDS geography, legislative timetable and grant expectations, and collaborative working between the Partner Authorities to agree the initial scope, deliverables, governance and resourcing proposals set out in this report. The Partner Authorities have already collaborated to respond to the SDS geography consultation and the response to the NPPF consultation. As the programme progresses, the partnership will develop and implement a proportionate engagement and communications plan, including early engagement with key stakeholders (such as infrastructure providers, neighbouring authorities, statutory agencies and relevant sub-regional bodies) and arrangements for formal public consultation at the appropriate stages once the statutory SDS process is confirmed.
41. There will be a further consultation on the statutory instrument for setting up of the Strategic Planning Board in early Autumn 2026. Strategic Authorities will have opportunities to comment on the draft legislation at this stage.

Robin Rogers, Director of Economy and Place

Robin.Rogers@Oxfordshire.gov.uk

Annex:

Annex 1: Programme

Annex 2: Resourcing & governance structure

Contact Officer:

Hannah Battye, Head of Place Shaping

Hannah.Battye@Oxfordshire.gov.uk

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