

This report is public	
Thames Valley Spatial Development Strategy (SDS) Development and Governance	
Committee	Executive
Date of Committee	13 July 2026
Portfolio Holder presenting the report	Deputy Leader - Planning and Enforcement, Councillor Chris Aramini-Brant
Date Portfolio Holder agreed report	Leader of the Council on behalf of Portfolio Holder 26 June 2026
Report of	Executive Director Place and Regeneration, Ian Boll

Purpose of report

To advise the Executive of the interim governance and working arrangements for the preparation of a Thames Valley Spatial Development Strategy (SDS).

1. Recommendations

The Executive resolves:

- 1.1 To note the interim governance arrangements for the Thames Valley Spatial Development Strategy explained in this report and at Appendix 1.
- 1.2 To instruct officers to request that the Council be formally co-opted as a 'partner authority' with Leader representation on the Spatial Development Strategy Partnership Board until such time that a 'Strategic Planning Board' is formally established.
- 1.3 To note that Executive Director Place and Regeneration will advise the Executive if the Council is not confirmed as a co-opted 'Partner Authority'.
- 1.4 To delegate to the Executive Director Place and Regeneration the authority to agree detailed working arrangements for the pre-inception development of the Spatial Development Strategy in consultation with the Assistant Director Law and Governance.

2. Executive Summary

- 2.1 Spatial Development Strategies (SDS's) are a new tier of the statutory Development Plan system. The Planning and Infrastructure Act 2025 re-introduces strategic planning at a level above Local Plans by amending the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004. Secondary legislation (regulations) is awaited for the establishment of statutory Strategic Planning

Boards and for the procedures to be followed in connection with the preparation, adoption and publication of a Spatial Development Strategy.

- 2.2 This report outlines the governance arrangements being presented to the Oxfordshire County Council's Cabinet meeting (14 July 2026) the day after this meeting of the Executive. These arrangements are for the period of time before regulations are introduced and include working arrangements for preparation of the SDS. The County Council's draft report is provided at Appendix 1. A further report to the Executive is likely to be required in the autumn once regulations and guidance have been published by the Government.
- 2.3 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.
- 2.4 In areas without mayoral strategic authorities, the responsibility for producing SDSs sits with non-mayoral foundation strategic authorities, or where they do not exist (as is presently the case for the Thames Valley), it sits with upper tier county councils and unitary authorities.
- 2.5 The partnership for the Thames Valley SDS is proposed to comprise the 'strategic planning authorities' across Oxfordshire and Berkshire. Section 12A of the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004 (as amended) defines a 'strategic planning authority' which includes an upper tier county council. It does not include a lower tier district council.
- 2.6 The proposed formal partnership is proposed to comprise Oxfordshire County Council and the Councils of Bracknell Forest, Reading, Slough, West Berkshire, Windsor & Maidenhead, Wokingham and Swindon.
- 2.7 The County Council's report states (para. 10), *'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 Reform in Oxfordshire has been completed. Moreover, other external stakeholders may also be engaged through co-opted or consultative arrangements'*.
- 2.8 The Executive is recommended to note the proposed arrangements but to seek confirmation that the Council will be co-opted as a 'Partner Authority' until such time that a 'Strategic Planning Board' is formally established. The intention of the partnership is to begin preparatory work on the SDS in earnest. As explained in the comments of the Head of Legal Services below, there is a need for clarity on the governance arrangements to help minimise the risk of later challenge to the process.

Implications & Impact Assessments

Implications	Commentary
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Finance	There are no financial implications arising from the governance and working arrangements. The Council's input will be resourced through existing service budgets. Kelly Wheeler, Finance Business Partner, 11 June 2026,
Legal	The principal legal risks arising are: 1. Ultra vires / governance risk: The report explains that the proposed arrangements are to enable preparatory work for the SDS ahead of the formal establishment of the Strategic Planning Board. There is a low risk that the shadow partnership arrangements could be perceived as exercising formal plan making functions prior to the establishment of statutory Strategic Planning Boards; 2. Procedural risk: interim arrangements may give rise to concerns that future statutory procedures (including for stakeholder engagement and consultation) have not been complied with; 3. Limited decision-making influence: there is an unavoidable risk that although co-option would allow the Council to participate, it will not confer formal voting or decision-making rights. There is therefore a risk that the Council contributes to a strategy which will ultimately bind local plan-making, without having legal control over its content; 4. Uncertainty / reform risk: due to on-going Local Government Reform (and subject to review of expected statutory instruments) any new unitary authority for the Cherwell area would become a formal partner. Their position on the SDS could depart from this Council's. These risks can be mitigated by: 1. maintaining a clear distinction between preparatory work and statutory decision making and ensuring that formal plan-making decisions are not taken until the Strategic Planning Board is established; 2. reviewing preparatory work undertaken in the context of secondary legislation and guidance when that becomes available to ensure legal compliance; 3. securing formal co-option with appropriate representation to maximise the Council's influence; 4. ensuring that local strategic priorities and evidence are consistently articulated and recorded throughout the process. Overall, while the proposed arrangements enable early engagement and influence, they place reliance on governance safeguards rather than statutory control, and these safeguards will need to be actively maintained to minimise legal risk. Denzil – John Turbervill, Head of Legal Services, 12 June 2026,

Risk Management	The main risk is the highlighted uncertainty about the co-opting of district councils into the partnership and the form of that co-opting. The recommendations therefore seek confirmation. The report to the County Council’s cabinet highlights the ‘lack of sign up to the partnership arrangements’ as a risk and, by way of mitigation, the need for common understanding and information sharing.			
	Celia Prado-Teeling, Performance Team Leader, 11 June 2026			
Impact Assessments	Positive	Neutral	Negative	Commentary
Equality Impact		x		There is no impact on equality as a direct consequence of this report. It is expected that the SDS will be accompanied by an Equalities Impact Assessment in due course. Celia Prado-Teeling, Performance & Insight Team Leader, 11 June 2026
A Are there any aspects of the proposed decision, including how it is delivered or accessed, that could impact on inequality?		x		As above
B Will the proposed decision have an impact upon the lives of people with protected characteristics, including employees and service users?		x		As above
Climate & Environmental Impact		x		There are no implications arising from this report. Assessing environmental impacts will be part of the SDS preparation process.
ICT & Digital Impact		x		N/A
Data Impact		x		The County Council’s report explains the proposed data sharing arrangements
Procurement & subsidy		x		The County Council’s report explains how procurement for SDS evidence would be overseen

Council Priorities	A Vision For Lasting Change 2025-2030 Priority 1: Economic Prosperity Priority 2: Community Leadership Priority 3: Environmental Stewardship Priority 4: Quality housing and place making
Human Resources	N/A
Property	N/A
Consultation & Engagement	Leader of the Council for Councillor Chris Aramini-Brant, Portfolio Holder – Planning & Enforcement

Supporting Information

3. Background

- 3.1 Spatial Development Strategies (SDSs) are new, high-level spatial plans looking ahead at least 20 years. Together with Local Plans and Neighbourhood Plans, they become part of the statutory Development Plan against which applications for planning permission are assessed. SDSs will set the framework for Local Plans which must then be in general conformity with them.
- 3.2 Spatial Development Strategies should set a positive vision for future growth and change at a sub-regional scale and provide a clear spatial framework for investment and growth, including for new housing. Their content should be genuinely strategic in nature and allow for more detailed issues to be considered and addressed through other parts of the Development Plan. The Government is targeting all areas of the country to have an examined SDS in place by mid-2029.
- 3.3 At the time of writing the final version of a new National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) is awaited which will advise more specifically on what an SDS should do. The draft version (December 2025) includes the following proposed requirements:
- a) set out a strategy for a sustainable pattern of growth covering a period of at least 20 years, including through the apportionment to local planning authorities in the strategy area of objectively assessed needs for housing and other uses that are best considered at a strategic scale for the duration of the plan period;
 - b) identify broad locations for strategic development including new settlements, major urban extensions, major cross-boundary development and key locations with the potential for new homes and jobs; such broad locations should extend over any large site allocations in adopted local plans;
 - c) support economic growth by providing a spatial framework for strategic investments and giving spatial expression to strategic elements of Local Growth Plans and the National Industrial Strategy;

- d) identify the general extent of areas established as Green Belt and broad locations where changes to Green Belt boundaries may need to be considered through local plan preparation, if necessary to meet the development needs of the strategy area;
- e) identifying broad locations for nature conservation and habitat enhancement, restoration and creation;
- f) set out the type, extent and broad location of strategic infrastructure needed to enable development and serve existing communities, including transport, social and waste infrastructure, utilities provision, flood risk management schemes and, where considered appropriate, the provision of minerals. The SDS should also make provision for infrastructure that is committed to in the 10 Year Infrastructure Strategy, sectoral spatial plans and any planned strategic infrastructure identified in local transport plans;
- g) use appropriate maps and diagrams to illustrate and communicate the strategy;
- h) provide a proportionate level of information on the mechanisms for delivering the strategy;
- i) monitor implementation and adopt a replacement no later than 10 years after the current version was adopted, or earlier:
 - i. if a strategic planning authority considers there are substantial inconsistencies with current national policies; or
 - ii. where changes to infrastructure are planned that are likely to have a significant impact on development and land use in the strategy area and which were not considered during the preparation of the existing spatial development strategy; or
 - iii. to respond to significant change or new evidence of needs, opportunities or development constraints.

3.4 The draft NPPF states that alterations to Spatial Development Strategies should be made at least every five years to reflect any changes to housing requirements for the Local Planning Authorities in the strategy area. It suggests that it may be possible to make limited alterations if they do not fundamentally change the overall spatial strategy.

3.5 A Government consultation paper (February 2026) on the SDS areas clarified that SDSs can identify broad locations for growth and development and the necessary infrastructure needed to support that growth. It stated that this may entail the re-distribution of housing need and other development needs between local planning authorities and may include specific policies for development or to be taken into account by Local Planning Authorities when preparing or updating their Local Plans.

3.6 It also made clear that SDSs are 'not larger Local Plans'. They cannot be site-specific nor can they allocate sites for development. That site-specific role is

preserved for local plans which will have to be in 'general conformity' with the SDS once it has been adopted. SDSs are expected to be succinct and not get into detail or locally specific issues.

4. Details

Governance and Working Arrangements

- 4.1 The County Council's report proposes a joint Thames Valley partnership to progress the pre-inception phase of work for the Thames Valley Spatial Development Strategy (SDS). Government grant funding has been made available to the Thames Valley area to support this early work with defined expectations for transparency and for monitoring and evaluation reporting. Bracknell Forest Council (on behalf of all authorities) would be the accountable body and host authority for any dedicated staff resource.
- 4.2 A Thames Valley SDS Partnership Board would be established 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.
- 4.3 A Chief Executive group would comprise 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.
- 4.4 A Programme Management Office / Strategic Planning Unit (hosted) is to be established - the operational team responsible for day-to-day delivery, commissioning and coordination and workstreams established.
- 4.5 The County Council's report highlights that undertaking pre-inception work now, the Thames Valley partnership would be 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.
- 4.6 Early joint working would also create a shared baseline and narrative for the SDS, including a statement of readiness and an initial "spatial portrait" of the area. The key issues, opportunities and constraints would be identified in the interest of seeking alignment with partners and clearer communication with communities and stakeholders.
- 4.7 Establishing these working arrangements now would strengthen relationships, improve risk management and provide an auditable platform for transition to the statutory board when it is constituted.

Local Context

- 4.8 The preparation of the SDS presents an opportunity to establish strategic spatial objectives for the Cherwell area for the longer-term having regard to wider, sub-regional needs, community consultation and evidence. Broad locations for future growth across the sub-region will need to be comparably tested. Environmental, Cherwell District Council

social and economic evidence specific to the Cherwell and wider Oxfordshire area will need to be considered. Examples will include the Oxfordshire Local Nature Recovery Strategy, the emerging review of the Oxfordshire Infrastructure Strategy, economic strategies and evidence about the needs of our urban centres.

- 4.9 Evidence can be expected to emerge from the Council's on-going engagement with the Oxfordshire Growth Commission (OGC) further to the publication of its interim report (December 2025). Similarly, work with Homes England's Advisory Team for Large [planning] Applications (ATLAS) in supporting the delivering of growth at Bicester will be insightful. The knowledge and expertise of services across the Council will be informative and coordinated through the Planning Policy team to ensure that the best interests of Cherwell are well represented.

5. Alternative Options and Reasons for Rejection

- 5.1 The Executive could decide not to seek formal co-opting as a 'partner authority' ahead of the establishment of a statutory Strategic Planning Board. However, it is considered to be in the best interests of Cherwell's communities to be as embedded as possible in the SDS process.

6. Conclusion and Reasons for Recommendations

- 6.1 Completing an SDS for the Thames Valley by mid-2029 will be challenging. Progressing early preparatory and informative work ahead of secondary legislation is sensible and the governance and working arrangements proposed in the County Council's report will support the process. However, there remains some uncertainty about the co-opting of district councils and whether the Leader will have a seat on the Partnership Board. It is therefore recommended that the Council seeks confirmation of its co-opted partnership status and representation.

Decision Information

Key Decision	N/A
Subject to Call in	Yes
If not, why not subject to call in	N/A
Ward(s) Affected	All

Document Information

Appendices	
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Appendix 1	Draft report to Oxfordshire County Council's Cabinet, 14 July 2026: Thames Valley Spatial Development Strategy (SDS) Development and Governance
Background Papers	None
Reference Papers	Draft NPPF (December 2025): https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/697b71c52ff8d10a830d5d4a/Draft_NPPF_December_2025.pdf Government consultation: Areas for Producing Spatial Development Strategies (February 2026): https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/areas-for-producing-spatial-development-strategies/areas-for-producing-spatial-development-strategies Oxford Growth Commission Interim Report (December 2025): https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/oxford-growth-commission-interim-report
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Executive Director Approval (unless Executive Director or Statutory Officer report)	Ian Boll, Executive Director Place & Regeneration, 11 June 2026