

Vale of White Horse's response to MHCLG consultation on Areas for Producing Spatial Development Strategies

This is a copy of the response from Vale of White Horse District Council which was submitted online via the MHCLG consultation portal on Wednesday 25 March

Question 1: Which SDS area(s) are you interested in?

The proposed Thames Valley Spatial Development Strategy area.

Question 2: 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.

Vale of White Horse District Council partially agrees with the proposed SDS area.

Question 3: If you do not agree with the proposed SDS area, please explain the issues/challenges that it/they would present.

Vale of White Horse District Council broadly agrees with the proposed SDS area, but we question including Swindon within a Thames Valley SDS area.

Overall, the proposed Thames Valley SDS area reflects a defined functional economic area, is well connected and has the potential for growth. It also makes logical sense with other similar public sector geography (e.g. Thames Valley ICB, Thames Valley Police). However, there are some practical, functional and strategic considerations arising from the inclusion of Swindon that may merit further review, to ensure the geography supports effective strategic planning through the future Thames Valley Spatial Development Strategy. These considerations are explained below:

1. Swindon's functional and economic linkages

The Thames Valley has traditionally functioned as the BOB area (Berkshire, Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire), with Swindon as a new addition in the SDS proposal. The extent of Swindon's functional and economic geography linkages may benefit from further analysis, to ensure the SDS reflects the strongest patterns of connectivity. Swindon's closest practical and administrative ties have historically been with Wiltshire.

2. Differences in sense of place and local identity

Swindon has a distinct local identity. As the Thames Valley has historically centred around the three BOB counties, it may be helpful to further consider how Swindon's sense of place aligns with the wider geography, including how this relates to the naming and presentation of the SDS – particularly given that the River Thames does not pass through Swindon, unlike the other BOB counties. This would support a clear and coherent place identity for the strategy as it evolves.

3. Geography and organisational structure

Swindon sits further west and some distance from places like Buckinghamshire, creating a more elongated geography which could weaken the purpose of an SDS as a unifying strategic framework. It may be helpful to consider whether this spatial configuration supports a coherent and efficient basis for long-term strategic planning.

The proposed SDS geography is more elongated than typically found with other Thames Valley organisations or partnerships. Existing historic public-sector geographies, such as the Thames Valley Police area and the BOB Integrated Care Board, have evolved around the core Thames

Valley authorities (Berkshire, Oxfordshire, Buckinghamshire), reflecting real patterns of movement and identity. It may help to consider how the proposed SDS geography fits with these structures, as this could support smooth delivery and effective governance in practice.

4. Relationship with current local government reform proposals

Government consultations on options for local government reorganisation in Oxfordshire do not include Swindon within any new unitary authority areas being explored. It may therefore be helpful to consider how the proposed SDS geography aligns with these ongoing discussions, to ensure that strategic planning arrangements remain complementary to any future structural changes.

5. Potential implications for strategic focus and investment priorities

The Thames Valley BOB area would already be one of the most complex and expansive geographies in the country for strategic planning. Including Swindon would broaden the geography further, which could stretch strategic capacity and resources thinly across places with differing needs and priorities. Considering these implications is particularly important at a time when significant investment and policy focus is already directed towards the Oxford–Cambridge Corridor - Swindon would sit as a side extension to this corridor.

6. Housing market differences and implications for assessing needs

Swindon's housing market has a distinct profile from those of Berkshire, Buckinghamshire and Oxfordshire. It contains a higher proportion of post-war council and housing association stock, and a significantly higher share of social housing (22%) compared with typical South East (17%) and Ox-Cam Corridor geographies (10–15%). These differences mean that the drivers of housing need in Swindon may not align closely with those within the core Thames Valley area.

It may therefore be helpful to consider how the inclusion of areas with differing housing market characteristics could influence the overall assessment of housing needs for the SDS. Recognising these differences early would help ensure that the combined assessment does not mask distinct patterns of need across the constituent authorities, and that each area's pressures are reflected appropriately within a single SDS evidence base.

7. History of cross-boundary planning issues

There has been no notable duty to cooperate issues requiring resolution through cross-boundary planning between Swindon and the Thames Valley authorities. As such it may be helpful to consider the extent to which there are shared strategic challenges or shared opportunities that would benefit from being addressed collectively through an SDS.

Question 4: If you do not agree with the proposed SDS area, please suggest and explain one or more alternatives that you believe would work better.

If the proposed SDS geography is revisited, it may be helpful to consider a geography based on the Berkshire–Oxfordshire–Buckinghamshire (BOB) area. This geography reflects long-standing collaborative arrangements across the three counties and aligns closely with existing economic, spatial and organisational relationships. It also corresponds to a number of public-sector geographies, including the BOB Integrated Care Board and the Thames Valley Police area, which could support coherent governance and delivery.

The BOB area also encompasses several nationally significant assets, including Science Vale, the Harwell cluster and the wider Oxford to Cambridge knowledge economy corridor. Focusing the SDS across the BOB geography could help ensure that strategic planning and investment are concentrated where established clusters and functional economic relationships are strongest.

As an alternative option, it may also be worth considering whether Swindon's strategic relationships, particularly those relating to the M4 corridor and its extensive shared boundary with Wiltshire, align more closely with the emerging Wessex SDS proposals. This reflects Swindon's

existing patterns of cross-boundary planning and may provide a more coherent basis for addressing shared challenges and opportunities.

Question 5: If there is no proposed SDS area for your area of interest, we would welcome your preferred SDS area with an explanation of your reasoning.

N/A