

Areas for producing spatial development strategies

Thames Valley Chamber of Commerce SDS Submission

Completed via online survey, 25th March 2026

Summary

The government is committed to getting Britain building again. This paper forms part of a series of working papers on different aspects of planning reform, designed to inform further policy development and implementation in collaboration with the wider sector.

This paper seeks views on a series of proposed geographies over which spatial development strategies (SDS) should be produced. The geographies proposed in this paper are intended specifically for strategic planning purposes. The Government recognises the value in aligning strategic planning with devolution geographies. Where mayoral devolution arrangements already exist, or will be implemented from April 2026, these are the most appropriate footprints on which to prepare spatial development strategies.

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Questions

Which SDS area(s) are you interested in?

Group 3: Bracknell Forest, Buckinghamshire, Oxfordshire, Reading, Slough, Swindon, West Berkshire, (Royal Borough of) Windsor and Maidenhead and Wokingham.

Do you agree with the proposed SDS area (where one is provided)? If so, please explain the strengths of the proposal as you see them.

Yes we support the proposed SDS area that covers the - established - function economic geography of the Thames Valley - including Berkshire. (incorporating the six Unitary Authorities of Bracknell Forest, Reading, Royal Borough of Windsor and Maidenhead, Slough, West Berkshire and Wokingham), Buckinghamshire, Oxfordshire and Swindon.

This - Thames Valley - area is the long established boundary of TVCC, the only accredited Chamber of Commerce for Berkshire, Buckinghamshire, Oxfordshire, and Swindon and one of the largest of the 51 Accredited Chambers of Commerce in the British Chambers of Commerce network (see: <https://www.thamesvalleychamber.co.uk/about-us/>). We serve over 4000 active international trade customers and members, one of the largest representations of major multinational employers and international trading SMEs in the British Chamber of Commerce network As the independent voice of business for the region (and proposed SDS geography) we believe we also have much to offer/contribute to shaping its priorities and we look forward to the opportunity of playing a key, central, part in it future and whatever structure/Board is set-up.

There is evidential strength, over many decades, that the combined Thames Valley geography works for business. For the reasons we outline in our annual Business Manifesto (see: <https://www.thamesvalleychamber.co.uk/business-manifesto/>) the Thames Valley is, and will continue to be, a significant driver of regional and national growth, capable of delivering - at pace - the growth targets and productivity ambition/s set-out, by government, in key statements such as the Industrial Strategy and NHS Ten-Year plan.

We believe a SDS that mirrors the Chamber's geography is correct for business and understood by business (locally, regionally and, crucially, internationally). For the reasons outlined below, the proposed geography would provide the opportunity to deliver a unified regional vision to accelerate economic growth, innovation, trade potential and inward investment; stronger place-based decision making; a coordinated skills/workforce strategy and a single authoritative voice aligning with the region-wide approach the Chamber has been delivering/supporting through our work very effectively (see also: Why the Thames Valley - <https://www.thamesvalleychamber.co.uk/inward-investment/why-the-thames-valley/>).

In addition to the above comments, we have consulted with TVCC's senior membership (see: <https://www.thamesvalleychamber.co.uk/our-voice/>) and provide a summary of opinion as to the strengths of the proposal as we currently see them and based on the information before us as a Chamber network:

Submission One - academia (Buckinghamshire)

We are pleased to express its strong support for the development of a Thames Valley Mayoral Strategic Authority (and the proposed SDS area). As a university deeply embedded in the economic, social and skills landscape of the Thames Valley, we see first-hand the region's enormous potential, as well as the growing need for a stronger, more coherent strategic framework to unlock that potential. The Thames Valley is one of the UK's most productive and innovative economic regions, yet its ability to plan, coordinate and compete at scale is currently constrained by fragmented governance structures.

The proposed would provide:

- A unified regional vision to accelerate economic growth, innovation and inward investment.
- Stronger place based decision making to ensure infrastructure, transport, housing, and public services keep pace with the needs of residents and employers.
- A coordinated skills and workforce strategy, enabling universities, colleges, and employers to align provision, address shortages, and support inclusive growth across all communities.
- A single, authoritative voice for the region in national and international fora, enhancing competitiveness and strengthening relationships with major sectors including health, aviation, technology, creative industries, and the green economy.

We are committed to working collaboratively with TVCC and Thames Valley partners to drive shared prosperity, nurture talent, and ensure our region remains a powerhouse of innovation and opportunity.

We believe the proposed is a necessary and timely step toward achieving these ambitions. We therefore fully support this proposal and look forward to contributing to the next phase of development.

Submission two - small business (Swindon)

The proposed SDS areas makes perfect sense as it is logical and based on the economic geography of the Thames Valley. Strengthening the links between Swindon-Oxford-Milton Keynes makes a lot of sense, and its certainly the preferred perspective as Swindon looks east - into the Thames Valley - as a driver of the towns future growth and prosperity rather than elsewhere (i.e. southwest).

Submission three - academia (Berkshire)

We do agree with the proposed SDS area – this is the most coherent and best understood by people, businesses and other organisations of what the Thames Valley constitutes, reflecting the geography of the TVCC and collaboration between higher education institutions.

Submission four - large multi-national business (HQ Berkshire based / wider UK operations)

The proposed SDS area sounds like a positive development, and it seems that, despite the fact that the SDS footprint is different from the (current proposed combined authority footprint - which appears to exclude Buckinghamshire), the proof points and careful arguments that are used to support devolution in the Thames Valley can be used here.

The success of TVCC in bringing together businesses in the same (proven) geography to explore commonalities and speak powerfully with one voice is another strong argument.

Submission five - not-for-profit social enterprise (Berkshire)

The Thames Valley (as defined above) is a strong geographic and economic force for business and innovation. The diverse cultural, urban, rural and infrastructure issues currently tackled separately would be better addressed under a larger shared vision that falls within a previously and in some cases still very much used (and understood) 'Thames Valley' footprint. Borders between Buckinghamshire and Berkshire have caused practical and fiscal issues for many years and the proposed SDS area boundary will facilitate a reduction in (false political) borders and a more understandable locality for residents and business (and investors alike).

As a business operating across the six Berkshire Unitary Authorities, Buckinghamshire, Oxfordshire and Swindon this new geography makes good sense and will actively increase business connectivity, reduce bureaucracy and encourage growth.

Submission six - academia (Berkshire based, but serving inter/national client base of predominantly in-work-based students)

We agree with the proposed area. This SDS will provide a more coherent and coordinated area for regional and local investment, economic growth, and social value thereby developing a thriving and more successful 'Greater Thames Valley', which in turn provides benefits nationally through its unique geographic position as an effect 'gateway' for national and international prosperity.

Submission seven - small business (Buckinghamshire)

Yes agreed for Bucks (to be included in a greater 'Thames Valley' SDS area. It provides a degree of certainty and accountability (i) to meet their housing needs; (ii) co-ordinate the provision of strategic infrastructure; (iii) grow their economies, and; (iv) improve the environment and climate resilience.

Existing housing accounts for 20% of the UK's total greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions. So, it is imperative that future new builds are subject to a higher standard of building regs when it comes to heating and insulation. This not only addresses net zero and local environmental concerns, but will have a major impact on energy security. My hope is that the a newly established SDS has the teeth to impose stricter controls at the planning stage.

Further, it is important to look at the cost implications spread across the full 20 years and not just up-front investment. This should look at total cost of occupation and ongoing maintenance, especially with regard to social housing. SDS's should consider additional and relevant HMG schemes like the warm homes plan to ensure all dots are connected and factor in social, economic and environmental Key Performance Indicators annually to track financial, social and environmental impact.

Submission eight - small business (Oxfordshire)

We agree with the proposed SDS area because:

- It is of sufficient size (population, local administration, wealth) to be capable of effecting change and there is sufficient area over which change can be planned.

- It includes a coherent economic, service and transport infrastructure.
- Whilst it is a diverse area of large towns, smaller urban centres and rural communities, there is sufficient commonality of economic base and integration or symbiosis between urban and rural, that, subject to ensuring understanding of diversity and engagement with communities, a strategy for development and growth can be produced which brings wide benefits.
- It is of a scale to stand sufficiently above corresponding roles of local authorities to avoid duplication and conflict.
- It is of sufficient scale, e.g., GVA, or population and key towns, to have credibility with Government, neighbouring SDS areas and national and regional bodies.
- Further, the question of size and boundaries is important. Perhaps more important are the measures to make planning and delivery at scale to work.

Criteria for success (include):

- Effective partnership working (including embedding engagement with the business community / accredited Chamber - TVCC - in all stages of development).
- Clear leadership able to cross political, geographic and sectoral boundaries and to build ownership of a strategy.
- Strategy with shared objectives for the good of all, relinquishing of local agendas and “red lines” and of too many supplementary, special case objectives.
- Comprehensive systems for engagement of communities and communities of interest.
- Good governance – I.e. effective, streamlined decision making, unencumbered by intensive bureaucracy, but aligned to meet strategic outcomes.
- Comprehensive and sound data, and to include capacity to understand granular diversity of communities, business sectors, etc.
- Support team of sufficient capacity and expertise, and with first loyalty to the SDS.
- Willing sharing of resources, data, expertise by local authorities.
- Enough powers and pooled or devolved resources to attract the parties and effort required to make it work.

(At this time) it is not certain what the Board membership proposals are but there is a need to ensure that the voices of business, transport infrastructure, health, academia etc etc are (fully) heard. (This could) be provided by direct membership.