

Slough Borough Council

Meeting:	Cabinet
Date:	15 December 2025
Subject:	Thames Valley Mayoral Strategic Authority - Expression of Interest
Lead Member:	Leader of the Council, Councillor Smith
Chief Officer:	Will Tuckley, Chief Executive
Contact Officer:	Sonia Khan, Director, Strategy, Change and Resident Engagement
Ward(s):	All
Key Decision:	Yes
Exempt:	No
Decision subject to Call In:	Yes
Appendices:	A – Thames Valley Devolution EOI Letter

1. Summary and Recommendations

- 1.1 This report updates Cabinet on plans to submit an Expression of Interest (EOI) to Government for the inclusion of a Thames Valley Mayoral Strategic Authority (MSA) within the Devolution Priority Programme, and provides an opportunity for Council to consider how devolution arrangements could best provide benefit for the residents of Slough.

Recommendations:

Cabinet is recommended to:

- Note the update on preparations to submit an EOI to Government for a Thames Valley Mayoral Strategic Authority [section 3].
- Endorse the Council's expression of interest to be part of a Thames Valley Mayoral Strategic Authority, as agreed by Full Council on 27th November.

Reason:

The EOI presents the opportunity to open up 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. The EOI is non-binding, but it will be important for Slough's leaders to ensure that devolution arrangements deliver tangible benefits for the future of Slough and its residents.

Commissioner Review

“Commissioners note the report and support the council taking a strategic focus and considering the wider benefits that can come from devolution.”

2. Report

Introductory paragraph

- 2.1 In February SBC’s Cabinet, in response to the English Devolution White Paper, committed to work positively with partners, all elected members and other stakeholders to develop proposals for devolution, at pace. The English Devolution and Community Empowerment Bill is now going through the parliamentary process to enable amendments to existing legislation to create a default framework to include new powers to enhance the offer for devolved areas across England.
- 2.2 Leaders and CEOs from Berkshire, Oxfordshire and Swindon Local Authorities have been meeting regularly to discuss potential devolution to the area.
- 2.3 At a joint meeting of the Oxfordshire Leaders Joint Committee & Berkshire Prosperity Board on 25th September, Leaders agreed to brief their respective Council members on the option to be included in the government’s devolution programme, and, subject to general support from their members, to subsequently seek endorsement through their Council’s formal governance processes to an expression of interest to join the government’s devolution programme.
- 2.4 This report was discussed by Full Council on 27th with Members agreeing to the above recommendations.

3 Background

3.1 Devolution towards Evolution of Regional Economic Growth

- 3.1.1 The principle of devolution is well-established, with Government aiming to redistribute political, social and economic power across England. In its English Devolution White Paper and the English Devolution and Community Empowerment Bill, the Government has expressed an ambition focused for universal coverage of Strategic Authorities across England.
- 3.1.2 Leaders across Berkshire, Oxfordshire and Swindon have been meeting to explore the opportunity for devolution to the Thames Valley.
- 3.1.3 The English Devolution and Community Empowerment Bill, if enacted, will create a new category of strategic authority. There are proposed to be three types of strategic authority: foundation, mayoral and established mayoral. 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.
- 3.1.4 There are 3 current main routes to becoming a Strategic Authority in England. The Bill proposes to add a fourth route:

1. Councils may come together to form a locally-led proposal to establish a new Combined Authority or Combined County Authority for their area.
2. The Secretary of State may propose the establishment of new Combined Authorities or Combined County Authorities for areas. This proposal would require consent from local places.
3. The Secretary of State may invite a single local authority to become a non-mayoral foundation Strategic Authority (SFSA). This would happen if a situation arose where it proved challenging for a Combined Authority or Combined County to be established across a particular area at this stage of its devolution journey and would be an interim arrangement.
4. The Bill, if enacted, will introduce a new route which will enable the Secretary of State to establish new Strategic Authorities or expand existing institutions without the consent of local areas. This power is expected to be used on a limited basis where other routes have been exhausted.

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.

3.2 A Thames Valley MSA for Collective Regional Growth

- 3.2.1 Becoming a Mayoral Strategic Authority represents a significant opportunity for regions in England to drive inclusive growth and prosperity for communities and businesses.
- 3.2.2 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.
- 3.2.3 However, failing to pursue this opportunity carries real risks. Areas that do not secure a mayoral 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.

3.3 Opportunities for Slough and the rest of Berkshire

- 3.3.1 It is hoped that participation in a Thames Valley MSA, and the devolution of powers and funding, will support SBC in the delivery of some its key strategic ambitions for the town:
 - Enhancing skills provision and supporting inclusive growth.
 - Unlocking land for further housing and better utilisation of the grey belt for homes and employment creation.

- Investment in, and the acceleration of, the regeneration of Slough, including: the revitalisation of town centre; the development of a new model for low-density, sustainable urban development; the innovative redevelopment of public housing-stock and the maximisation of the potential benefits of Heathrow growth.

3.3.2 Despite a track record of success, Berkshire's 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.

3.3.2 The collaboration through the Berkshire Prosperity Board of the six Berkshire unitary authorities has been a great success, however, the fragmented governance structure of six unitary authorities and the centralisation of powers and funding means that Berkshire has historically not benefitted from the advantages generated through strategic planning and collaboration at scale.

3.3.3 There are substantial benefits for Berkshire, and therefore the UK economy, in creating a Thames Valley Regional MSA approach with strong connection to the priorities that have been agreed by the Berkshire Prosperity Board.

3.3.4 Long-term devolved investment funds will support devolved control over adult education and skills budgets which would allow the 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 helping to ensure inclusive access to opportunities.

3.3.5 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.

3.3.6 An enhanced ability to attract private investment and innovation partnerships would support the development of the innovation ecosystem and key sectors such as IT in order to stem the current exodus of UK innovation overseas and also help to attract more overseas investment to Berkshire. Its science parks and the University of Reading (with Berkshire's globally connected business base, the partnership could form a knowledge-intensive growth region with a stronger national and international capable of competing with major European economic clusters.

3.3.7 As a key driver of the UK economy, Berkshire has the potential to scale up rapidly and deliver significant regional and national economic growth. Establishing an MSA will act as catalyst for growth allowing Berkshire to target funding and skills programmes where they are needed most, helping to reverse productivity decline and remove barriers to economic development.

3.3.8 The opportunities need to be considered alongside the opportunity costs and risks of participating in the Thames Valley MSA. These will need to be established clearly before final approval of the creation of the MSA. Slough has an active and dynamic

local voluntary and community sector and business base. They will play a key role in ensuring that local benefits are secured from the economic growth that is expected through devolution. The Council will need to ensure that there is an appropriate interface between local partnerships and new engagement mechanisms established as part of the MSA. The Council has previously identified the opportunity of being part of London. There are however no immediate opportunities to progress this opportunity as outlined in the Alternative Options considered.

3.3.9 In order to secure the opportunities outline above, the Council will need to ensure that current work on local economic development focuses on key groups facing economic inequality and is aligned to devolution plans. The groups are summarised in the Equality Impact Assessment section of this report. Local economic development actions will need to include:

- Pathways to work
- Local business development
- Tackling health inequalities
- Partnership working with the voluntary and community sector and business sector

3.4 **Expression of Interest – Vision for the Thames Valley**

3.4.1 The EOI and supporting evidence base (Appendix 1) builds on these discussions. 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.

3.4.2 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 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 eco-system 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.

3.4.4 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, Full Council Cabinet and The Corporate Improvement and Scrutiny Committee will be engaged at future key decision points to ensure we are providing the right devolution framework for our region.

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

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

3.4.7 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 Programme Board, with regular updates to Cabinet/Council and public consultation as the process evolves.
- **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.
- **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 Cabinet and Council, with input from Corporate Improvement Scrutiny Committee as appropriate.

3.5 Alternative options

3.5.1 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.

3.5.2 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.

3.5.3 Should this Council later consent to a Mayoral Strategic Authority, it would give a seat at the Council of Nations and the Regions influencing government policy and ensuring local community voice is heard.

3.5.4 In its February Cabinet Paper, SBC also considered alternative possible geographies the council could explore as part of a devolution arrangement – including the possibility of a West-London focussed approach. It is the view of the council’s leadership that the case for a Thames Valley MSA is both economically compelling and significantly more practicable, and therefore should be prioritised at this time.

3.5.6 Furthermore, two recent surveys - the first commissioned by Boston Consulting Group, the second by SBC – have highlighted that more residents identify Slough as feeling more like a part of Berkshire, than a part of Greater London:

	BCG Survey (252 residents)	SBC Survey (502 residents)
A part of Berkshire	47%	72%
A part of Greater London	22%	10%
A part of Buckinghamshire	13%	3%
A part of Oxfordshire	3%	1%
A part of Surrey	3%	0%
None of these	11%	11%
Don’t know	1%	3%

3.6 Local Government Reorganisation (LGR)

3.6.1 In addition to Devolution, SBC committed in its Cabinet paper in February to work with partners to develop LGR proposals in line with the criteria laid out in the English Devolution White Paper. The White Paper had made reference to smaller unitaries being required to develop proposals, and SBC’s population of 167,359 is considerably smaller than the Government’s preferred size of 500,000 people.

3.6.2 However, the Government's focus so far has been on two-tier areas, and there has been no invitation to submit proposals from Government. There was also no funding allocated for Berkshire when the Government announced the support it was providing to support councils in the development of their proposals.

3.6.3 SBC has therefore taken the decision to pause work on the development of LGR proposals in order to focus on the opportunities provided by devolution, while maintaining a watching brief on developments in other parts of the country.

3.7 Engagement and consultation

3.7.1 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.

3.7.2 Devolution is primarily about giving power back to local communities. It is therefore vital that residents are involved at the earliest opportunity to inform and shape the process. The requirements for consultation and engagement are set out in existing legislation and proposed to be amended depending on whether the proposal is locally led or not. Under the Bill it is proposed that for locally led proposals, authorities consult constituent councils and other persons as appropriate prior to submission of proposals.

3.7.3 The Council plans for consultation are aligned to the timeline agreed with other Thames Valley Councils. Based on this timeline, consultation is due to take place after discussions with Government in spring 2026 and prior to a final proposal being submitted in summer/ autumn 2026.

4. Implications of the Recommendation

4.1 Financial implications

4.1.1 There are no direct financial implications arising from the submission of the Expression of Interest. If further work is necessary across the Thames Valley to develop more detailed submissions, any cost incurred will need to be accompanied by an appropriate funding strategy, approval through the Council's decision-making process and governance on how any shared costs will be approved, managed and monitored.

4.1.2 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.

4.1.3 Devolution and Local Government Reorganisation offer 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.

4.1.4 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 a resource plan will be submitted, subject to the EOI submission.

4.2 *Legal implications*

4.2.1 Local Democracy, Economic Development and Construction Act 2009 sets out the current framework for establishing new combined authorities and combined county authorities. This permits one or more authorities to submit proposals to the Secretary of State on the establishment of a combined authority. At present arrangements are agreed on a case by case basis. The English Devolution and Community Empowerment Bill contains amendments to the 2009 Act simplifying the devolution framework and the process for locally led proposals. It also adds in a Secretary of State directed approach where this is no locally led proposal.

4.2.2 The Bill is progressing through the parliamentary process. Some of the detail on devolution is reserved to statutory instruments which have not yet been produced and statutory guidance. At present it is proposed that the following functions will be performed by statutory authorities:

- Transport and local infrastructure, with the strategic authority being the local transport authority.
- Skills and employment support.
- Housing and strategic planning – powers similar to the Mayor of London.
- Economic development, growth and regeneration.
- Public health and wellbeing.
- Public safety, however this depends on whether the geographic area of the police and fire authority replicate the strategic authority.

4.3 *Risk management implications*

4.3.1 As noted in section 3.5.1, the Government is legislating 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. Not participating in the EOI and subsequent discussions with Government, could result in an unfavourable settlement being imposed upon the council, without its consent. Active participation in discussions presents the best opportunity to ensure devolution arrangements are of most benefit to Slough's residents,

4.3.2 Further risk management assessments will need to be undertaken following discussions with Government before any final decision is made.

4.4 *Environmental implications*

4.4.1 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.

4.5 *Equality implications*

4.5.1 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 across the region.

- 4.5.2 Expected benefits of devolution are that it will drive growth, enabling local leaders to place more focus on inequality and living standards. An Equalities Impact Assessment will be developed against the different elements of devolution, as proposals progress. This will be informed by the Council's identification of key equality groups who are economically disadvantaged in its [Poverty Profile](#) published online in June 2025. Groups include families with dependent children, women, Asian groups. The recent Index of Deprivation published in 2025 identifies the areas where there are inequalities.
- 4.5.3 Through the English Devolution and Community Empowerment 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.

5. **Background Papers**

None