

This report is public	
Thames Valley Devolution Expression of Interest Endorsement	
Committee	Executive
Date of Committee	2 December 2025
Portfolio Holder presenting the report	Leader of the Council, Councillor David Hingley
Date Portfolio Holder agreed report	17 November 2025
Report of	Executive Director Place & Regeneration, Ian Boll

## Purpose of report

This report seeks to endorse an Expression of Interest (EOI) to be made by the Oxfordshire County Council to Government. This is in response to the Government's devolution policy and seeks to position our region in the next round of devolution for the purpose of creating a Mayoral Strategic Authority (MSA).

## 1. Recommendations

The Executive resolves:

- 1.1 To endorse the benefits from the proposed devolution of powers and functions, and agree to continue building on the collaborative approach across the region to date.
- 1.2 To endorse the Expression of Interest (EOI) to be submitted by Oxfordshire County Council as the upper-tier authority to Government, noting that the EOI is designed to proactively position our region for early consideration in the next wave of the Devolution Programme.
- 1.3 To acknowledge the EOI as an initial invitation to Government, opening further dialogue and engagement, and not a decision to establish a Strategic Authority.
- 1.4 To agree that a further report will be brought to Executive prior to any final decision by the County Council as upper-tier authority on the creation of a Strategic Authority.
- 1.5 To note the informal Devolution Programme Board will oversee discussions with Government, ensuring robust governance and stakeholder engagement by elected members throughout this process.

## 2. Executive Summary

- 2.1 On 16 December 2024, the Government published the Devolution White Paper. The paper sets out the most significant reforms to local government since the Local Government Act 2022.
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Government Act 1972. It indicated the Government's aim to reorganise and simplify the structures of councils in England by replacing county and district councils with unitary authorities (LGR – local government reorganisation) and devolve more powers and funding from national to local government primarily through strategic mayoral authorities covering one or several of the new unitary authorities (devolution).

- 2.2 Through the Oxfordshire Joint Leaders Committee and together with the Berkshire Prosperity Board and wider invitation to leaders from across the Thames Valley geography including Buckinghamshire and Swindon, Leaders and Chief Executives have been working to understand and develop a proposal in response to the Government's English Devolution White Paper.
- 2.3 This report seeks to note an Expression of Interest (EOI) will be made by the Oxfordshire County Council to Government. This is in response to the Government's devolution policy and seeks to position our region in the next round of devolution for the purpose of creating a Mayoral Strategic Authority (MSA).
- 2.4 By submitting the EOI (Appendix 1) Oxfordshire Councils are requesting the Secretary of State to engage with us on devolution of powers and functions. Our region aims to enter dialogue with Government to target regional economic growth working within a strategic partnership that focuses on promoting innovation, sustainability and prosperity. By providing collaborative regional governance this Council can provide a framework to promote inclusive growth for our area for the benefit and wellbeing of our residents.

## Implications & Impact Assessments

Implications	Commentary
<b>Finance</b>	<p>There are no direct financial implications arising from the submission of the Expression of Interest. As discussions with Government proceed the opportunity will arise to explore how growth in our economy could create significant social and economic uplift for our area and indeed, for the whole country. The Thames Valley is a positive contributor to Treasury.</p> <p>As discussions progress, we will need to keep under review whether any financial implications for the council develop.</p> <p>Michael Furness, Assistant Director of Finance (S151 Officer), 24 November 2025</p>
<b>Legal</b>	<p>The submission of an EOI to open discussions with Government on devolution is an executive decision of Oxfordshire County Council as the upper-tier authority. The Levelling Up and Regeneration Act 2023 allows for areas to collaborate to create new strategic authorities. The Act requires constituent councils to consent to devolution, however 'constituent council' is defined in the Act as including only upper-tier councils. Whilst this Council has participated in all discussions regarding devolution for</p>

	<p>Oxfordshire and the wider region, its role is to consider whether it endorses supports the decision by the County Council.</p> <p>The Executive has the authority to formulate the council’s overall policy objectives and priorities, which permits it to make this endorsement.</p> <p>The English Devolution White Paper sets out the Government’s intention that where the geographies of new Mayoral Strategic Authorities align with Police and Crime Commissioner and Fire and Rescue Authorities, Mayors will, by default, be responsible for those services. Where those boundaries do not currently align Government has said that it will look to align public sector boundaries to strategic authority boundaries.</p> <p>Through the English Devolution Bill, the Government will introduce a new bespoke duty for Strategic Authorities in relation to health improvement and health inequalities. Strategic Authorities will support partners in driving public service reform and the new devolution framework will set clearer expectations for Mayors’ roles in local health systems and in improving population health.</p> <p>Shiraz Sheikh, Monitoring Officer, 24 November 2025</p>			
Risk Management	Not applicable			
Impact Assessments	Positive	Neutral	Negative	Commentary
Equality Impact				<p>There are no immediate equalities implications arising from this report. However, the purpose of forming an MSA is to bring an all-inclusive growth strategy to the Thames Valley Region. A strategy that ensures no one is left behind in the ambition to bring economic growth.</p> <p>The expected benefits of devolution are to drive growth, enabling local leaders place more focus on inequality and living standards. An Equalities Impact Assessment will be developed against the different elements of devolution, as proposals progress.</p>
A Are there any aspects of the proposed decision, including how it is delivered or accessed, that could impact on inequality?		X		

<b>B</b> Will the proposed decision have an impact upon the lives of people with protected characteristics, including employees and service users?		X		There are no equalities implication arising from this report, however as the councils move to the transition phase of LGR, an equality impact assessment will be undertaken for each workstream to summarise any implications and the associated actions being taken to mitigate any negative impacts.
<b>Climate &amp; Environmental Impact</b>				There are no immediate sustainability implications arising from these decisions. Government has indicated it will give strategic authorities a meaningful role in planning for our future energy system, establishing heat network zoning in England and leading on local nature recovery. The detail of these various policies are to follow as the English Devolution and Community Empowerment Bill proceeds through Parliament.
<b>ICT &amp; Digital Impact</b>		X		N/A
<b>Data Impact</b>		X		N/A
<b>Procurement &amp; subsidy</b>		X		N/A
<b>Council Priorities</b>	N/A			
<b>Human Resources</b>	There are no immediate implications arising from submitting the EOI. Should the Executive make a later decision to proceed with devolution the staffing implications will be considered in full at that time.			
<b>Property</b>	N/A			
<b>Consultation &amp; Engagement</b>	<p>The EOI was developed collaboratively, with input from local authority Leaders and Chief Executives.</p> <p>The EOI is a strategic step to initiate formal discussions with Government, with public and stakeholder engagement planned should the Government accept the Council onto the devolution programme.</p> <p>Devolution is a collaborative process which will require continuous engagement and collaboration between local authorities and with residents, public sector institutions including the NHS, Police and Fire Authorities, businesses, and further and high education providers and other key local organisations and businesses.</p> <p>It is also vital that residents are involved at the earliest opportunity to inform and shape the process. It will not be possible to carry out resident engagement prior to submitting an EOI but it is expected that resident engagement would begin after Government agrees to further discussions. Insert details of consultation undertaken or to be taken</p>			

## Supporting Information

### 3. Background

#### **Devolution towards Evolution of Regional Economic Growth**

- 3.1 The principle of devolution is well-established, with Government aiming to redistribute political, social and economic power across England. With ambition now focused on universal coverage of Strategic Authorities across England following the English Devolution White Paper and the English Devolution and Community Empowerment Bill, Leaders have been meeting across our region to explore the opportunity for devolution.
- 3.2 The Government's vision, as set out in the English Devolution White Paper, is for all parts of England to be part of regional Strategic Authorities led by a regional Mayor. These authorities will drive growth, shape public services, and deliver strategic leadership in areas such as economic growth and sustainability, planning, skills, employment, and transport.
- 3.3 This move to devolving power to regions signals a significant step change in how UK economic growth will be delivered. It places significant shift in how local government needs to develop and deliver its economic growth strategies. This will shift relations from central government to local regional strategic partnerships, working with an elected Mayor within a Strategic Authority. It will require council Leaders, supported by their Chief Executives, to form new strategic regional partnerships to drive our ambitions for place based all-inclusive growth.

#### **A Thames Valley MSA For Collective Regional Growth**

- 3.4 Becoming a Mayoral Strategic Authority represents a significant opportunity for regions in England to drive inclusive growth and prosperity for communities and businesses. With new powers and investment, Mayoral Strategic Authorities can address strategic economic challenges and opportunities, in collaboration with local Leaders, business leaders and investors, with Government and increasingly, with other Strategic Authorities as part of the Council of regions. This is a new and exciting platform in our regional and local government landscape, creating systems based on collaboration and collective action that can work at scale to make connections, drive innovation and support growth.
- 3.5 However, failing to pursue this opportunity carries real risks. Areas that do not secure a strategic authority risk missing out on funding, influence, the ability to set their own strategic direction, and deliver against regional priorities. In an increasingly devolved landscape, inaction could result in diminished competitiveness, slower growth, and reduced leverage in regional and national decision-making around investment.

#### **Regional Economy**

- 3.6 Thames Valley economy is one of the most dynamic and globally connected in the United Kingdom contributing billions in Gross Value Added to the national economy
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each year. On a per-person basis, it ranks second only to London, a reflection of the area's powerful concentration of high-value industries and skilled workforce.

- 3.7 The Thames Valley Region prosperity has its roots in knowledge and innovation, driven by digital **technology, communications, life sciences**, biotech, and health **including creative and professional service** sectors that have flourished thanks to the regions connectivity and proximity to London and Heathrow Airport. Global companies have long chosen to locate in the region with recognised hubs for technology and business services. This includes fast growing sectors in pharmaceuticals, manufacturing, and digital.
- 3.8 This region's economy has a critical mass of science, learning, talent, intellect and inspiration. The region also has a culture of pushing boundaries, redefining leading edge, pioneering and entrepreneurship. The universities are powerhouses of knowledge and beacons of experimental excellence as indeed are many of the businesses located across the county.
- 3.9 The intellectual capacity of the region and talent emerging from the universities is driving the establishment of spin out businesses and the scale up of growing ones, contributing to an environment that promotes and nurtures commercialisation; a driving force for a new, science and knowledge led industrial revolution.

### **Regional Risk of Economic Decline**

- 3.10 Despite a track record of success, the Thames Valley economy has not been immune to the decline in productivity across the UK in recent years, suffering from underinvestment and increased global competition. In addition, continued prosperity brings challenges, including housing affordability, infrastructure constraints, and uneven growth across localities.
- 3.11 There are considerable challenges for residents and businesses in generating a future proof transport infrastructure that supports the region's economic growth is showing signs of struggling to cope with increased demand. Education and skill need to be developed on a regional collaborative basis to power capacity for economic growth.
- 3.12 This means this region needs to take a lead in ensuring sustainable housing and transport, promoting green technology, repowering the economy, developing the regional connectively and attracting inward investment. The region could do much more to benefit from the advantages generated through strategic growth planning and collaboration at a much greater scale that can be currently delivered by individual councils.
- 3.13 This places the Thames Valley under threat of seeing economic decline as businesses and inward investment risks diverting to regions that have clear joined up regional Growth Plans and unfragmented governance arrangements, selling the regions benefits to sectors and investors.
- 3.14 Areas that can deliver regional transportation connectivity, housing growth and other business support infrastructure such as skills training and wellbeing are better placed to secure investment.

### **The Opportunity**

- 3.15 There are substantial benefits in seeking devolution of powers. Devolved control over adult education and skills budgets allows authorities to better align training provision with the needs of local industries from digital technology and life sciences to creative industries, helping retain talent and businesses whilst ensuring inclusive access to opportunities.
- 3.16 Devolved powers and responsibility over **strategic transport, strategic housing and spatial planning will support planning at a wider regional level enabling** authorities to better target investment in deprived or underperforming areas, address housing affordability, promote green infrastructure and ensuring growth benefits reach all communities. A regional transport strategy would future proof the regions rail links, while improving access to Heathrow and London. Coordinated investment in rail, bus, and sustainable transport would reduce travel times, improve productivity and support the net zero agenda.
- 3.17 An enhanced ability to attract **private investment and innovation partnerships** would support the development of the innovation ecosystem and key sectors such as IT to stem the current exodus of UK innovation overseas and help to attract more overseas investment to the region. A science partnership could form a **knowledge-intensive growth region with a stronger national and international identity** capable of competing with major European economic clusters.
- 3.18 As a key driver of the UK economy, an MSA has the potential to scale up rapidly and deliver significant regional and national economic growth. Establishing an MSA will function as catalyst for growth to target funding and skills programmes where they are needed most, helping to reverse productivity decline and remove barriers to economic development.
- 3.19 Stronger coordination through an agreed MSA regional growth plan, influenced and led by local authorities, will stimulate a larger, integrated economy that can carry more weight in negotiations with Government, securing devolved funding and national infrastructure investment. It would also present a more compelling 'investment ready' proposition to global investors seeking a region that combines cutting-edge research with commercial capability.

## 4 Detail

### Expression of Interest Thames Valley Vision

- 4.1 The EOI emphasises the region's strengths in innovation and productivity and its readiness to enter discussions with Government for a possible MSA. Devolution will drive inclusive growth and unlock significant opportunities for local communities and the UK more broadly.
- 4.2 The Thames Valley EOI highlights:
- **Economic rationale:** The region has national excellence and/or international excellence in at least 5 of the 8 key business sectors highlighted in the Modern Industrial Strategy. The Strategic Authority would provide the framework that allows businesses to leveraging those sectors across a wider geography and create jobs. Our intent is to restore growth to pre-Covid levels of prosperity.

- **Collaborative governance:** There is a commitment to partnership working across constituent councils, with clear terms of reference and for the EOI to mark the start of wider stakeholder engagement across the region.
- **Strategic powers and funding:** Powers over transport, skills, housing, and economic development and the ability to provide these within a business ecosystem will lead to greater investment.
- **Place-based leadership:** Greater local control to deliver national policy objectives at local level has been shown to be successful in other established Strategic Authority areas. Adapting powers and functions to meet local needs strengthens local identity, accountability, and the ability to deliver tailored solutions for residents.

- 4.3 The EOI is the first stage towards devolution. Whilst it does not bind any Council to an MSA at this stage, it does indicate our readiness to engage further.
- 4.4 Oversight of the proposals will be through a Devolution Board made up of elected representatives from each participating Council.

### **Next Steps**

- 4.5 **Submission of the EOI** (subject to approval) to Government by 19 December 2025, followed by further engagement and refinement based on feedback from Leaders, Chief Executives, and stakeholders.
- 4.5 **Ongoing governance and oversight** via the Devolution Board, with regular updates to Executive and public consultation as the process evolves.
- 4.6 **Build the proposal** through regular engagement, agreeing our geography and the size and scale of the Strategic Authority based upon criteria set out in the Devolution White Paper as follows:
- **Scale:** Strategic Authorities should be of comparable size to existing institutions. The default assumption is for them to have a combined population of 1.5 million or above.
  - **Economies:** Strategic Authorities must cover sensible economic geographies with a particular focus on functional economic areas, reflecting current and potential travel-to-work patterns and local labour markets. It is likely that where travel to work areas are small and fragmented, Strategic Authorities will cover multiple travel to work areas.
  - **Contiguity:** Any proposed geography must be contiguous across its constituent councils (either now or with a clear plan to ensure contiguity in the future through agreed local government reorganisation).
  - **No 'devolution islands':** Geographies must not create devolution 'islands' by leaving areas which are too small to go it alone or which do not have natural partners.
  - **Delivery:** Geographies should ensure the effective delivery of key functions including Spatial Development Strategies, Local Transport Plans and Get Britain Working Plans.

- **Alignment:** The government will seek to promote alignment between devolution boundaries and other public sector boundaries.
- **Identity:** A vital element of successful devolution is the ability for local residents to engage with and hold their devolved institutions to account – and local identity plays a key role in this.

4.7 **Stakeholder engagement** with residents, businesses and public sector partners to explore devolution for our region.

4.8 **Finalise proposal** with further decisions made at key points by OCC Cabinet and Scrutiny.

## 5. **Alternative Options and Reasons for Rejection**

5.1 The White Paper is clear that the Government intends that all of England be devolved by default and is committed to ending the deals-based approach. The Government will also legislate for a ministerial directive, which will enable it to directly create Strategic Authorities in any places where local leaders in that region have not been able to agree how to access devolved powers. Therefore the “do nothing” option could mean Government legislating on our behalf for devolution.

## 6 **Conclusion and Reasons for Recommendations**

6.1 Opting to begin further discussions with Government on devolution would allow the Council to lead the definition of the strategic authority for our region. This will provide choice over the geography and the ability to determine the key priorities for our area.

6.2 Should this Council endorse a Mayoral Strategic Authority at a future meeting, it would have a seat at the Council of Nations and the Regions influencing government policy and ensuring local community voice is heard.

As set out under section 1, Recommendations, It is recommended that Executive:

- Endorse the benefits from the proposed devolution of powers and functions, and agree to continue building on the collaborative approach across the region to date;
- Endorse the Expression of Interest (EOI) to be submitted by Oxfordshire County Council as the upper-tier authority to Government, noting that the EOI is designed to proactively position our region for early consideration in the next wave of the Devolution Programme;
- Acknowledge the EOI as an initial invitation to Government, opening further dialogue and engagement, and not a decision to establish a Strategic Authority;

- Agree that a further report will be brought to Executive prior to any final decision by the County Council as upper-tier authority on the creation of a Strategic Authority; and
- Note the informal Devolution Programme Board will oversee discussions with Government, ensuring robust governance and stakeholder engagement by elected members throughout this process.

## Decision Information

<b>Key Decision</b>	No
<b>Subject to Call in</b>	Yes
<b>If not, why not subject to call in</b>	N/A
<b>Ward(s) Affected</b>	All

## Document Information

<b>Appendices</b>	
<b>Appendix 1</b>	Thames Valley Devolution Expression of Interest (EOI) Letter
<b>Background Papers</b>	None
<b>Reference Papers</b>	Background papers: English Devolution White Paper English Devolution and Community Empowerment Bill
<b>Report Author</b>	Ian Boll, Executive Director Place & Regeneration
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<b>Executive Director Approval (unless Executive Director or Statutory Officer report)</b>	Report of Executive Director