South Oxfordshire District Council
Listening Learning Leading

The Rt Hon Jim McMahon OBE MP
Minister for Local Government, Devolution and Regional Growth
2 Marsham Street
London
SW1P 4DF

Via email

Councillor Maggie Filipova-Rivers
Leader of the Council
executiveupport@southandvale.gov.uk
Tel: 01235 422422
Textphone: 18001 01235 422422

Abbey House
Abbey Close
Abingdon
OX14 3JE

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Dear Minister McMahon,

Thank you for meeting with council leaders on 21 October and for providing information on the Government's proposal for the geography of a Thames Valley Mayoral Strategic Authority (MSA), alongside an indication of the devolved powers and funding to be made available.

South Oxfordshire District Council remains strongly supportive of devolution to a Thames Valley MSA on the most natural boundaries, and we regret that the process has not been more genuinely locally driven. Rather than allowing councils to determine the geography that best reflects their economic, social and public service relationships, we have effectively been presented with a binary choice: **proceed on the Government's preferred geography or risk losing the opportunity altogether**.

We believe that decisions affecting our communities should be taken as close to them as possible and we want South Oxfordshire residents to have the opportunities that greater local control over investment, infrastructure, housing, skills and economic development will offer.

For South Oxfordshire, the preferred geography remains the long-standing one of **Berkshire, Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire**. This geography builds on the established economic, institutional and public service relationships across the Thames Valley. Here in South Oxfordshire, the need to continue working together strategically with Buckinghamshire means we should be in the same mayoral area.

We are also very concerned by proposals to change the Thames Valley geography by excluding Buckinghamshire and including Swindon. The implications for existing public service boundaries, particularly policing, fire and rescue, health and other strategic partnerships are serious. We understand that Government intends to align public service boundaries with the new strategic

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authority geographies, with all the service disruption that entails. This means that the practical implications, costs and potential disruption of such realignment remain uncertain, including the implications for services currently delivered across the wider Thames Valley.

We must also highlight the exceptionally limited time afforded to councils to consider this matter. Following the meeting on 21 October, leaders have effectively been given just two working days to respond to a proposal with lasting implications for local governance, public services and democratic accountability. This has not allowed sufficient opportunity for leaders to engage meaningfully with their respective councils, consult colleagues or undertake the level of scrutiny that a decision of this significance warrants.

Therefore, we can only restate the support of South Oxfordshire District Council to proceed to the next phase of working with Government on developing a detailed proposal for a Thames Valley MSA. We do so with an open mind, recognising the potential opportunities that devolution could offer our communities, while reserving judgement until a robust, evidence-led case has been developed that clearly demonstrates the benefits, costs and implications of the proposed arrangements.

We therefore welcome your explicit confirmation that this is a key next step rather than a final decision, and that the process will be subject to further work, local consultation and final decisions by all constituent authorities and Government.

We remain committed to working constructively with Government and our neighbouring authorities, including Buckinghamshire, to secure the best possible arrangements for our communities. Our shared ambition should be to deliver devolution that is not only ambitious and deliverable, but also financially sustainable, democratically accountable and grounded in the needs and identities of the places it is intended to serve.

Yours sincerely



Councillor Maggie Filipova-Rivers
Leader of the Council