

To: Cabinet
Date: 08 July 2026
Report of: Director Planning & Regulation
Title of Report: Thames Valley Spatial Development Strategy (SDS)
 Development and Governance

Summary and recommendations	
Decision being taken:	To note the development of, and governance arrangements for, a Thames Valley SDS
Key decision:	No.
Cabinet Member:	Councillor Railton, Cabinet Member for Planning and Zero Carbon
Corporate Priority:	Good, affordable homes; Strong, fair economy; Thriving Communities; Zero Carbon Oxford.
Policy Framework:	The SDS is a new statutory planning document that sits above the Local Plan.

Recommendation(s): That Cabinet resolves to:	
1	Note the governance and development of the Thames Valley Spatial Development Strategy
2	Agree to officer and member involvement in the early programme stages as outlined in this report, in particular with regards to the governance model and assisting in the development of the Thames Valley SDS.

Appendix No.	Appendix Title	Exempt from Publication
Appendix 1	Resourcing	No
Appendix 2	High level programme	No

Appendix 3	Governance and resources	No
Appendix 4	Risk Assessment	No

Introduction and background

1. This paper seeks Cabinet approval to participate in a joint Thames Valley partnership with councils covering Oxfordshire, Berkshire and Swindon 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
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. As the statutory Strategic Planning Board (SPB) for the Thames Valley is expected to be established through secondary legislation due Autumn 2026, 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, Swindon, West Berkshire, Windsor & Maidenhead, and Wokingham (with the final geography to be confirmed summer/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, Swindon, West Berkshire, Windsor & Maidenhead, and Wokingham. The option is there for Buckinghamshire to join but they have indicated they do not want to work

together at present. 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.
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.
 10. The partnership is proposed to comprise the strategic planning authorities across Oxfordshire, the Berkshire authorities and Swindon Borough Council (together, “the Partner Authorities”). For the avoidance of doubt, the expectation is to co-opt district councils (where relevant) and other stakeholders may be engaged through co-opted or consultative arrangements as set out under the interim governance arrangements up until the 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 programme plan and timetable for development of the SDS, including workstreams, decision points and engagement approach;
- 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;
- 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);
- 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;
- 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 (interim period)

12. During the interim 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, 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.

13. Interim Accountable Body arrangements to hold regional funds granted by Ministry for Housing Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) to support this interim development phase and commission on behalf of the region.

14. 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.

15. The interim arrangements will be in place until the formation of the statutory 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.
16. If a Foundation Strategic Authority (FSA) is established, the Strategic Planning Board will be dissolved, and its legal responsibilities will pass to the FSA.
17. If the geography of the SDS area and FSA footprint are misaligned, joint working and governance arrangements will be put in place.
18. 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:
 - Quarterly reporting on progress against agreed milestones, key risks/issues, and a summary of expenditure;
 - Interim updates between quarters where required (e.g. where Government requests updates, or where material risks emerge);
 - Expenditure records maintained by the accountable body and made available to partner authorities for assurance purposes;
 - Evaluation returns as required by Government, including completion of any end-of-grant evaluation summarising outcomes and expenditure.
19. Funding has already been received from the 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 outlined in table Appendix 1. 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.
20. Oxfordshire councils are subject to the current round of Local Government Reorganisation (LGR) 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 partners 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.
21. Further funding sources are expected to include government SDS preparation grant funding and where required, partner authority contributions (monetary and/or in-kind). An outlined draft budget, including the proposed allocation by workstream and the basis for partner contributions is attached as Annex 1. 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

22. 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.
23. 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 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 2 & 3).

Working arrangements and data sharing

24. 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.
25. 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 Freedom of Information and Environmental Information Regulations. When processing personal data, partners will conduct Data Protection Impact Assessments and adhere to UK GDPR and the Data Protection Act 2018.

Alternative Options Considered

The Cabinet could choose not to engage in the SDS process. However, this will lead to the Council being unable to help shape the strategic growth of both Oxford and the wider area. Therefore this option has been discounted.

Implications of Local Government Reorganisation

The creation of SDSs is being led by central government, and the development of the Thames Valley SDS will become mandated by secondary legislation. There are no financial implications for the Council, albeit that human resource will need to be directed to help guide the emerging workstreams. The creation of a Thames Valley SDS will continue irrespective of LGR outcomes and programmes.

Engagement and consultation

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 National Planning Policy Framework (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.

Sustainability implications

26. 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.
27. 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.

Financial implications

28. 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.
29. A detailed budget and resourcing plan will be maintained and reported through the partnership governance. Any financial commitments by the Council will be subject to approval through the Council's normal financial governance (including delegated authority limits) 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.

Legal issues

30. Through the Local Government Acts 1972 and section 1 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 Parts 3.8 (Joint Arrangement) and 3.9 (Delegation to and from other local authorities) of the Council's Constitution which set out that the Council or the Cabinet may establish joint arrangements with one or more local authorities to exercise functions that are not executive functions in any of the participating authorities. Such arrangements may involve the appointment of a joint committee with these other local authorities and the delegation of functions to the joint committee. The Council may delegate non-executive functions to another local authority or, in certain circumstances where these are local choice responsibilities, the executive of another local authority.

32. The Leader may establish joint arrangements with one or more local authorities to exercise functions which are executive functions. Such arrangements may involve the appointment of joint committees with these other local authorities and the delegation of functions to the joint committee. The Leader may delegate executive functions to the executive of another local authority or, in certain circumstances where these are local choice responsibilities, another local authority. The decision to accept a delegation of executive responsibilities from another local authority is reserved to Cabinet.
33. 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. Further reports will be prepared for consideration in the future as needed as the programme develops.

Level of risk

34. Risk Register is attached at Appendix 4.

Equalities impact

35. 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 inclusions assessments will be developed alongside the development of the SDS.

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