

Devolution – Expression of Interest: Thames Valley Mayoral Strategic Authority Expression of Interest

Committee considering report:	Council
Date of Committee:	27 November 2025
Portfolio Member:	Councillor Justin Pemberton
Date Portfolio Member agreed report:	14 November 2025
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Forward Plan Ref:	C4747

1 Purpose of the Report

- 1.1 This report seeks Council support for the Executive to agree to submit an Expression of Interest (EOI) to Government in response to the Government’s devolution policy. It is a stated Government policy intent that all regions in England benefit from devolution.
- 1.2 The submission of the EOI Thames Valley will not bind the Council but will enable it to engage with Government on devolution of powers and functions to target regional economic growth working within a strategic partnership that aims to bring prosperity. This will enable collaborative regional governance to enable this Council to support innovation, business growth and investment. The aim of devolution is to ensure inclusive growth by opening greater prospects for skilled jobs, affordable housing and connected places that add to the region’s future economic sustainability.

2 Recommendations

- 2.1 That Full Council is informed of the benefits from the proposed devolution of powers and functions, and agrees to continue building on the collaborative approach across the region to date
- 2.2 Note that the informal Devolution Board will oversee discussions with Government, ensuring robust governance and stakeholder engagement by elected members throughout this process.
- 2.3 That Full Council recommends that the Executive approves the Expression of Interest (EOI) to authorise the Council to submit this to Government, noting that the EOI is designed to proactively position the Thames Valley for early consideration in the next wave of the Devolution Programme.

- 2.4 That Full Council supports that a further report will be brought to Council and Executive prior to any final decision on the creation of a Strategic Authority.

3 Implications and Impact Assessment

Implication	Commentary
Financial:	<p>To date, each Berkshire Council has agreed a £10,000 contribution towards the devolution agenda. This has been met by the funds held by the Berkshire Prosperity Board.</p> <p>There are no direct financial implications arising from the submission of the Expression of Interest. If discussions with Government proceed the cost of establishing an MSA will be modelled and the opportunity will arise to explore how growth in the Thames Valley economy could create significant social and economic uplift for our area and the whole country. The Thames Valley is a positive contributor to Treasury.</p> <p>Devolution offers an opportunity to reset local government finances. In this context, the EOI submission seeks discussions with Government on developing innovative fiscal solutions to support investment into the Thames Valley Region. This reference to investment funding will also look to develop inward investment through the private sector and funding institutions, as part of any regional investment strategy.</p>
Human Resource:	<p>As the work devolves, there will be a requirement for additional resource supporting the development of a MSA and its strategic purpose. Therefore, a proposed resource plan will be submitted, subject to the EOI submission.</p>
Legal:	<p>The report seeks Executive approval to submit an EOI to open discussions with Government on devolution for our region. The Executive has the authority to discharge the function of the formulation of the council's overall policy objectives and priorities, which permits it to make this decision.</p>
Risk Management:	<p>The submission of an EOI does not present any significant risks and it is non-binding. There is a risk that not submitting the EOI will result in a lost opportunity to establish an MSA and benefits resulting from this as set out in the report.</p>

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	A risk associated with an MSA will be that while the Leaders of Council's will have a place on the MSA Board, the MSA and Mayor will have significant influence and have devolved powers. Some decisions of the MSA may not have the uniform support of all of the local authorities in the Thames Valley Region.			
Property:	The decision to submit an EOI does not have any direct property implications			
Policy:	The EOI submission does not bind the Council to any course of action and in itself it does not have policy implications. However, if with government support, the Council progresses an MSA, this will have significant policy implications especially in respect of supporting a prosperous and reliant West Berkshire			
	Positive	Neutral	Negative	Commentary
Equalities Impact:				
A Are there any aspects of the proposed decision, including how it is delivered or accessed, that could impact on inequality?		x		No direct impact but 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

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<p>B Will the proposed decision have an impact upon the lives of people with protected characteristics, including employees and service users?</p>		x		<p>No Direct Impact but an MSA supports proposals like Connect to Work and the Get Britain Working plan supporting people with protected characteristics being in work.</p>
<p>Environmental Impact:</p>		x		<p>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 is to follow.</p>
<p>Health Impact:</p>		x		<p>No immediate impact but the MSA will enable greater coordination of local government function with the NHS to support healthy lives</p>
<p>ICT Impact:</p>		x		<p>No direct impact.</p>
<p>Digital Services Impact:</p>		x		<p>No direct impact</p>
<p>Council Strategy Priorities:</p>		x		<p>The EOI submission does not bind the Council to any course of action and in itself the EOI does not have policy implications. However, if with government support, the Council progresses an MSA, this will have significant policy implications especially to meet Priority Area 5: A Prosperous and Resilient West Berkshire</p>
<p>Core Business:</p>		x		<p>No Direct impact although any decision to progress an MSA will have implications on capacity of the organisation to address other priorities.</p>

Data Impact:		x		A data sharing agreement will be in place
Consultation and Engagement:	<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>Devolution is primarily about giving power back from Central Government to local communities. It is therefore vital that residents are involved at the earliest opportunity to inform and shape the process. It has not been 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.</p>			

4 Executive Summary

- 4.1 The English Devolution White Paper 2024 set out the Government’s vision 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.
- 4.2 This report seeks approval to submit an Expression of Interest (EOI) to Government to establish a Mayoral Strategic Authority (MSA) through which there is a significant opportunity for regions in England to drive inclusive growth and prosperity for communities and businesses. With new powers and investment, MSAs 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.
- 4.3 There are substantial benefits from establishing an MSA for the Thames Valley including long-term devolved investment funds to support control over adult education and skills budgets. Also, devolved powers and responsibility over strategic transport, housing and spatial planning to better target, address housing affordability, promote green infrastructure and ensuring growth benefits reach all communities.
- 4.4 An MSA would provide an enhanced ability to attract private investment and innovation to support the development key sectors such as IT and life sciences to deliver a growth region with a stronger national and international capability of competing with major European economic clusters. It would offer stronger coordination and negotiating power with Central Government to secure devolved funding and national infrastructure investment.

- 4.5 For West Berkshire, MSA will have significant positive impacts on its businesses and residents. The Council responsibilities will remain unchanged but will be impacted by the MSAs strategies and policies. The Council will be able to influence the MSA in relation to economic growth, skills development, spatial planning, housing including affordable housing, transport, and the environment as the Leader will have a place on the MSA Board.

5 Supporting Information

Introduction

- 5.1 In December 2024, the UK Government issued the English Devolution White Paper [Devolution White Paper](#) outlining a proposal for Strategic Authorities as a mechanism to rebuild and reform local government. Subsequently, the [Devolution Bill](#) enables power to be decentralised from Central Government to local authorities. This shift is intended to foster local growth, improve public services, and enhance democratic accountability.
- 5.2 Strategic Authorities must serve a population of at least 1.5 million and there are three tiers of Strategic Authorities proposed:
- (a) Foundation Strategic Authorities – Non-mayoral, with limited powers and funding access.
 - (b) Strategic Authorities – Mayoral-led (MSA) with significant powers and funding.
 - (c) Established Strategic Authorities – Proven mayoral authorities eligible for enhanced powers and funding.
- 5.3 This proposal is to support the submission of a EOI to Central Government for the establishment of a Thames Valley Mayoral Strategic Authority (MSA) to unlock devolved powers and resources that enable local leaders to shape policies to reflect local priorities and aspirations. While Buckinghamshire has opted out of discussions on a Mayoral Strategic Authority (it currently has a ‘combined authority’ arrangement covering Buckinghamshire only), Berkshire and Oxfordshire councils have been engaged in discussions about advancing a Mayoral Strategic Authority (MSA) proposal while retaining the option for Swindon to be included.

Devolution towards Evolution of Regional Economic Growth

- 5.4 The principle of devolution is well-established, with Government aiming to redistribute political, social and economic power across England. The Government’s ambition is 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 the Thames Valley Region to explore the opportunity for devolution.

- 5.5 The Government's vision for all parts of England to be part of regional Strategic Authorities led by a regional Mayor to drive growth, shape public services, and deliver strategic leadership in areas such as economic growth and sustainability, planning, skills, employment, and transport.
- 5.6 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.

Regional Economy

- 5.7 The Thames Valley economy is one of the most dynamic and globally connected in the United Kingdom contributing billions in Gross Value Added (GVA) to the national economy 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.
- 5.8 The Region's prosperity has its roots in knowledge and innovation, driven by digital technology, communications, life sciences, biotech, defence 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.
- 5.9 The 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. 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

- 5.11 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.
- 5.12 There are considerable challenges for residents and businesses in generating a future proof transport infrastructure that supports the region's economic growth which is showing signs of struggling to cope with increased demand. Education and skills need

to be developed on a regional collaborative basis to power capacity for economic growth.

- 5.13 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. 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.

A Thames Valley MSA for Collective Regional Growth

- 5.14 Becoming a Mayoral Strategic Authority represents a significant opportunity for regions in England to drive inclusive growth. 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 platform in the 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.
- 5.15 There are substantial benefits for the Thames Valley, in creating a Thames Valley Regional MSA approach. Long-term devolved investment funds will support devolved control over adult education and skills budgets which would allow the authorities to better to align training provision with the needs of local industries, from digital technology and life sciences to creative industries helping retain talent and businesses whilst helping to ensure inclusive access to opportunities.
- 5.16 Devolved powers and responsibility over strategic transport, 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 could strengthen east–west 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.
- 5.17 An enhanced ability to attract private investment and innovation partnerships would support the development of the innovation ecosystem and key sectors such as IT and life sciences in order to stem the current exodus of UK innovation overseas and also help to attract more overseas investment to the region. Science parks and universities with the regions globally connected business base could form a knowledge-intensive growth region with a stronger national and international capable of competing with major European economic clusters.
- 5.18 There is the potential to scale up rapidly and deliver significant regional and national economic growth. Establishing an MSA will act 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.

- 5.19 Stronger coordination between the MSA local authorities and Central Government will stimulate a larger, integrated economy that can carry more weight in negotiations with Whitehall, 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.
- 5.20 Consolidating these strategic functions currently spread across multiple councils will reduce duplication, improve decision-making, and create a single, accountable leadership structure that gives confidence to investors and our public sector partners.

What this means for West Berkshire Council

- 5.21 For West Berkshire, the establishment of the Thames Valley MSA with the benefits set out above, will have significant positive impact on its businesses and residents. The Council responsibilities will remain unchanged but will be influenced by the strategies and policies of the MSA. The Council will be able to influence the MSA as the Leader will have a place on the MSA Board (voting rights TBC). All regions (to be defined by Government) will be expected to produce a Spatial Development Strategy which will provide the blueprint for development and infrastructure growth (led by MSAs where in place). West Berkshire will be able to influence this through its place on the MSA Board
- 5.22 As part of the MSA Board, the Council will also be able to influence the following:
- Policies and decisions around **Housing development** including Affordable Housing
 - Strategies to deliver **Growth** supported by funding for infrastructure delivery
 - **The duty to improve health and to reduce health inequalities.** Greater coordination between partner agencies – especially important for Adult and Children's services, community safety, to secure joined up approaches and secure funding.
 - **Thames Valley Economic Development and regeneration strategies** – Innovation, sector development and new business growth – marketing, lobbying powers and access to funding
 - **Skills Development** – Funding for Joined up skills development programmes to meet business need. This is more coordinated and effective delivered at level greater than West Berkshire Council can do individually.
 - **Transport and Local Infrastructure** – Investment in Transport and Roads through funding secured by the MSA
 - **Environment and Climate Change** – Energy and Nature Recovery

The Expression of Interest Thames Valley Vision

5.23 The EOI (Appendix 1) builds on discussions between local authorities in the Thames Valley to date. It emphasises the region's strengths in innovation and productivity and its readiness to enter discussions with Government for a possible Mayoral Strategic Authority. Devolution will drive inclusive growth and unlock significant opportunities for local communities and the UK more broadly.

5.24 The Thames Valley EOI highlights:

- **Economic rationale:** The region has several key business sectors highlighted in the Modern Industrial Strategy. The Strategic Authority would provide the framework that allows businesses to leverage 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.

5.258 The EOI is the first stage towards devolution. Whilst it does not bind any Council to a Mayoral Strategic Authority at this stage, it does indicate our readiness to engage further. If the Council is to proceed further, Council and the Resources and Place Scrutiny Committee will be engaged at future key decision points to ensure we are providing the right devolution framework for our region.

5.26 Oversight of the proposals will be through an informal Devolution Programme Board made up of The Leaders from each Council interested in pursuing devolution and supported by their Chief Executives.

Process and Engagement

5.27 The EOI was developed collaboratively, with input from local authority Leaders and Chief Executives and is supported by a robust economic narrative and evidence base.

5.28 The EOI is a strategic step to initiate formal discussions with Government, with further public and stakeholder engagement planned before any final decision.

Next Steps

- Submission of the EOI to Government by 19 December 2025, followed by further engagement and refinement based on feedback from Leaders, Chief Executives, and stakeholders.
- Ongoing governance and oversight via the Devolution Programme Board, with regular updates to Councils and public consultation as the process evolves.
- Build the proposal through regular engagement, agreeing the geography and the size and scale of the Strategic Authority based upon criteria set out in the Devolution White Paper
- Stakeholder engagement with residents, businesses and public sector partners to explore devolution for our region.
- Finalise proposal with further decisions made at key points by Executive and Scrutiny / Council

6 Other options considered

6.1 The White Paper is clear that the Government intends that all of England to 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. This is not a recommended option.

7 Conclusion

7.1 The EOI is not binding on the Council, however it does present the opportunity to open further discussions with Government on devolution to drive significant economic and social benefits. The region stands to gain enhanced powers, financial resources, greater strategic control and improved infrastructure, as well as the ability to deliver more responsive public services.

8 Appendices

Appendix 1: Proposed EOI

Appendix 2: Current list of MSAs

Appendix 3: Examples of powers and funds devolved to MSAs

Background Papers:

[Devolution White Paper](#)

Subject to Call-In: Yes: No:

- The item is due to be referred to Council for final approval
- Delays in implementation could have serious financial implications for the Council
- Delays in implementation could compromise the Council's position
- Considered or reviewed by one of the Council's Scrutiny Committees or associated Task Groups within the preceding six months
- Item is Urgent Key Decision
- Report is to note only

Wards affected: All

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