

To: Cabinet

Date: 8 July 2026

Report of: Mish Tullar – Transition Director

Title of Report: Thames Valley Strategic Authority Proposal: Update and Implications for Oxford City.

Summary and recommendations	
Decision being taken:	Cabinet is invited to note Oxfordshire County Council's veto of the systemwide Expression of Interest to Government, which would have enabled the creation of a Thames Valley Strategic Authority with enhanced powers and funding for the region. Cabinet is further requested to reaffirm its commitment to working collaboratively with Thames Valley partners and Government to reassess devolution in light of the 'minded to' decision on Local Government Reorganisation, with the clear aim of advancing a renewed proposal that includes Swindon and remains open to Buckinghamshire.
Key decision:	No
Cabinet Member:	Councillor Susan Brown, Leader of the Council, Cabinet Member for Partnership Working, Inclusive Economic Growth and Culture
Corporate Priority:	The Council Strategy 2024 to 2028.
Policy Framework:	The Government's English Devolution White Paper.

Recommendation(s): That Cabinet resolves to:
Note Oxfordshire County Council's decision to veto the Thames Valley Foundation Strategic Authority proposal; Agree that the Council Leader and Council officers to work with counterparts in other Thames Valley councils to review the position following the Government's decision on Local Government in Oxfordshire and West Berkshire; Note that officers will work with counterparts in the other 12 councils to further develop the Expression of Interest proposal against any updated policy position around devolution set out by the new Prime Minister;

4. **Agree** the commitment to continue to support Swindon's involvement as a willing partner in a Thames Valley Strategic Authority – and keep the door open for Buckinghamshire's inclusion too, if they change their position.

Information Exempt From Publication	
State in here what information is to be exempt from publication – where it is, attach it as an appendix and name the appendix as you describe it here	• None

Appendix No.	Appendix Title	Exempt from Publication
None		

Introduction and background

1. Councils across Berkshire, Oxfordshire and Swindon including Oxford City Council have been working together for over 18 months to develop a strong Expression of Interest proposal to Government for a new Strategic Authority for the Thames Valley region.
2. This work has been supported by businesses, public service organisations and local leaders across the Thames Valley, who recognise the opportunity to better coordinate growth, investment and delivery of strategic services across a shared economic area.
3. A Foundation Strategic Authority could bring significant benefits, including devolved powers over transport and adult skills, improved coordination of infrastructure and housing, and increased access to significant government funding.
4. With a potential economy growth opportunity worth approximately £97bn in gross value added, the Thames Valley is a region of national significance, behind only London and Greater Manchester.
5. Significant work has progressed over the past 18 months, involving officers and leaders of 13 councils, coordinated by a senior officer employed by Oxfordshire County Council, to develop and refine a strong proposal and engage with Government to maximise the potential opportunity. In December 2025 Government amended its policy to require that a Foundation Strategic Authority must first be established, and can demonstrate it is functioning effectively, before transition to a Mayoral Strategic Authority with a directly elected mayor – which unlocks greater powers and enhanced level of Government funding.

6. On 24th March 2026 an [Expression of Interest letter](#) was submitted to Govt on behalf of Oxfordshire and Berkshire, confirming a wish to develop a formal devolution proposal for a Foundation Strategic Authority. It was signed by the leaders of Oxfordshire County Council and Slough Borough Council.
7. On Tuesday 16th June 2026 Thames Valley council leaders received a letter from the Devolution Minister encouraging the submission of the Expression of Interest that would see the creation of a Foundation Strategic Authority, as a stepping stone towards establishing a Mayoral Strategic Authority .
8. The very next day, at a meeting of councils held in Reading on Wednesday 17th June 2026, held to finalise the joint submission to Government, the Leader of Oxfordshire County Council ("the County Council") vetoed the devolution proposal.

Implications of the Oxfordshire County Councils decision

9. The County Council's decision to veto the proposal:
 - a. Considerably reduces the likelihood of establishing a Thames Valley Mayor in the near term. An elected Mayor could provide a single, clear regional voice to government, help secure inward investment, and support decision-making on strategic growth; capable of rising above local politics to make the difficult decisions needed to deliver on the area's growth potential.
 - b. Brings 18 months of constructive partnership working to a halt and removes for now, an opportunity to secure additional investment and greater local decision-making for Oxford and the wider region.
10. For Oxford, this impact is significant. A Foundation Strategic Authority would have enabled the city to:
 - a. Bring decision-making that currently sits with government closer to residents and businesses
 - b. Access new government funding and investment
 - c. Strengthen delivery of housing, transport, energy and water infrastructure and jobs in a coordinated way
 - d. Improve the integration of public services across the region.

Recommendations

One of the key requirements Government set for Local Government Reorganisation (LGR) is that proposals must demonstrate how they support and integrate with existing or planned devolution arrangements. There remains strong support for the creation of a Strategic Authority among the majority of Thames Valley councils, therefore it is recommended that the Council Leader and officers work with counterparts to review the position once the Government has announced its decision on LGR for Oxfordshire and West Berkshire.

The prospect of a new Prime Minister could see a review of Government devolution policy and potentially a strengthening of its commitment to bring forward those areas of the country that don't yet have strategic authorities. Officers will monitor any Government announcements on devolution over the coming months and work with

colleagues to in the other Thames Valley councils to further develop the Expression of Interest proposal against any updated policy position.

In discussions on devolution to date Oxford City Council has stated its clear support for Swindon's inclusion in any Thames Valley strategic authority. Cabinet is asked to reaffirm the commitment to continue to support Swindon's involvement as a willing partner in a Thames Valley Strategic Authority – and keep the door open for Buckinghamshire's inclusion too, if they change their position.

Alternative Options Considered

11. No alternative options have been developed to date. Councils across Berkshire, Oxfordshire and Swindon, including Oxford City Council, have been focused on this proposal over the past 18 months and devolution has been assessed to bring many benefits to Oxford and other parts of the Thames Valley region that are not otherwise available.
12. The County Council's veto at the final stage of agreeing the devolution Expression of Interest was unexpected. Its decision was made without consultation with Oxford City Council or other district councils in Oxfordshire or across the wider Thames Valley. It followed recent positive engagement with Government and broad support from councils across the region, including within Oxfordshire itself.

Implications of Local Government Reorganisation

13. The County Council's veto has no immediate statutory implications for Local Government Reorganisation, although Government has been clear that one of its criteria for assessing LGR proposals is that they must demonstrate how they support and integrate with existing or planned devolution arrangements.²⁰³
14. The County Council's decision is likely to delay and potentially reshape progress to devolution.

Other implications

15. While the County Council's veto does not prevent future progress, it introduces delay, uncertainty, and strategic risk.

Financial implications

Oxford City Council has contributed a total £20,300 to date to support Thames Valley systemwide work needed to progress a Devolution proposal. There are no other direct financial implications arising from this report.

Without a strategic authority in place, Oxford and other areas of the Thames Valley are likely to continue to miss out on significant levels of Government funding now being channelled through such bodies.

Legal issues

16. Whilst there are no direct legal issues arising from this report directly, without agreement of the constituent Councils at this stage the establishment of a Strategic Authority and devolution are not possible.

Level of risk

17. There are no direct risks arising from this report.

18. Without the structure of the Foundation Strategic Authority, there is a risk that Oxford, and the wider Thames Valley may miss future funding opportunities, as national funding is increasingly directed through such bodies.

Equalities impact

19. There are no direct equalities impacts arising from this report

Carbon and Environmental Considerations

20. This report is not seeking key decisions. There are no direct carbon and environmental considerations arising from this report.

Conclusion

21. Oxford City Council does not consider the County Council's veto to be final.

22. Local Government Reorganisation is expected to lead to new local governance arrangements within the next two years, which may provide future opportunities to progress devolution.

23. The Council remains committed to working with regional partners and local stakeholders to secure the best possible outcomes for Oxford, including continuing to advocate for greater devolution, investment, and the powers needed to deliver sustainable growth and tackle inequalities.

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Background Papers:

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